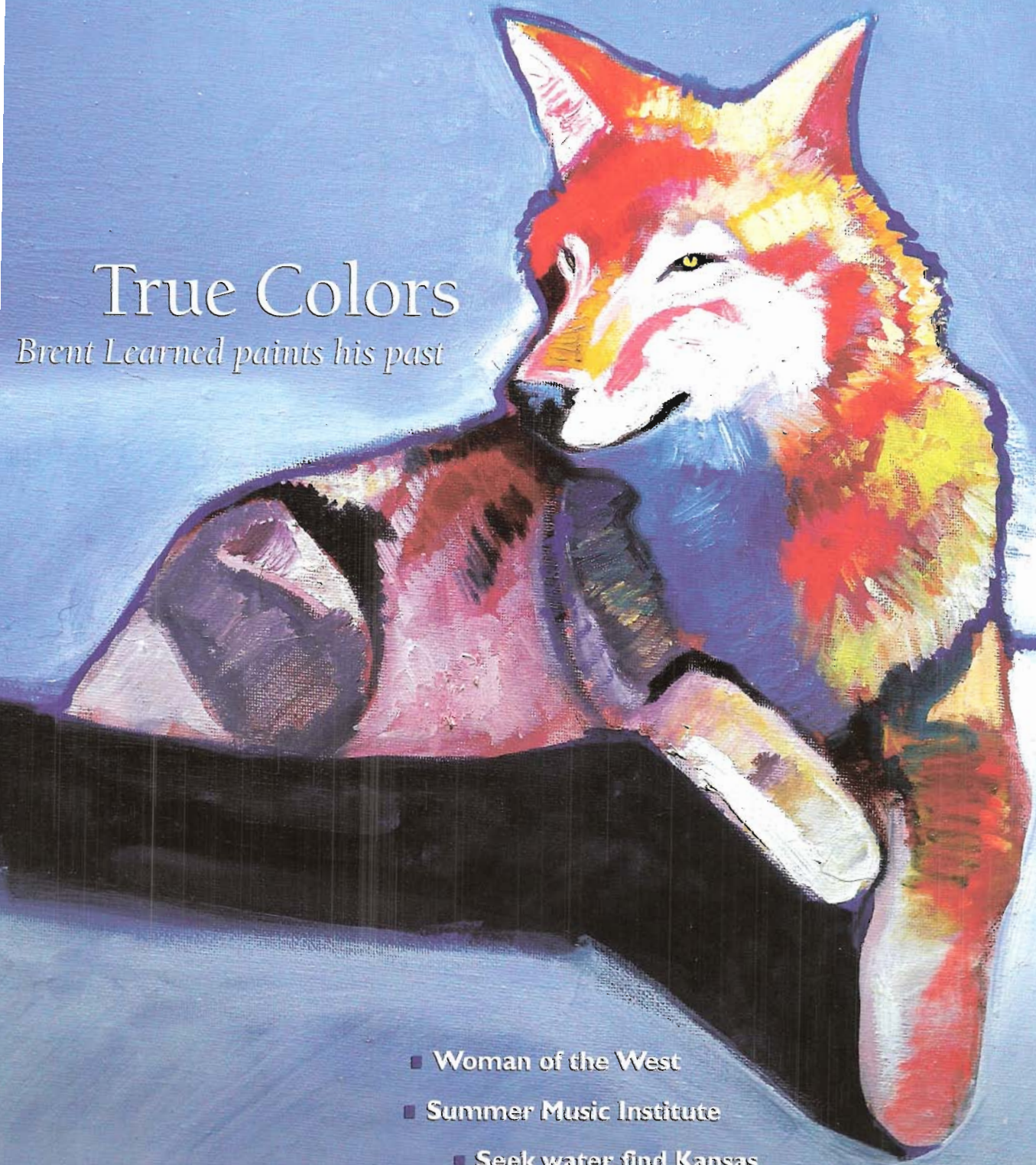


# KANSAS ALUMNI

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## True Colors

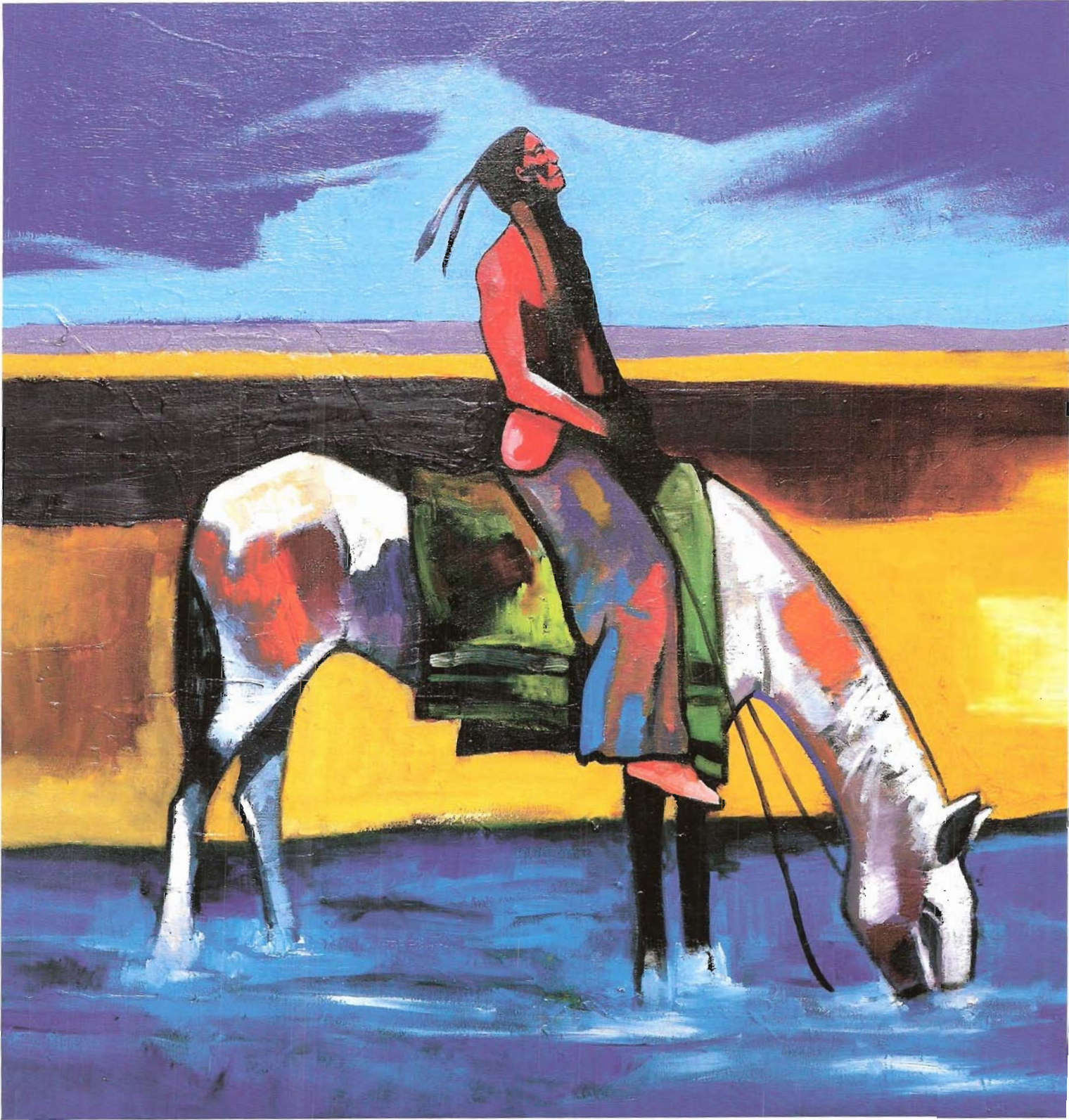
*Brent Learned paints his past*



- Woman of the West
- Summer Music Institute
- Seek water, find Kansas

*Brent Learned  
Kansas*





■ At Peace



# Time Traveler

BRENT LEARNED'S PALETTE ELICITS  
FRESH APPRECIATION FOR PLAINS INDIANS

**B**rent Learned confesses that he would be most content in the time and place of his forebears, Plains Indians who roamed in nomadic freedom. The dream is possible only in his imagination, but thanks to his vibrant, creative spirit, others can share his personal journey.

"I'm painting a certain time of history, and I wish I would have lived at that time because it would have been a beautiful thing," says Learned, 49. "I think that being a contemporary painter and using colors in an abstract way, I can pull that past up to the present.

"It's an old theme, but I can tell it in a way that hasn't been told before, and that is through color."

This 21st-century storyteller who dwells in the Great Plains of centuries past recently commanded the Kansas Union gallery with his solo exhibition, "Colors Through Indian Eyes." Sponsored by Student Union Activities, Learned's March show included 20 new paintings, each depicting an aspect of Indian life in what became known as Kansas. He also hosted a drawing workshop for the public.

Learned's contemporary version of traditional Native American iconography

has earned him a good deal of attention within the usually conservative circles of Western art. His work has been collected by the Smithsonian Institution, and he participates in shows at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. He travels widely for exhibitions and lectures, he is a featured artist at the prominent Blue Deer Gallery in Dallas, and his paintings hang in the Oklahoma governor's office.



BY CHRIS LAZZARINO

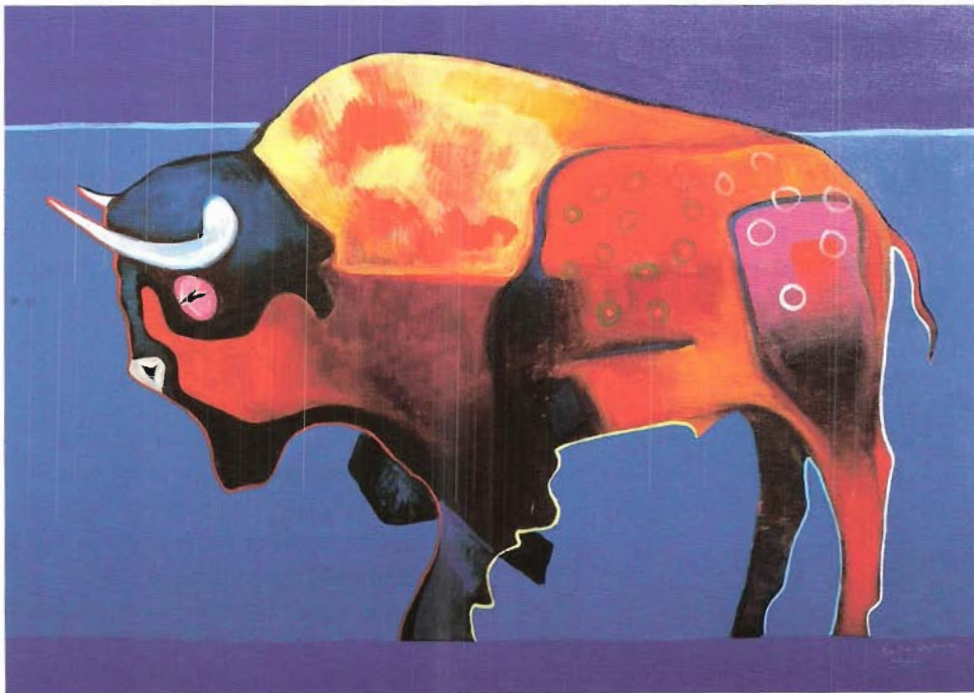
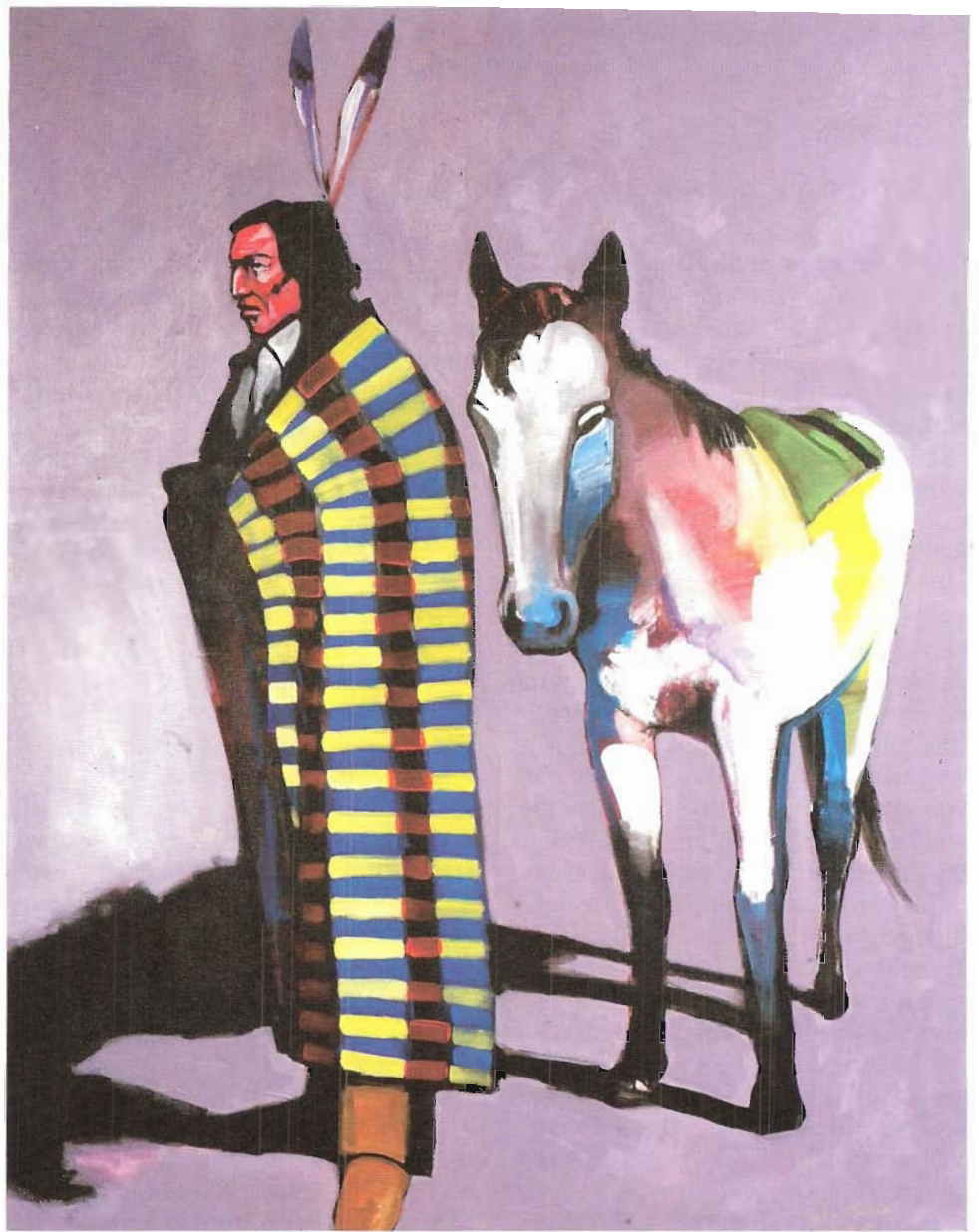


John, c'60, d'60, f'60, is a sculptor and painter who grew up in Lawrence and went on to become a teacher and artist in Oklahoma City, where Brent was reared and still lives.

Brent's grandfather Robert was a member of the Class of 1921; his great-uncle Albert, e'10, g'30, was the first Learned at KU, and great-uncle Stanley, e'24, g'36, was president of Phillips Petroleum and namesake of the School of Engineering's Learned Hall. Learned's Lawrence heritage even reaches as far back as the first band of abolitionist settlers to arrive from Massachusetts, and another in the family tree was a Civil War veteran and rancher who sold his farm to make room for the institution we now know as Haskell Indian Nations University.

Learned says his father, a U.S. Marine and veteran of the Korean War, had predicted since he was a boy that he would marry a Native American woman. John Learned met Juanita Howling Buffalo, then a member of the Women's Army Corps and a Haskell alumna, during a tour with his Marine basketball team, and he immediately told a friend that he had just met his future wife.

During leaves and long weekends, the



■ "I'm Not Talking" (above), "Blue Buffalo" (left), "Buffalo Hunt" (opposite page), and "At Peace" (preceding spread) depict many aspects of Learned's style, including raw action, the vitality of animals, human/animal interaction, vivid and unusual colors, and non-representational backgrounds. Also evident is the respect Learned feels for Native American lives on the Great Plains.



elder Learned hitchhiked across the country to carry on an interracial courtship that was rare for its era.

“I had the best of both worlds,” Brent Learned says. “I learned to appreciate both heritages.”

Learned notes that just as scores of World War II veterans are lost each day, so, too, are generations of older Native Americans. And with them goes another catalog of stories and traditions that can’t be replicated. “Once it’s dead,” Learned says, “it’s over.”

Learned says his paintings play multiple roles: His palette appeals to those who claim they don’t otherwise enjoy Western art; aficionados of conventional Western art tell him they appreciate the way he’s “doing something new” with the genre they already adore; and even those who are indifferent to Indian heritage might find a place to hang one of his bold paintings.

“From the art perspective, what it is beyond everything else is contemporary,” Learned says. “It’s something that can go into a modern home and the first thing you think is, ‘Wow, that’s really cool, abstract.’ The subject matter is secondary.”

But not for Learned. For him, his art will always be about handing down the

stories that cling to such uncertain destinies—a mission he never felt as strongly as he did a year and a half ago, when he began sketching his ideas for “Colors Through Indian Eyes” by contemplating the lives, families and ambitions that played out long ago on the Great Plains.

“A lot of people, especially younger generations, they don’t really appreciate the hardships their ancestors have gone through to get them to where they are now. They take it for granted.”

“I’m a big believer in history. I was always taught that you have to learn where you came from in life to know where you are going in life. A big part of me is the past, because that is my future.”

Honoring the native flame his mother sparked with family tales handed down from generations past, Learned asked an aunt to bestow upon him an Arapaho name. Because Juanita Learned’s family name was Howling Buffalo, her son became Buffalo Bull Howling. He now signs his paintings with the Arapaho translation, Haa-Naa-Jaa-Ne-Doa.

“Mom was big into these stories, and we can see with his painting that Brent was listening,” says one of Learned’s nine siblings, older brother Johnny, c’76. “Brent is a true Plains Indian.”

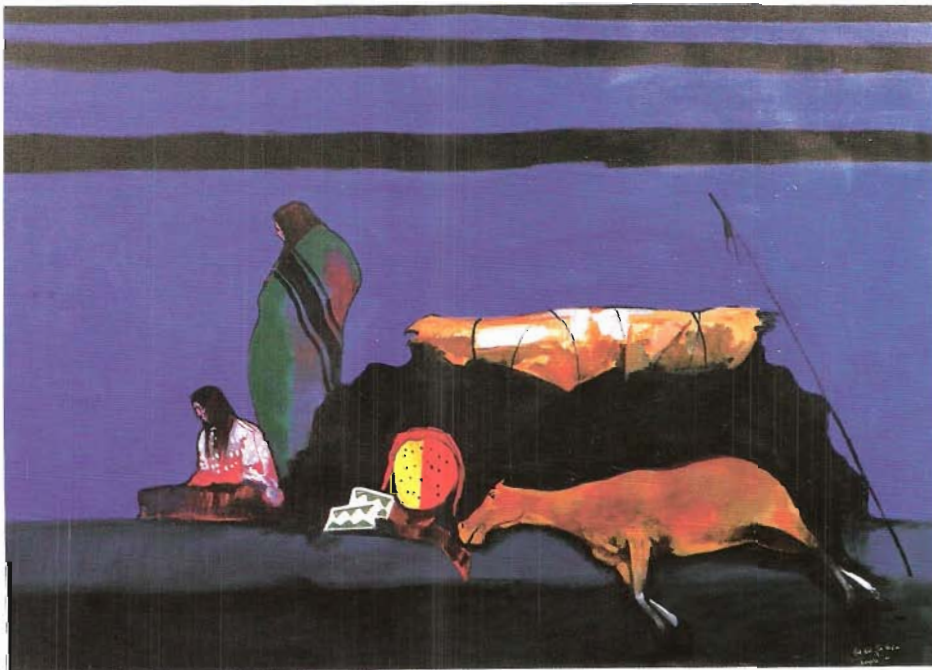
It is impossible to avoid the immediacy of Learned’s work—colorful, contemporary versions of iconic Indian and Western visages.

“The tendency is to treat Western art in traditional Western style; give people what they want to see,” says artist Joel Cooper, f’92, a classmate of Learned’s who works in Watson Library. “For Brent, the subject matter is taken for granted. It’s who he is. So for him it’s about the style, the bright colors, the visual tension.”

After Learned guided him through the exhibition with a private discussion of the concepts and techniques behind each of the paintings, Cooper said, “It’s still fundamentally Brent, but he’s gotten more sensitive in relationships of colors. And he’s loosened up a bit. He’s showing much more confidence.”

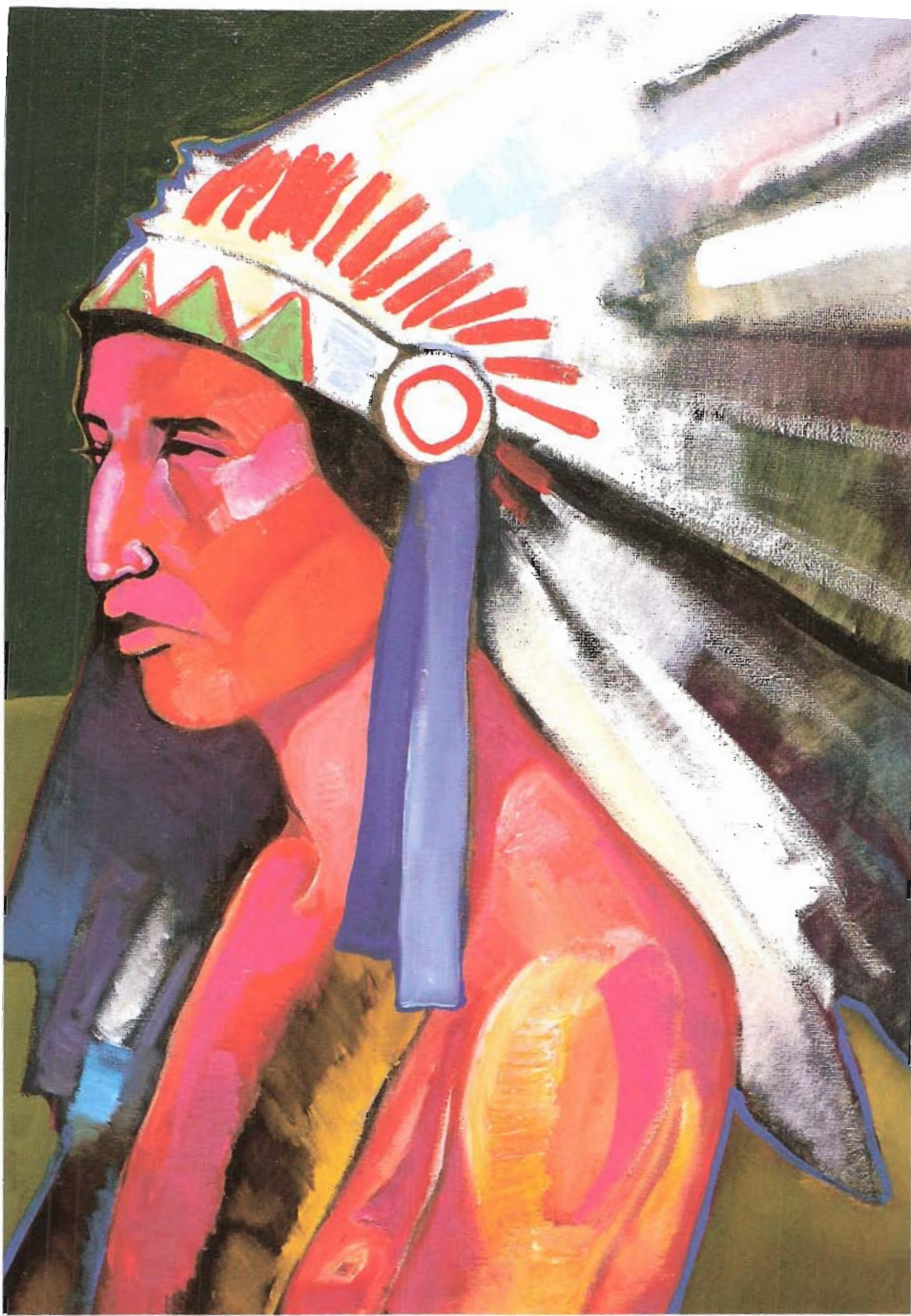
Learned’s trademark remains his use of color. He intends to “rework the wheel,” in reference to the standardized “color wheel” that traditionally defined harmonious hues: “I like to use colors that you wouldn’t normally associate with one another, such as blacks and pinks, red and browns ... two colors that are so opposite of one another but seem to gel just right.”

Longtime fans of Learned’s paintings might notice that while foreground subjects are in some ways more realistic and representational (except, of course, for the coloring), his backgrounds are now abstract acres where Learned manipulates spatial proportions and the viewer’s imagination. Even horizon lines have morphed into abstractions that still place the subject within a physical and



■ “What Next” (left) shows a dead man’s possessions assembled for use in the next life. Learned hints at only slivers of emotive human faces, instead conveying the somber mood with composition and color. Note especially the paired black horizon lines that weigh so heavily on the earthly scene and, through the gloom, the shrouded form’s otherworldly luminance.





spatial context, yet do so without overtly influencing the viewer's eye.

Which is, in a way, Learned's ultimate intention: help an imaginative mind wander without explicit visual direction. The point of his artwork isn't the images, or even the colors; it's all about the visual and imaginative meanderings Learned hopes they inspire.

"We live in a time now," Learned says, "where we all carry with us the same question all day long: 'Can I get everything done on time?' To me, that's not really living."

During the show's reception, Learned's nephew Chase Jackson, a high school junior from Oklahoma City, says, "A more solid skin tone might not be as

interesting as the things Brent does with colors. This is more alive. He captures the action with his colors."

Jackson is particularly drawn to two pieces: "Buffalo Hunt," a whorl of motion and mass, and "At Peace," a serene scene of horse and rider that conveys its narrative less directly. To Jackson, the Indian gazing into the big, empty sky is a sad man.

"You want to figure out the story that can tell you why they are feeling that way," Jackson says. "Like when you read a good book, you can read more into it. You can find out what it means to you."

Again the puzzle pieces, freed from their creator's restraint, reassemble themselves according to the viewer's



■ Learned and his nephew Chase Jackson (above) discuss the action portrayed in "Buffalo Hunt." Learned says he considers "Young Cheyenne" (left) his finest work in the show; of particular note is the warrior's feathered headdress, vividly portrayed in a confident flourish of color and form.

palette. Learned says he did not intend the horseman in "At Peace" to be sad; he is, to Learned's eye, blissfully at peace with his place and time in the world. The fleeting, bittersweet moment portrayed is, for the artist, sad only because it can never happen again.

"I hope to depict an aura of the person or the image or the object that I'm painting, and I want to express that through color," Learned says.

"Depending on how well you use color, your eye wants to travel around. Something draws you in and wants to take you all over the canvas before it lets you go. Then if it really speaks to you, you want to go back into it.

"That's when the viewer discovers things that were not hidden, by any means, but nonetheless, they find hidden messages that speak only to them."

The old stories, alive again with the creative spirits of teller and listener, never to die or end.

*On the Web:*

*More of Learned's art, as well as art by his brother Matt, f88, can be seen at [buffalobullhowling.com](http://buffalobullhowling.com).*