

# John Coleman: Reanimating America's History

BY MATTHIAS ANDERSON



In Indianapolis, the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art is set to host its eighth annual *Quest for the West* Art Show and Sale, which will again feature recent works by 50 of today's best Western artists. Its lively opening weekend kicks off on September 6, and the show closes exactly one month later.

Also opening at the Eiteljorg on September 6 will be *Honored Life: The Art of John Coleman*, a show focused entirely on the recipient of the Artist of Distinction Award at last year's *Quest for the West*. That prize is bestowed by members of the museum's staff and of its Western Art Society, who consider all of the artists participating in the current *Quest for the West* show. The new exhibition highlighting John Coleman (b. 1949) will feature almost 40 of his sculptures, paintings, and drawings, and will run through November 17. Coleman is the program's sixth Artist of Distinction, following in the prestigious footsteps of Daniel Smith, Curt Walters, Robert Griffing, George Hallmark, and Doug Hyde.

Coleman is best known for sculpture, mostly in bronze, though he returned to painting recently and says he wants "my paintings to be as well received as my sculptures have been." Whatever his medium, he

aims to tell "a story that is deeper than what you see on the surface, and that conveys an underlying emotion or mood." Coleman says, "If I were in Europe, I might use Arthurian legends. But I live in America, so I go to American history. And sometimes it's easier to tell a story outside your culture. I find Native American culture has so many stories that lend themselves to being told visually and in ways people understand."

Sure enough, Coleman has — over the last 19 years — sculpted an impressive array of primarily Native American figures. Rigorously researched, deftly composed, and expertly modeled, these are realistic enough to convince us of their humanity, yet idealized enough to evoke the myth-based spirituality that characterizes Native cultures, and in which Coleman is extremely well read. It has never been easy to render figures that satisfy both ethnographers and symbolists, but somehow

**1876, Gall, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse**  
2008, Bronze, 34 x 56 x 22 in. (including base)  
Edition of 9





*Addih-Hiddisch, Hidatsa Chief* (from the *Explorer Artists Bodmer-Catlin series*)  
2004, Bronze, 35 x 18 x 11 in.  
Edition of 35



*Lives with Honor*  
2008, Bronze, 27 1/2 x 25 x 17 in.  
Edition of 35



*Lives with Honor*  
2009, Charcoal on paper, 20 x 20 in.

this artist has done it, winning both critical praise and commercial success in the process.

Two specific projects underscore Coleman's reanimation of American history, both Native and Anglo. In 2004, he launched a series of 10 standing figures that bring to three-dimensional life the Native Americans whose detailed portraits were so famously painted by the artist-explorers George Catlin (1796-1872) and Karl Bodmer (1809-1893) during their Western sojourn in the 1830s. (First in Coleman's series was *Addih-Hiddisch, Hidatsa Chief*, illustrated here.) Coleman claims he sought "to capture sculpturally the essence of who these men really were" and to create "a respectful complement to the original paintings." Both goals were fully achieved, and indeed some observers cannot quite believe that sculptures so well-crafted and dignified were actually made in our all-too-often slipshod, vulgar times.

More recently, Coleman was invited to place a sculpture at the entrance to the family plot of George Catlin at Brooklyn's historic





### *The Game of Arrows*

2009, Bronze, 60 1/2 x 26 x 16 in.

Edition of 12

to do, and declared myself an artist.” Coleman promptly studied sculpture at the Scottsdale Artists’ School (where he now teaches) under Lincoln Fox and Richard MacDonald, and he began sculpting and exhibiting professionally in 1994, at the ripe old age of 44.

Coleman starts making a new sculpture by focusing on an emotion, sketching out the forms in clay and sometimes drawing in charcoal on paper. He works on six or seven pieces at a time, a volume of productivity that has been aided by the increasing looseness of his touch — a less meticulous, more Rodin-like fluency that makes the results more expressive, even painterly.

That last word is highly relevant because Coleman has been studying recently with the painters John Asaro and Quang Ho. His canvases (two of which are illustrated here) bring to life his Indian sitters in ways that resemble his sculptures (e.g., accuracy and nobility) but also transcend them (e.g., brilliant color and a necessarily more controlled way for viewers to experience the work — i.e., we can study a painting from only one direction, rather than from all sides).

Paintings aren’t all that’s new for Coleman, either: he and his wife, Sue, who manages his business affairs, just finished building a two-story studio at their ranch house near Prescott, Arizona. Inside are not only two workspaces (for the artist’s larger and smaller pieces), but also a library of art reference books and a gallery for private viewing.



Green-Wood Cemetery. For this unique opportunity, he created *The Greeter*, which is based on Catlin’s account of his conversations with Black Moccasin, the Hidatsa chief who had welcomed Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1805. Here the septuagenarian chief stands with his ceremonial pipe, making a welcoming gesture with his eagle fan, a highly appropriate pose for Catlin’s resting place.

### AN UNUSUAL PATH

Coleman’s route to these successes was hardly a straight one. Born and raised in Southern California, he won a scholarship to what is now the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles, where he trained as an illustrator. Soon, however, he became involved in contracting and real estate development, and remained so until his youngest daughter married, when he suddenly felt “a sense of freedom that I had done everything I needed

### *Holy Man of the Buffalo Nation*

2012, Oil on canvas, 23 x 17 in.



*Iron Sharpens Iron*  
2008, Bronze, 17 x 12 x 12 in.  
Edition of 35



*Unconquered*  
2013, Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in.

Reinventing yourself in your mid-60s is a thrilling prospect, and we wish Coleman many more years of painting (and sculpting) to come. ■

**Information:** Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, 500 West Washington Street, Indianapolis, IN 46204, 317.636.9378, <http://eiteljorg.org/explore/exhibitions/quest-for-the-west>. On September 6, Coleman will discuss his art during a reception in his honor; pre-registration is required. Coleman is participating in two shows at Oklahoma City's National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum: the Prix de West exhibition (on view through August 4) and the Cowboy Artists of America Show & Sale (October 11 through January 5, 2014). Coleman is represented by Borsini-Burr Gallery (Montara, CA), Bronze Coast Gallery (Cannon Beach, OR), InSight Gallery (Fredericksburg, TX), Legacy Gallery (Jackson Hole and Scottsdale), Midland Gallery (Midland, TX), and Plainsmen Gallery (Clearwater, FL).

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