

BOLD & BEAUTIFUL

Navajo artist **David K. John** relies on strong hues to paint cultural images both historical and imagined
By Gretchen Reynolds

DAVID K. JOHN'S ARTISTIC TRAINING BEGAN long before he held his first paintbrush, owned a sketchbook, visited a gallery, or considered that he might one day have the makings of an artist. As a boy, John grew up on a remote sheep ranch on the Navajo Reservation, near the tiny town of Keams Canyon, AZ. Raised by his single mother, great-grandmother, and great-grandfather,

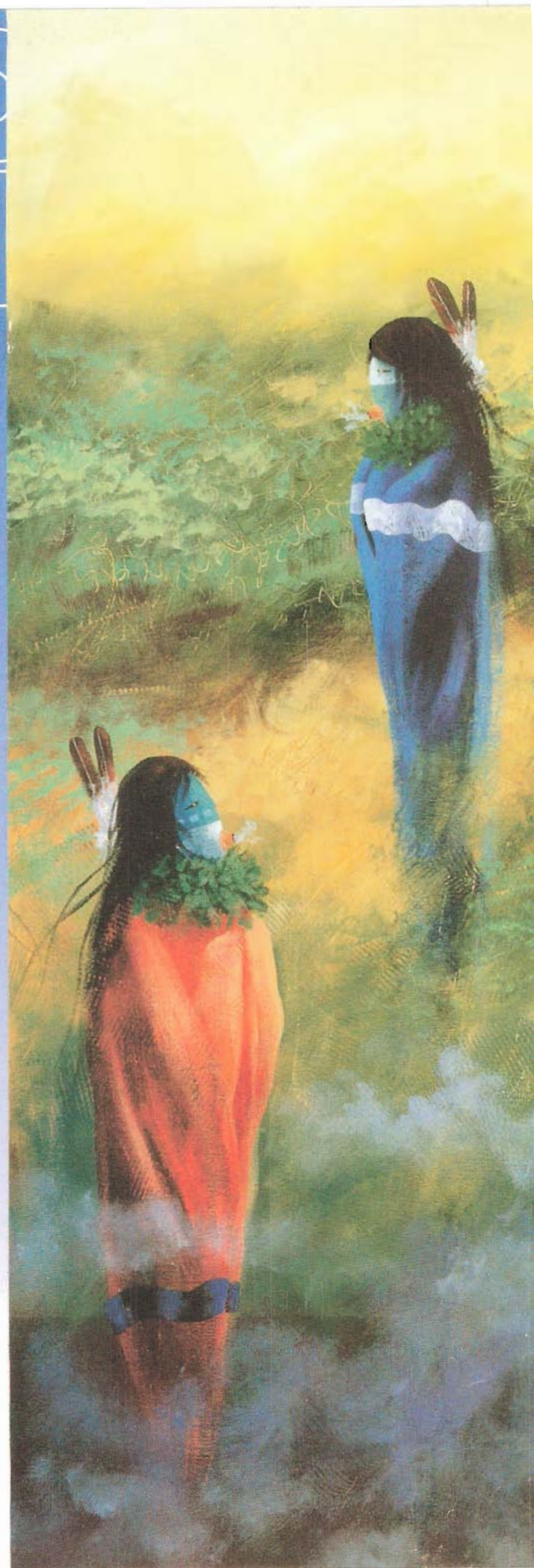
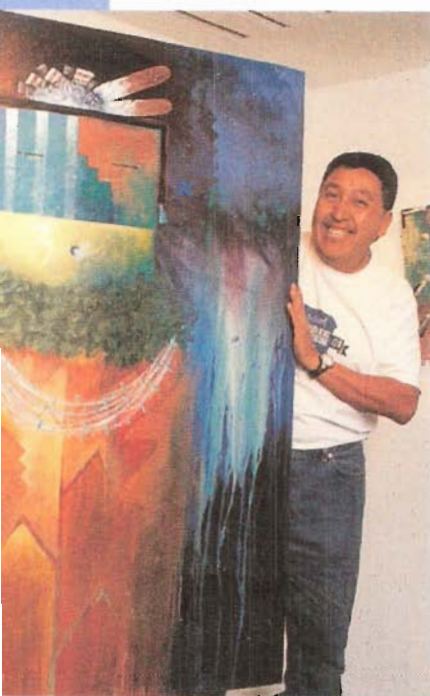
he grew up sleeping sometimes on the dirt floor of a hogan and sometimes under the stars in the reservation's serene red rock country. There was no television.

During most days, he herded recalcitrant sheep, sat in the shade of cliffs covered in petroglyphs, watched his mother and great-grandmother weave elaborate rugs, and listened raptly to his great-grandfather, a Navajo medicine man. The elder man would chant for John—in Navajo—the old stories, legends about the making of the world and the struggles of men to be good. He also brought the boy with him to traditional ceremonies, an experience that would, in time, provide John with

enough artistic material for several lifetimes.

But back then, John had no idea that he was being readied for a life of creativity. Instead, he thought he was untalented or at least unprepared when he started school—speaking only

OPPOSITE PAGE: HEALING DIETY, ACRYLIC, 40 X 30
RIGHT: EARLY SPRING, ACRYLIC, 45 X 15.



Navajo—and saw how some of the other children already knew how to draw. They'd watched television and could sketch cartoon characters. John felt isolated and inept.

But with time, he found teachers who recognized his raw, questing ability. They showed

material. He began to create paintings and masks that referred to, explored, and showed deep reverence for his traditional Navajo upbringing.

Now one of the most accomplished Native American artists in the country at age 43, he feels depthless gratitude, he says, for both the deprivations and the glories of his childhood. "In some ways," John reflects, "we didn't have anything. By the normal standards, we were very poor. But in other ways, we were really fortunate. We had the earth, this beautiful land all around us, and, thanks to my great-grandfather, we had our people's culture. I got to know my heritage. It's part of me. I couldn't be an artist without it." He pauses. "I couldn't even be *me* without it." The man, his past, and his people's past are plaited into his art. "It's all connected," he says. "That's what makes what I do so exciting. Everything is connected."

The first thing most viewers notice in one of John's large, beguiling acrylics is color. It's impossible to ignore. Color fills the canvases, flowing lightly along the edges of many of the paintings and filling the figures at the center with thicker, insouciant, almost anthropomorphic heft. The hues are vivid, pulsating. This is color that breathes and beats its chest. "I like red, blue, yellow—the primary colors," John says.

These shades appeal to him not just for their presence. They also have deep symbolism for Native Americans. Red and blue, for instance, are the colors of the earth and the sky, respectively. They represent, too, the female and male elements of rain in traditional Navajo mythology. They also are, of course, the foundations of

a sunset, when it is at its most fiery and intense. And they are, not incidentally, beautiful.

It is this mix of the symbolic, the gorgeous, the representational, and the bold that characterizes John's art. The subject matter of most his work is not absolutely new: The myths, legends, and symbols of Navajo culture are the starting points. But then he



WEDDING BASKET. ACRYLIC. 40 X 30.

him how to hold a pencil and a brush. He absorbed the basics of technique. And then, after he had become adept at the fundamentals of art, he began to look about for a subject, for something to make art about—and his childhood returned to him as source



DANCERS FROM SIX DIRECTIONS, ACRYLIC, 60 X 72

reimagines this imagery. One of his canvases may contain, say, a Yeí Bi Chei figure, the traditional, often squared-off shape that in Navajo symbolism represents a god. But in John's version, the image is subtly altered, the colors are unusual, or the background contains symbols of his own imagining. The image is historical and yet also his.

This approach ensures that John never violates Navajo tenets against representing certain deities or stories. John is extremely mindful of following Navajo religious practice in all things. But it also ensures that what he does is creative, that it's not just illustrative or archival. "I want everything I do to be respectful to

our past," he explains. "But I also want there to be imagination in it. That's what makes it art."

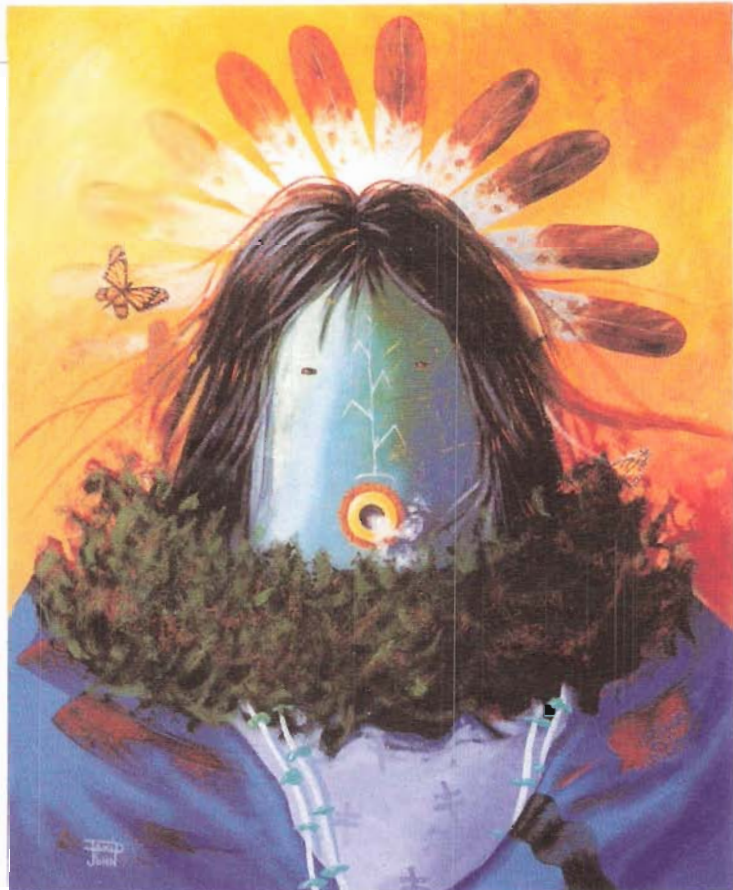
JOHN'S FORMAL ART TRAINING didn't begin until high school. By then, he'd left the reservation for a boarding school in Ridgeville, UT. Many of the students were focused and assured. John was aimless at first, until, in his sophomore year, a teacher commented that he had the talent to be a professional artist. "I hadn't ever really considered that," he remembers. He'd grown up surrounded by the beauty of handicrafts, of course—weavers and jewelry makers were common on the reservation. He'd also marveled at the petroglyphs, proof of how deeply the urge to make art abides in the human soul. But any

desires he'd had to create had been formless and inchoate. Yet once told that he could and should make art, John became a painting dervish.

Transferring to a nearby vocational high school, he majored in commercial art and, upon graduation, was awarded a full scholarship to the two-year degree program at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, NM. There he was introduced to art history and the traditions of tribal people from all over the United States. "I couldn't paint enough," he says. He graduated with the school's award for Outstanding Two-Dimensional Artist.

Next he enrolled in the art program at Brigham Young University. The size and bustle of the university was overwhelming, however. So after a semester, he transferred to Southern Utah University and immersed himself in almost every genre of art—"I tried photography, collage, even writing," he says.

He also got a taste of early success when, while he was still an undergraduate, one of his paintings was chosen by the U.S. Census Bureau for use as the poster image promoting the 1990 Census. Suddenly, John's work was plastered everywhere. "I still see that poster sometimes," he says. The bureau flew him to Washington, DC—his first plane ride—for a press conference and a meet-and-greet session with



SIGN OF A NEW SEASON, ACRYLIC, 48 X 40

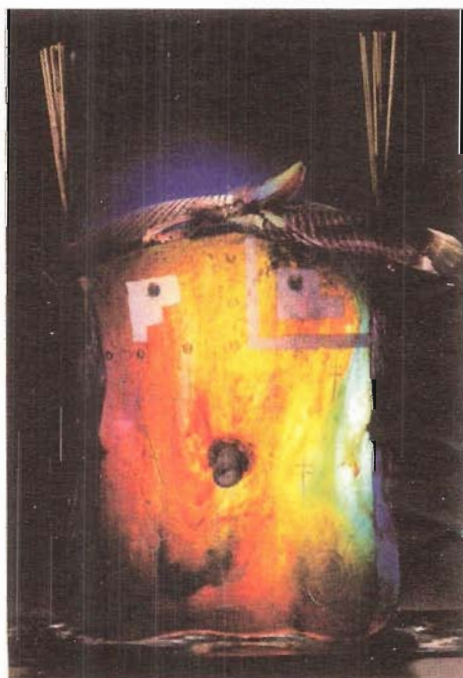
Monet, and other modern masters. He was awed. "I'd been to galleries, but I'd never seen anything like these paintings," he says. "I couldn't wait to go home and make art that really matters."

For the past 20 years, John has been doing just that. After he and his wife, Kathleen, a fellow Southern Utah student, graduated, they moved back to the Arizona reservation. At the time, he was concentrating on making masks and small sculptures based on tribal legends and symbols. A gallery in Sedona, AZ, took him on, then a gallery in Santa Fe. He and his family moved to Kayenta, AZ, where he set up two studios, one in town and another about eight miles away, in a converted hogan in the high desert.

Calls came in from collectors, critics, and, thrillingly, Navajo elders. He received another huge poster commission: this time for the 2003 Santa Fe Indian Market. "I think people could understand what I was trying to do," he reasons, "that I was trying to preserve something of our culture, while making that culture contemporary."

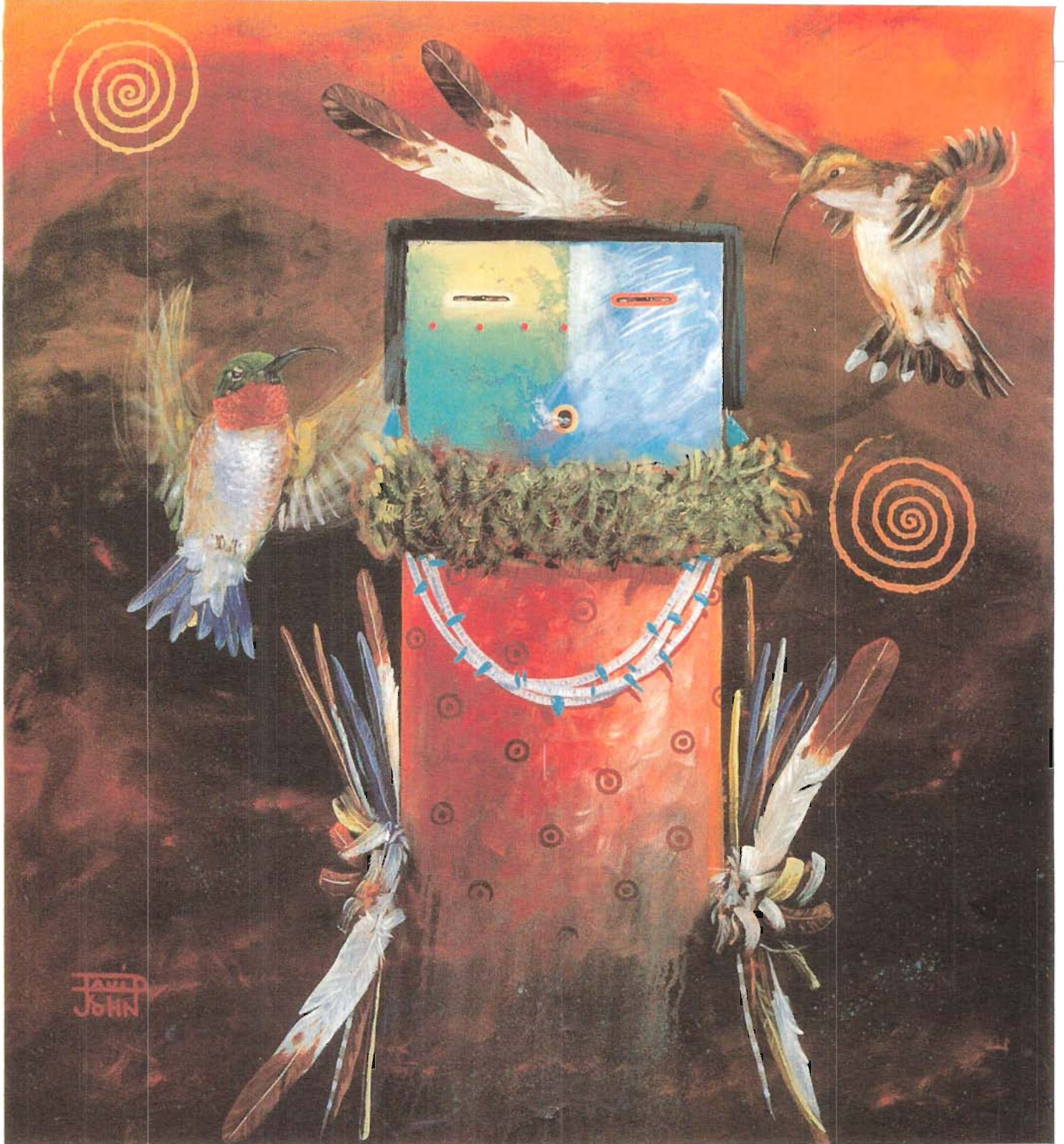
Today, John is principally a painter, although he continues to make masks. Recently, he's begun casting the masks in glass, a new technique for him,

"I want my children and other people's children to know the old ways."



RAINBOW CHANT, CAST AND SAND ETCHED GLASS, 11 X 18 X 6

Congressmen and White House representatives. John was asked to make a speech. Happily, he held his own; "I can talk about my art OK," he says. Perhaps most importantly, he saw an exhibit of the works of Picasso,



BIRD MEDICINE ACRYLIC 36 X 32

and for Navajo artists in general. "I'd like to try all the types of art," he says, but he'll never abandon his central theme.

"I guess you'd call what I do expressionistic realism," he says. "I'm putting down on canvas my feelings about our culture and our way of life. I think that tribal cultures, and not just ours, are in danger of being lost. And that would be a real loss. Because they have a lot to teach us."

The way John sees it, his culture has much to say about good and evil, about life and death, and so, he explains, "I want my children and other people's

children to know the old ways. And if I can show them through my art, then I will have accomplished something important." He will also have made his great-grandfather proud, no doubt. ▽

Santa Fe-based Gretchen Reynolds contributes frequently to *The New York Times Magazine*, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, and *National Geographic Adventure*.