SEEING RED
Rennard Strickland's Lifelong Quest

By M.J. Van Deventer

When Rennard Strickland bought an Acee Blue Eagle painting at the age of eight, little did he know that single action would lead to a lifetime of collecting Native American art.

He still remembers the occasion vividly. "Blue Eagle came to the St. Paul Methodist Church in Muskogee for a fellowship dinner and displayed his art. I paid $10 for the painting. I had to borrow the money from my father and he made me pay it back 25 cents a week."

Ironically, the painting was originally priced at $12.50, so the transaction also marked the beginning of Strickland's lifetime of "bargaining" for his Native American treasures. He became a master at asking artists, "Could you come down on the price?"

That 11¼" x 7½" watercolor painting on butcher paper, "Warrior With Shield," along with 200 pieces of pottery, baskets, Kachinas, sculptures and rugs, will be the focus of "Spirits Red: Visions of Native American Artists," opening June 4 in the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma. Strickland has donated his extensive collection of art and artifacts to the Museum in honor of his late mother, Adell Tucker Strickland (1914-2006).

Strickland grew up thoroughly immersed in the culture he has collected. A native of Muskogee - home of the Five Civilized Tribes Museum - he has accrued a national reputation for his books and treatises on the nuances of Native American law.
Though professionally devoted to legal education — currently Senior Scholar in Residence at the OU College of Law, Strickland also is a former Dean and Philip H. Knight Professor of Law Emeritus at the University of Oregon and a former Dean of the Oklahoma City University College of Law — his passion for art has never wavered. And though his quest to gather vestiges of the Native American culture have taken him across the country and around the world, his generosity is focused on the Fred Jones Museum, where he served as curator of Native American art in the early 1990s.

The collection includes works of art by Joan Hill, Richard West, Willard Stone, Fred Kabore, Cecil Dick and C. Terry Saul, as well as ledger paintings from Plains Indian artists at the end of the 19th century. A china painting of Geronimo, featured in the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904, is also included. “I’m sure there are others of Geronimo, but that is the only one that has surfaced,” Strickland said.

Here too is a black pot made by Maria Martinez and her husband Julian, and pottery from Anna Belle Sixkiller Mitchell, an octogenarian resident of Vinita. Strickland calls Martinez “the most important Native American artist of the past century” and considers Mitchell the Maria of Oklahoma. “She has influenced Cherokee pottery for the past three generations of Oklahoma potters,” he says. “I met her at Gilcrease Museum when I was researching Cherokee pottery designs.”

A Cherokee potter made the most recent piece in the collection: Joseph Erb, director of technology for the Cherokee Nation in Talequah, produced “Gourd With Warriors Addressing Modern Technology,” a whimsical piece on which a traditionally dressed warrior listens to an iPod.

In the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, Strickland pays homage to his high school speech teacher and debate coach, the late Jack Gregory. “We were both mixed-blood Indians and we felt an affinity for the Native American culture,” Strickland says. They wrote three books together in the 1960s and 1970s: “Sam Houston With The Cherokees,” “American Indian Spirit Tales” and a limited edition of “Grandfather Was A Good Witch.”

“I have to say my collection was very much influenced by his tastes as well as mine,” Strickland said. Gregory passed away two years ago in Phoenix, where he had been director of Indian education for the Phoenix Public Schools.

Other influences on Strickland’s increasingly voracious collecting included Allan Houser, Joan Hill, Dick West and the late Nettie Wheeler, who was the mentor and patron of Strickland’s high school classmate Jerome Tiger. Strickland contends that few aficionados intentionally set out to build a collection. Rather, a body of art such as his gradually evolves out of a passion for the subject. “I decided about four years ago that it really was a valuable collection and I was going to give it to someone — an institution or museum,” he said.

“Probably, in Oklahoma, we are so intimidated by the Thomas Gilcrease Collection,” Strickland said, referring to the collection that inspired the world-class Tulsa museum. Strickland is writing a biography of its namesake and said, “I hope the 220-page book will focus on Thomas Gilcrease as a collector.”

The key to building a collection that will have value through the years, he suggests, is to start young — though perhaps not as early as eight; more like age 23 to 25. “If you collected only two paintings a year, and bought the best, eventually you would have 70 to 80 paintings — or other collectible objects — and that’s easily doable for all of us.”

**SHARING VISIONS**

Spirit Red: Visions of Native American Artists from the Rennard Strickland Collection explores five decades of passionate procurement in a collection of over 200 pieces. In conjunction with the annual Oklahoma City-based Red Earth Native American Cultural Festival, Spirit Red opens with a special reception at 6pm on Wednesday, June 3, featuring a presentation by co-curators Mary Jo Watson and Rennard Strickland. The exhibition will remain on view through September 13. For more information visit www.ou.edu/fjjma or call 325.3272.