

Lloyd Kiva New

His Cherokee Roots and Legacy in Oklahoma

The ultimate prayer is for the continuation of the system, and to be allowed to harmoniously maintain one's place in it.

—Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee Nation)¹

By **ᎠᎩᎦᎳᎠᎩ** Roy Boney Jr.

LLOYD KIVA NEW'S STATURE as a revered figure in Native fashion and arts education in the Southwest is solidified and continues to grow, even after his death on February 8, 2002. It's rare for a Native artist to have an obituary appear in the *New York Times*; yet, as testament to the impact of his work, a tribute to New appeared in their pages just two days after his passing. The *Times* stated, "He had a broad, humanistic approach to the arts, stressing creative links to the traditional arts but urging students not to be bound by them and to reject stereotypical notions of American Indian art and culture."²

His success as a fashion designer, beginning in the 1940s in Scottsdale, Arizona, and his later involvement with the founding of the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, are now well documented. Though New's professional life as an artist and educator centered on the Southwest, he was born in Cherokee Nation. This year marks the centennial year of his birth, which was celebrated with exhibitions at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, Museum of

Contemporary Native Arts, and the New Mexico Museum of Art, all in Santa Fe. His Oklahoma roots, his place in Cherokee history, and his influence on Cherokee artists deserve further attention.

Timber Hill

LLOYD HENRI NEW spent the first few years of his life on his mother's allotted land in Fairland in Northeast Oklahoma near the Neosho River. Much of his early life is detailed in his recently published memoir, *The Sound of Drums*, edited by Ryan Flahive (Sunstone Press, 2016). New was the youngest of ten children. Some of his siblings died before he was born on February 18, 1916, within a decade of land allotment in Indian Territory upending tribal life in unimaginably devastating ways. The Cherokee Nation and other tribal governments were effectively abolished by federal declaration to pave the way for Oklahoma statehood in 1907. New's much older siblings had already left home to pursue lives of their own, and some even managed to generate income from their allotted land by renting it out.

New's father, William Edward New (Scots-Irish) called their family farm Timber Hill due to its hillside location near a wooded lot. New's full-blooded Cherokee mother, Josephine Colston New, or Josie as William called her, was an orphan raised by a Christian Cherokee couple. Josie made sure she taught young Lloyd as many of the Cherokee traditions and family stories she could remember before her own foster parents died. New had a special connection with her. She didn't share as much with his older siblings as she did with him. Since Cherokees are culturally a matrilineal society, it made sense New's connection to his Cherokee roots were instilled in him thanks to his mother.

His parents spoke Cherokee to each other, but for New and his siblings, the language was banned from usage due to the general belief during that era that speaking Cherokee, as New put it, "meant you were falling behind."³ Federal Indian policy focused heavily on acculturation for tribes, so this attitude was common among many families. Despite the cultural disconnect this caused, New carried the Cherokee stories and traditions his mother told

him for the rest of his life.

New always gravitated toward painting and drawing. Josie was also skilled at drawing, so she gave New his first lessons in art. He made images of flowers and animals, once even painting a mural on part of the walls of the family home, much to the consternation of his father. He made crude brushes from horsehair and mixed his own pigments from materials he found around the farm, experimenting with different binding agents. He also made ceramic figures of farm animals and miniature kitchen dishes from clays gathered from the banks of a stream that ran through the yard of the farm. Despite his creative pursuits, mostly his days at Timber Hill were concerned with the day-to-day work of farm life. The family had little interaction with the larger world. Sometimes his mother's Cherokee family and friends would come visit, and on rare occasions, they would go visit her family. New once received a glass ornament as a Christmas gift from Josie's family, and its beauty impressed upon his young mind the wonders of the world that existed outside of Timber Hill. From these humble origins, New would go on to become one of the most influential figures in Native American art and fashion in the 20th century.

Moving Out

BECAUSE OF A SOMEWHAT contentious relationship with his father, New, at age seven, was sent to live with his sister Nancy Ritter in Jenks, a suburb of Tulsa. Tulsa had been recently minted the "Oil Capital of the World," and New was sent to a public school that was taking full advantage of having access to such new wealth. He excelled in the arts and eventually attended Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, a land grant college that later became Oklahoma State University, to study engineering. He struggled with most of the classes since his true passion was fine art. He was impressed by his



Josephine "Josie" Colston New and Lloyd New on the front porch at Timber Hill, Oklahoma. Image courtesy of the Lloyd H. New Papers, IAIA Archives, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

home economics class in which he learned, among other things, how to tell the difference between various men's fabrics. He dropped out of Oklahoma A&M and was uncertain about his future. Worried about his well-being, Josie and Nancy drove to Muskogee from Timber Hill and persuaded the superintendent of the Five Civilized Tribes to give New a Bureau of Indian Affairs loan to attend the Art Institute of Chicago. Josie put up her own land as collateral.

New's education set the stage for his success in Scottsdale, where he collaborated with Native artists such as Charles Loloma (Hopi) and Andrew Van Tsinajinnie (Navajo). Their work proved to be hugely influential on Native fashion and the arts for generations.

"Lloyd Kiva New was one of the first Native Americans to break into the couture design field, where he grew a national reputation in the 1940s to 1960s," says Heather Ahtone (Choctaw-Chickasaw), associate curator at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma. She described how New shook up the art world at the time:

At his boutique in Scottsdale, Arizona, he hand-constructed handbags from leather with

accent details provided by Charles Loloma. They creatively reached an audience, gaining a following for the Kiva boutique that transcended the Native arts genre. New recognized that Native artists had a great resource in their cultural knowledge, with unlimited potential if they could transcend the impositions placed on their creativity by the Studio style and other limitations existing within the nascent Indian art market. New and Loloma were part of the reason that the Rockefeller Foundation convened in Phoenix to consider the future of Indian art in 1959.

The success of Lloyd Kiva's studio was soon followed by New laying the groundwork for the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe. New took a modernist approach to what he saw IAIA—and by extension, Native art—could be. As Ahtone further explains,

Because of New's vision for that potential, he was willing to commit himself to the position of art director at the Institute of American Indian Arts in 1962. He would go on to be president, leading the IAIA with a vision for

1. Lloyd Kiva New, *The Sound of Drums: A Memoir of Lloyd Kiva New*, ed. Ryan S. Flahive (Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2016), 101.

2. Obituary, "Lloyd Kiva New, 86, Teacher of Indian Artists," *New York Times*, February 10, 2002, web.

3. Lloyd Kiva New, *The Sound of Drums*, 43.



Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee Nation, 1916–2016), *Untitled*, ca. 1938, watercolor on paper, collection of Aysen New. Image courtesy of the IAIA Archives, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

the potential held within traditional Native American cultures for creativity. As art director, New wrote the curriculum and built a faculty composed of Fritz Scholder, Allan Houser, Charles and Otellie Loloma, Louis Ballard, Josephine Wapp—each a recognized artist of their own merit. Together, these teachers helped to shift the concept of Native American art to remain respectful of tribal traditions but imagining that the potential for Native creation was not restricted to what was known.

By establishing the IAIA as a place for Native creativity, New opened the door for scores of Native artists to explore materials, experiment in expression, and dream our cultures into new forms. He recognized that the tension between traditions and

contemporaneity were not Native issues—that Native artists were at their best when they worked inspired by their culture to imagine the future. That legacy is what makes him such a critical personality in Native art history.

New wrote his “Statement of Philosophy of Art Education for Indians,” which discussed the founding principles of IAIA. His progressive attitude toward Native arts is on display in the document: “Indian art can be projected into the future by a willingness to consider the evolution of new forms, the adoption of new technological methods, and the fact that the new incentives for expressions by the individual must fill the void of inertia in Indian group or tribal forces, in the rapidly changing Indian world.”⁴

Oklahoma Artists on New

CHEROKEES THROUGHOUT HISTORY have typically taken progressive views of the world and adapted to change quickly. New’s forward thinking can be viewed as part of that historical, Cherokee continuum. To name a few examples, Cherokees adopted an early form of constitutional governance, developed a writing system, installed the first telephone line west of the Mississippi River, adapted trade cloth into distinct styles of Cherokee fashion, and developed a uniquely Cherokee style of beadwork from traded materials.

Cherokee Nation artists from Oklahoma provided their insight into Cherokee history and New’s place in it. Tonia Weavel, a Cherokee National Treasure, has worked with

and researched Cherokee textiles for nearly 30 years. She cites Cherokee adaptation of the wrap skirt as an example of what she calls “cultural agility.” Weavel explains, “The skirt has been used from time immemorial to the present day, so to speak. What I love is that when it was made of mulberry fiber, it was a wrap skirt. When it was buckskin, it was a wrap skirt. When it was wool, it was a wrap skirt. The style of the versatile garment didn’t really change, but the textile and fabric did. It was everything we needed it to be. Cherokees have adapted and taken the best of what was available to us—always innovative—to suit our needs for what is practical and comfortable.” For Weavel, New’s legacy is an example of that cultural agility.

Martha Berry, also a Cherokee National Treasure who was born and raised in Tulsa and now lives in Texas, is credited with reviving the lost art of Cherokee beadwork. She considers beadwork an act of innovation. “When, through the 1700s, Cherokees were exposed to glass seed and pony beads, things changed rapidly. They fell in love with the woolen trade cloth, silk ribbon in bold colors, cotton and linen fabric for linings, but especially the brightly colored glass beads. They did not, however, abandon the rich art history of our ancestors. Instead, they blended ancient design and construction influences with then state-of-the-art materials, obtained from trade with Europeans, to develop a truly unique art form.” Berry counts New as an influence on her own work.

Being exposed to photos of his work years ago helped me to understand that work in textiles can be more than just craft; it can be art. His work showed me that an artist’s use of color, texture, and iconography or motif could evoke an emotional response in the viewer. To me, that is the definition of visual art: being able to communicate a complex idea to a viewer in a way that does not use words. Essentially,

communicating from my heart straight to theirs. Realizing that I could do that with a bandolier bag changed my whole ballgame.

This same spirit of progressivism was readily apparent in the work of a seminal group of Cherokee artists who, directly and indirectly, can be considered artistic relatives of New. Also recognized as Cherokee National Treasures for their work, painter Cecil Dick (1915–1992), potter Anna Sixkiller Mitchell (1926–2012), and ceramicist Bill Glass Jr. are towering figures in 20th-century Cherokee art. Their work has focused on a distinctly Cherokee identity in art and engages in acts of cultural reclamation. Dick, often referred to as the “Father of

Cherokee Traditional Art,” started his career in the 1930s and was one of the first to depict distinct Cherokee cultural themes in modernist painting. Mitchell was a trailblazer whose art and research during the 1960s and ’70s is credited with reviving the lost art of Cherokee pottery for Oklahomans. Glass was a student at IAIA while New was an administrator, and though he did not study directly with New, a forward-looking approach to art permeates his work, creating a distinctly contemporary vision of what Cherokee art could be.

Among Oklahoma Cherokee artists, New’s ideology has been more of an influence than his actual artistic output. Although New chose to adopt



Lloyd Kiva New in his studio in Scottsdale, Arizona, 1956. One of his signature Kiva Bags is on the left. Image courtesy of the IAIA Archives, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

4. Bill Anthes, *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1940–1960* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 179.



the non-Cherokee name *Kiva* for his creative pursuits, he did maintain some connections to home, particularly later in his life.

Dr. Candessa Tehee, executive director of the Cherokee Heritage Center in Park Hill, Oklahoma, and a weaver and textile artist, feels New's place among Cherokees "is a paradox."

He created uniquely distinctive artwork as a Cherokee designer while oftentimes working with the imagery of other tribes. His work creatively blended these symbolic images and design with modern fabrics for a wholly new way of presentation. Therefore, the imagery he used wasn't always distinctly Cherokee, but his work and his legacy should be considered innovatively Cherokee.

Tehee was not familiar with New as an artist until recent years, yet, for the most part believes New is not receiving the recognition he deserves as a Cherokee artist. "He was working in a time that was very difficult to be an Indian person, and he did so with unparalleled success," says Tehee. "Yet, because he did it away from home, it seems as though it did not become a

part of our historical consciousness as a people. This is something that should be addressed on a more lasting basis."

Like Dr. Tehee, Weavel wasn't very familiar with New until a few years ago. Weavel says, "His work to me doesn't reflect what today we consider Cherokee or Southeastern. For me, his greatest accomplishment was establishing the school [IAIA] to train generations of artists." She further explains, "You have to look at the time he was working, too. In Northeastern Oklahoma, Cherokee Nation was in such an oppressed state. We didn't have a formal tribal government, and the best thing we could do was feed our families and survive. So to have an 'art world,' even if he had been working in Oklahoma, there wouldn't have been many to participate in and appreciate it." Weavel recalled how her parents, who were born in the 1920s, had no time to pursue the arts or even take their family to museums because the focus was on basic subsistence. The Oklahoma oil wealth could have possibly provided patronage for New, but all the right elements were in place for an artist like him to succeed



ABOVE: Label from a Lloyd Kiva's man's shirt. Photo: Blair Clark/DCA. Image courtesy of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs. LEFT: Lloyd Kiva New on the old Santa Fe Indian School campus where the Institute of American Indian Arts first held classes, Santa Fe. Image courtesy of the Lloyd H. New Papers, IAIA Archives, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

in the Southwest.

New's work did contain some Cherokee roots, however. An example is fabric he designed that incorporates the Cherokee syllabary through graphical elements unique to the Cherokee language. He also worked with Cherokee weavers in northeast Oklahoma to provide woven textiles for some of his studio's designs. Cherokee Nation potter and textile artist Lisa Rutherford, a National Museum of the American Indian's Artist Leadership Fellow, knows of the weavers whose significance is great in the story of Cherokee textiles. "There were eight loom weaving halls starting in the 1940s to provide income for Cherokee families, and they were very successful and sold their textiles to large companies and designers in the East." And New tapped into this wealth of artisanship for his business in the desert.

Rutherford also recognizes that New's reputation in Oklahoma isn't as large as it is in the Southwest.

It's odd that Lloyd isn't well known in Oklahoma, but perhaps it's because he lived in other states. He was in [Illinois, Arizona,] and then New Mexico. I first learned about Lloyd from Dr. Rennard Strickland when we were working on a project together. I eventually met Aysen, Lloyd's widow, and visited their home. I had seen his



Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee Nation, 1916–2002), detail of textile design. Photo: Blair Clark/DCA. Image courtesy of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs.

fashions before, but I didn't know who designed them. I remember the shift dresses and the famous running horses design on shirts. I remember seeing the metallic leathers on handbags, but until Aysen told me, I didn't know Lloyd was the first to use metallic leathers. She brought out some of his fabrics and a bag for us to see, and even gave us a tour of his office, which is as he left it. I was really impressed to know he was Cherokee! Lloyd opened the door for Native designers, and after hearing his story from Aysen, I can't help but be inspired by him. I would guess that most of today's Native designers are inspired by Lloyd, or at the very least, familiar with his work. People use the phrase, 'ahead of his time' to describe innovative people, and maybe this applies to [Lloyd].

Rutherford's own work, while based in meticulous research of historic Cherokee art forms, is often firmly rooted in the present day, a nod to

New's push for breaking the Native art mold. In collaboration with Navajo designer Orlando Dugi, Rutherford's historically inspired Cherokee feather capes have been featured on fashion runways. Her work has also been featured in fundraisers in fashion-themed art shows in the Tulsa area. Collaboration was an important feature of New's work as well, which was evident in his partnership with his former student Charles Loloma. Just as Rutherford has collaborated with Dugi, Cherokee Nation artist Kade Twist, originally from Bakersfield, California, now based in Santa Fe, collaborates with other artists in a collective known as Postcommodity. His multidisciplinary art exudes the spirit of innovation, especially with the use of sight, sound, and motion in installations. According to Twist, one of New's greatest contributions to the Native art world is that of community and collaboration. "He was a do-it-yourself organizer that built infrastructure for communities to support the arts with a shared responsibility. He had a way of finding

common ground among different tribes. He was an artist diplomat. New started IAIA as a place of collaboration, a place where groups of artists can work together and push boundaries."

New is one of the most historically influential Cherokee artists, so the recognition of his impact in various exhibits, articles, and other venues across the United States during the celebration of his 100th birthday is relevant. As his stature only grows, new generations of artists will undoubtedly discover his work, raising awareness of his legacy among his fellow Cherokees.

Tehee sums up his lasting influence: "New's legacy to Cherokee artists is one of opening doors. Whether it was through education at IAIA or in the world of high fashion, New was a trailblazer. Cherokee artists, whether they would recognize him as an explicit influence or not, are impacted by his contributions to raising the profile of Indian art on a national and international level."