

CHECKLIST

Short Bull, Lakota, 19th century  
*Pawnee Tribe of Indians*, before 1880s  
Watercolor, graphite, ink, colored pencil on ledger paper  
*Gift of Ann H. and Harte C. Crow; 2005.28*

James A. Haran, American, late 19th–early 20th centuries  
*Profile of Elderly Male Indian with Braided Hair*, 1934  
Gelatin silver print  
*Gift of Roger Arvid Anderson, Class of 1968; PH. 986.59.2*

Unknown artist, after Charles Bird King  
*Chippeway Squaw and Child*, about 1838  
Handcolored lithograph  
*Purchased through the Guernsey Center Moore 1904  
Memorial Fund; PR.967.120*

Charles Marion Russell, American, 1864–1926  
*Cowboy Bargaining for an Indian Girl*, 1895  
Oil on canvas  
*Gift of J. Shirley Austin, Class of 1924; P.961.26*

Fritz Scholder, American, 1937–2005  
*Drunken Indian in Car*, 1974  
Acrylic on canvas  
*Gift of Jane and Raphael Bernstein; P. 986.77.6*

Awa Tsireh (Alfonso Roybal), American, 1898–1955  
*Rainbow and Deer Design*, before 1931  
Watercolor  
*Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller; W.935.1.96*

Andy Warhol, American, 1930–1987  
*Cowboys and Indians: War Bonnet Indian*, 1986  
Screenprint  
*Gift of Kent M. Klineman, Class of 1954; PR.998.57.1*

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Andy Warhol, *Cowboys and Indians: War Bonnet Indian*, 1986, screenprint.  
Gift of Kent M. Klineman, Class of 1954; PR.998.57.1  
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HOOD MUSEUM OF ART

# MYTH OF THE NOBLE SAVAGE



Short Bull, *Pawnee Tribe of Indians*, date unknown, before 1880s, watercolor, graphite, ink, colored pencil on ledger paper. Gift of Ann H. and Harte C. Crow; 2005.28

What do you picture when you hear “Native American”? Probably a stoic Indian man mounted on a horse and wearing war paint and a long feathered war bonnet. This captivating nineteenth-century image of the noble savage remains entrenched in notions of buffalo hunts, tipi camps, and other specific characteristics of pre-contact Plains cultures. Due to the long history of resistance, turbulence, and tragedy in the encounter between natives and non-natives, Plains Indians—and by extension *all* Native Americans—were portrayed as a primitive and resistant race, an enemy who was ignorant of “civilized” ways. This stereotype, further perpetuated by the entertainment world and the media, has been imposed upon Native peoples throughout the continent despite the realities of their cultural differences.

During the late 1800s the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show introduced the earliest form of entertainment to the public involving staged gunfights between Indians and soldiers. The white soldiers always won, with Buffalo Bill Cody usually coming out as the hero. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, government officials were also responsible for feeding many misconceptions to the public during the

Western expansion, which the Plains people met with fierce resistance for obvious reasons. Combined with biased stories of the massacres of early white settlers in the West, government depictions of the rebellious Plains people further contributed to the widespread idea of the “savage Indian” who needed to be conquered and controlled.

Since contact, Native Americans have further been seen as a “vanishing” race, exoticized as an oddity within the dominant European American society. This was a myth that artists, photographers, and Hollywood filmmakers were quick to romanticize in portrayals of intrepid encounters between cowboys (the heroes) and Indians (the enemy). The seven works in this exhibition examine how the cultural stereotype of Native Americans has been represented by both Native and non-Native artists.

Playing off widely disseminated and mythologized representations of Plains Indian cultures, Andy Warhol created a series of screenprints entitled *Cowboys and Indians*. Warhol, an American artist who became famous in the 1960s for his silkscreen prints, typically took everyday American iconic imagery, such as Marilyn Monroe’s face or Campbell’s soup cans, and transformed them into monumental high art. The content of his work revolved around and became the answer to pop culture, with Warhol himself evolving into an icon.

Warhol wanted to stylize popularized images of the quintessential “Indian.” Several of the silkscreens in the *Cowboys and Indians* series were based on actual photographs representing the American conquest of famous Native Americans such as Geronimo and Sitting Bull, Hollywood stars such as John Wayne, and other icons of the “Wild West,” such as General Custer and Annie Oakley. These personalities and their images were meaningful to Warhol because of their power, conspicuousness, and familiarity. In *War Bonnet Indian*, Warhol presents his take on the characteristic Indian man, dressed in Plains clothing, wearing a war bonnet, and stoically looking off into the distant horizon. Warhol’s use of bright neon colors, however, transports this stereotype into contemporary American pop culture, drawing attention to America’s collective mythologizing and romanticizing of the West.

Some works by Native artists represent a more intimate knowledge of Native American everyday life, community ties, and tribal histories, while others consider what it means to be “Indian.” The images they produced are neither more authentic nor more reliable merely because of the artists’ Indian blood, however. For example, the ledger drawing by Short Bull is a historical work that marks the introduction of Indian self-representations during the reservation era. Originally, ledger drawings helped Plains warriors and chiefs record their deeds and battles and memorialize great accomplishments in their tribal histories. This drawing reveals how Plains Indians saw and celebrated themselves for centuries, before a sense of inferiority was imposed upon them after their defeat by the American military and the establishment of the reservation system.

Is Short Bull’s image of a mounted warrior “too Indian”? It might appear so, but we must recognize that it depicts a traditional manner of self-representation in Plains cultures that pre-dates European American contact and the wide dissemination of Indian stereotypes in American popular culture. In his drawing, Short Bull, who was a Lakota chief and holy man, portrayed himself on horseback as an old-time warrior battling a Pawnee enemy. His self-representation is an act of self-preservation, of remembering significant events from his past rather than simply making art. And yet he was also aware of (and contributed to) the emerging interest in the vanishing Plains culture when in 1891 he rode with the Wild West Show in Europe. In 1909 he gave at least thirty-nine of his drawings, including the one exhibited here, to Natalie Curtis, author of *The Indians’ Book* and daughter of the famous photographer Edward Curtis.

Unlike Short Bull, who had lived the pre-contact Plains life and witnessed its destruction, Fritz Scholder was a Native artist who by his own admission did not grow up “Indian” and never felt the push-and-pull struggle between two identities until he was confronted by the issue with his Native art students at the Institute of American Indian Art in the 1960s. At that time he became interested in depicting what he referred to as “a loaded subject, the American Indian in real terms” (Scholder 1991, p. 16). Although Scholder was aware of Indian stereotypes in popular culture, he rejected the quintessential Indian as proud warrior, exploiting instead the mundane reality of alcoholism in Native American communities. Scholder’s painting depicts a drunken Indian sitting in a car, thereby addressing what he sees as an important issue of being an Indian today. As this and other works in the exhibition reveal, there is no sharp distinction between those who create and those who deconstruct stereotypical representations, whether seen from a Native or a non-Native perspective. Scholder poignantly concludes, “In the beginning it was the Indian who was exploited; later even the Indian would dilute the Indian” (Scholder 1979, p. 4).

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Fritz Scholder, *Drunken Indian in Car*, 1974, acrylic on canvas. Gift of Jane and Raphael Bernstein; P. 986.77.6

