What Is Indian Art?

In the mid-20th century, American Indian painting reflected popular ideas about Native Americans, representing Native life and the natural world. As pop art emerged, Scholder crafted his own unique style, featuring lines that danced around his subjects. During the following decades, a group of Native artists often working under the collective name Post-Indian Group, began to depict contemporary Native people in a way that challenged mainstream notions. At the center of this movement was Native American artist Fritz Scholder (1937-2005), who would become the media's most frequent, controversial, and commercially successful artist.

Born in Bismarck, North Dakota, Scholder spent part of his early years on the Northern Plains. His father, half German and half Native American, worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but he and his family lived off-reservation, and Scholder later recalled that he grew up in a house that contained no Indian objects. In 1957, the family moved to Sacramento, California, where Scholder, who had known how to make a living since his early age, worked for his father in his barbershop with pop artist Wayne Thompson. In 1961, he received his BFA from the University of Arizona and was soon invited to teach at the IAIA.

In the late 1960s, Scholder was exposed to the work of German expressionist painter Emil Nolde, who used bright colors and exaggerated forms to create powerful images. Scholder admired Nolde’s work and began to incorporate similar techniques into his own art. He also developed an interest in the work of other Native American artists, such as Zuñi artist Willard Dixon, who had used bright colors and bold lines to create images of Native American life.

In the early 1970s, Scholder’s work began to reflect the political and social issues facing Native Americans. His paintings often depicted Native American life in a harsh, realistic manner, highlighting the struggles and injustices faced by Native people. Scholder’s work also reflected his interest in the history of Native American art and the way it had been presented in the past. His paintings often included references to traditional Native American art forms, such as beadwork and pottery, as well as contemporary forms like graffiti and pop art.

Scholder’s work was both controversial and influential. It was praised for its raw honesty and its ability to connect with people on a personal level, but it was also criticized for its use of stereotypes and its portrayal of Native American life as a series of problems waiting to be solved. Despite these controversies, Scholder’s work continued to be influential, and his paintings continue to be studied and appreciated by scholars and artists today.

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