

PAINTING FOR TIME

The Art Colony at Nespelem

By J. J. Creighton

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The road from Grand Coulee Dam to Nespelem was a narrow gravel track in 1937. Situated 18 miles north of the monolithic dam that soon would furnish an unlimited supply of hydroelectric power to the Northwest, Nespelem was the perfect site for an art colony. The location pitted the past against the future; progress juxtaposed with what many perceived as a dying culture. These elements combined to create an ideal setting for the artist whose goal was to capture things memorable for future generations.

The Nespelem area had long been the home of numerous Indian tribes—tribes that were no doubt uneasy about the "progress" that was rapidly altering their sacred landscape. The region was, and still is, home to the Colville Confederated Tribes. Inhabited by a variety of local Indian bands from the San Poil, Methow, Okanogan, Lake, Kalispel, and other tribes, the reservation was created by executive order on April 3, 1872, and eventually also became home to the once-exiled Chief Joseph band of Nez Perce, the Snake River Palouse, the Moses Columbia, and the Wenatchee band. It was in this diverse setting that the Nespelem Art Colony began its work in 1937, recording Native American culture and the history of a group of significant individuals who defined American Indian involvement in events of the late 19th-century Northwest.

Nespelem fit the criteria for a colony whose work was to focus on a fascinating historical record and, better, a living past. Unlike the art movement in western Washington and Oregon, which emphasized Asian genres among others, the Nespelem experience focused on Native Americans. Never before had the tribes of the Inland Northwest been represented in this way. Tribal members posed for dozens of students and instructors. The colony's founders, Worth Griffin and Clyfford Still, were excited about this opportunity to create the first extensive visual record of the Nespelem people and their history.

Griffin and Still decided to admit only 15 to 20 students, and Washington State College (WSC) began sending out invitations in early spring 1937. Griffin reported to President Holland that they had "published a folder and sent it to 600 or more prospective students in Washington, Idaho, California, Utah, Montana, and Oregon, and some of these folders were sent to teachers in Ohio and Indiana." Still was emphatic about selecting "a more professional type of worker than is usually attracted to the summer session." He felt that professional artists would do a better job of depicting the subject matter in their art, boost the prestige of WSC, and build a reputation for the colony. By acquiring strong talent, Still believed "such a project might form the nucleus of what could readily prove to be a vital, creative art movement in eastern Washington comparable to those which have developed in Kansas, Iowa, Texas, Oklahoma, and many other places." The colony attracted talented artists, but they were not the kind Still

envisioned: Nespelem would start its first summer with a combination of well-traveled instructor-artists and some very enthusiastic students.

With recruiting already under way and newspapers throughout the region frequently reporting on the upcoming program, WSC's Department of Fine Arts turned its attention to finding suitable living and working accommodations for the artists' eight-week stay. Still and Griffin spent most of their spring vacation in Nespelem determining the nature and quality of available facilities. According to Still, the options were numerous:

- One hotel, room for 20 persons, electric lights, all new equipment, rooms small but clean. Entire top floor could be turned over to the group which would have exclusive access to quarters. Rate \$10 per month, per person.
- Private homes—six to eight beds—assured at same rates.
- Clean wholesome meals will be served at reasonable rates at the local restaurant, or, if preferred, in a few cases in private homes. The total cost of living should be not more than \$28 to \$30 per month.
- A large loft above the drugstore on the main street can be secured for studio space. Skylight equipment would be installed for us at cost.
- Transportation from Coulee Dam is by local taxi over graveled state road.
- Recreational facilities include horseback riding, golf, lake swimming, hiking, moving pictures, and dancing.

The students ended up living wherever they could find space—above the local drugstore, in the old hotel, or in vacant cabins across the reservation. But it did not really matter where exactly they stayed; the excitement that pervaded the colony experience made up for any inconvenience. And with the painting schedule they kept, falling asleep at the easel was probably as good a place as any.

Students and instructors put in exhaustive hours each day. Their weekly schedule was rigorous: three days spent on portrait work, two on landscape, and weekends at Grand Coulee sketching with pencil and charcoal. Charter student Anne Harder completed roughly 25 pieces of artwork during the colony's first summer and worked on many more that she never finished. Student Glenn West completed nearly 100 over the course of four summers, and Ruth Kelsey completed almost 50 paintings in her summers at the colony. Though sometimes finishing a portrait in just one day—and hurried possibly by the models to complete portraits in one sitting—the artists lost little clarity in the portraits they painted. In a letter dated August 4, 1938, Griffin informed President Holland of the day-to-day activities during the colony's second summer:

The students are the most enthusiastic group I have ever taught. Many of them are painting at 5 o'clock in the morning, and they usually continue until 5:30 in the evening.... The daily routine consists of breakfast, sometimes between 5:30 and 8:30 in the morning; painting until 12:00; lunch, which is more often than not a meal worthy of a harvest hand; painting from the model or landscape until 5:30; dinner, and a swim in lake Owhi, or a shower at the Agency; the evenings are usually spent preparing canvases for the following day. With few exceptions this schedule is carried on seven days a week.

Ruth Kelsey initially had entered WSC as a home economics major, completing her degree in 1927. After graduation she taught home economics and art in Clarkston and Cle Elum, Washington, and Lewiston, Idaho. After a brief marriage and the demanding experience of owning her own restaurant in Tacoma, Kelsey realized that teaching was her greatest interest. Upon returning to WSC in 1937 to renew her Washington teaching certificate, Kelsey consulted her friend Worth Griffin about her curriculum. Griffin urged her to take his portrait class. With some hesitation, Kelsey joined the class, where she developed interest and skill in portrait painting. After completing a teaching certificate, Kelsey taught at Lewis and Clark High School in Spokane. It was there, in 1938, that she received Griffin's invitation to join the colony's second summer session.

Kelsey remembers loading up her Chevrolet coupe with enough supplies to last the eight-week stay in Nespelem. She recalls that the roads heading north were "pretty good up to Grand Coulee; from there to the reservation was like an old county road." The country's primitiveness did not seem to trouble Kelsey; her excitement about having the chance to work with the rest of the group overshadowed all other perceptions. Kelsey found the tribal members' reception "quite pleasant"—probably because in the colony's second summer the Indians had become more comfortable and trusting of the instructors and students.

According to Kelsey, Griffin made early morning trips into the surrounding countryside to recruit tribal members to pose for the students. The colony's contract with the school district aided greatly in convincing many to participate; painting was done in the school's old gymnasium, a comfortable atmosphere for most. Models sat for a full day for a reported sum of three to five dollars. Not everyone on the reservation was pleased about these activities and some, as expected, kept their distance. Generally, however, the response was good. Kelsey recalls the enthusiasm of one key individual in particular:

Our good relations with the tribal members [were] probably because of mutual admiration. Chief Red Star allowed us to paint his portrait several times. We would walk past his house on our way to class and often he or some members of his family were outdoors, so we had an opportunity to greet them or stop for a visit. He and his family became our good friends, although all of the Indians I met were friendly.

Kelsey did not get off to a good start during her first week at the colony. Descending the stairs from her room on the second floor of the old hotel, she hooked one of her heels in the opposite pant leg, sending her headlong to the bottom landing. Having fractured her right wrist, Kelsey learned to paint left-handed for a week during the eight-week session. Later, whenever students whined about being too tired to paint, Worth Griffin would relate this story, squelching any further complaints. Kelsey had nothing but praise for Griffin, Still, and Wessels, the primary instructors during her stay at the colony. She often credited them with convincing her to stick with painting. Kelsey describes Clyfford Still as patient, considerate, and tolerant, though aloof. She remembers that he often isolated himself from students and instructors when he was painting at the colony. Glenn Wessels also had a significant effect on Kelsey's maturation with regard to painting. Wessels described Kelsey as a good student—one who showed innate ability:

Ruth Kelsey came to painting by an admirable and logical process; she began as a student and teacher of the household arts, but quickly discovering her true inclination, moved from this general field to the more specific one of painting.... Miss Kelsey's work displayed an innate awareness of color and the decorative values of form, but through study she amplified this intuitive equipment to a rational understanding of pictorial structure...her knowledge of various

contemporary styles is eclectic in the good sense—that is, many—sided but not derivative. She has made many contemporary means and methods her own.

Kelsey spent three summers at Nespelem, 1938-40. After the 1940 summer session ended she continued her creative efforts through a newly established Works Progress Administration (WPA) art project in Spokane. There she worked under project coordinator James Fitzgerald, gaining experience in drawing, ceramics, and sculpture. Kelsey continued a lifelong art career. Between 1943 and 1945 she attended the University of Oregon with the help of three Carnegie Foundation scholarships, and by 1946 she earned a master of fine arts degree from the University of California, Berkeley. Kelsey's work was exceptional, and as a result, she received two James Phelan fellowships.

The fellowships enabled Kelsey to spend six months in Mexico and another six months in Guatemala studying pre-Columbian and colonial art. The Mexico experience made a deep impression, and Kelsey established Mexico City as her summer home for several years. In the summer of 1950 Kelsey had the exalting experience of meeting Diego Rivera, one of her favorite artists, when she was invited to his birthday party by a gallery attendant she met at a museum. Kelsey crossed paths with the artist again the following year while touring the presidential palace, where Rivera happened to be composing another mural.

In 1948 Kelsey began a 24-year career as an art instructor at Western Washington University. She retired in 1972 as professor emerita. Her work since that time has appeared in juried and invitational exhibitions on the Pacific Coast. Kelsey has had solo exhibitions at the Seattle Art Museum, Henry Art Gallery, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Berkeley Art Gallery, Pasadena Art Institute, Whatcom Museum of History and Art, Washington State Historical Society, and Western Washington University. She also was responsible for instituting a study-abroad program sponsored by the Fine Arts Department at Western Washington University—the first of its kind; students earned university credits for tours (developed and led by Kelsey) in Mexico, China, Japan, and the Philippines.

The finished works of the Nespelem colony artists have gone in various directions over the years. Kelsey's work remained for a time in her personal collection, although she bequeathed her remaining 18 paintings to the Washington State Historical Society upon her death in 2000.

In a sense, the art of the 1960s and 1970s progressed too far to suit many of the Nespelem students who had, for better or worse, cultivated a simple form of expression dedicated to the portrayal of living history. Their style of art has been called bland, expressionless, and unsophisticated, ignoring that the value of the work is mainly in its interpretation. Most of all, the work reveals how these students, many of whom had never before set eyes on an Indian, left Nespelem with a more positive view of Native American culture. And those who were painted seemed to have appreciated the work of these visitors. Today several persons who sat for the artists in the 1930s retain a genuine interest in the work, and two women in particular remember almost all of the students. For most concerned, the Nespelem experience was a successful endeavor.

J. J. Creighton is associate archivist with the Washington State Archives, Eastern Region, Cheney, and author of Indian Summers: Washington State College and the Nespelem Art Colony, 1937-41 (Washington State University Press, 2000), from which this article is excerpted, with permission of the publisher.