

White House honors woman who resurrected ancient Indian art form

Doug Hill, CNHI News Service, November 03, 2009

NORMAN, Okla. — The National Museum of the American Indian purchased Jereldine Redcorn's ceramic pot titled "Intertwining Scrolls" in 2005. This was significant recognition for the Norman artist's one-woman resurrection of the traditional Caddo methods in making both fine and utilitarian pottery. Important as that acknowledgment was however there's no way Redcorn could have known that someday this piece would be chosen by first lady Michelle Obama for display in the White House's Oval Office. That's what happened this fall.

"It's quite an honor to have my work selected along with other artists such as Maria Montoya Martinez," Redcorn said recently during an interview at OU's Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History. Her art will be among work by others such as Mark Rothko and Jasper Johns on display for the Commander in Chief's daily enjoyment and inspiration. "When President Obama was elected I received e-mails from German friends congratulating us on the outcome," Redcorn said. "His election has made a difference all over the world by opening doors."

Redcorn knows something about opening doors through her art. In 2000 she made friends with a collective of German artists called the Group of Five. Along with other Native American artists Redcorn traveled to Bremen. They worked and shared ideas together as well as having a great time getting to know each other. "In 2004 they came to America," Redcorn said. "We've kept the conversation going and it has been a wonderful exchange."

How a little girl from Washita County grew up to be an international artistic ambassador, her work admired by the most powerful couple in the world is a fascinating story. Redcorn is also a wife, mother, retired educator and has been an artist in residence at the Smithsonian Institution.

"I grew up on my dad's cotton farm in Colony," she said. "We went to Caddo dances and also Cheyenne and Arapaho because their reservations were nearby." One of Redcorn's favorites was the Alligator Dance. "When you're young it's a social dance and you hope you'll be holding hands with some guy you like," she said. "The alligator aspect never occurred to me then, it had just been handed down through the centuries." Obviously there were no gators in western Oklahoma where she grew up but the reptile's symbolism was something Redcorn wouldn't forget.

It wasn't until 1991 as a member of the Caddo Culture Club that she visited the Museum of the Red River in Idabelle and realized the enormity of what had happened to her nation. "Not only had we been removed from the lush pine forests and river banks of Louisiana by President Andrew Jackson," Redcorn said. "Our amazing culture had been totally upset and in 1859 we arrived in Oklahoma barely with our lives." Exposure to European diseases had begun decimating the Caddo population starting in the 16th century. Violent white settlers pushed the maize and squash farmers west. It's estimated only a few hundred Caddo made it to what would become the Sooner State.

Redcorn became a diligent student of Caddo history. "I realized I could name the presidents, but couldn't name one Caddo chief," she said. "What really got to me was

that my history had been purposefully denied.” Redcorn’s mother and father had both been subjected to the infamous boarding school policy in an attempt to assimilate Indian children into white culture. “They both went away at age 6 and during those years couldn’t speak their Potawatomi and Caddo languages,” she said. “They were indoctrinated into Christianity.”

Redcorn affirmed she did not grow up with bitterness and this was immediately evident from speaking with her. “My people accepted what had happened to them and went on with life,” she said. “They pulled together for the children.” The displaced Caddo managed to retain their language, songs, dances, horticultural knowledge, burial customs, food preparation and how to relate to each other. One tradition however had not survived the Diaspora. “Pottery was gone,” Redcorn said. “Their skills in clay were unsurpassed but they had disappeared.” She imagined her female Caddo ancestors teaching the young girls where to find the best clay and how to make pots.

Redcorn studied Caddo pots in many museums. Many fine examples have been discovered and preserved. OU’s Sam Noble museum has perhaps the finest permanent collection in the world with nearly 700 pieces. Redcorn developed important relationships with archeologists at the University of Texas-Austin and learned from them. It became Redcorn’s personal mission to make pots with methods as close as possible to the way her ancestors had for centuries.

“I learned they mixed ground mussel shells in the clay,” she said. “And they must have used flint shards and bone to incise their designs into the clay.” She marveled at how thin the clay walls were in some of the ceremonial vessels. These were often buried with the deceased and sometimes filled with items such as seed corn they’d need in the next world. “Items such as wooden bows and textiles didn’t survive through time but I’ve been able to study these magnificent pots,” she said.

Redcorn’s husband Charles is her assistant on the days that pots are fired in a wood burning device. The Osage author of novel *A Pipe for February* (OU Press, 2002) and distinguished Tribal Fellows scholar at Dartmouth College is also a fire wood expert. “On burn ban days I notify the Norman Fire Department,” she said. Redcorn’s research has contributed to the processes she uses because the actual methods were not handed down. “Charles has made gourd shapers and I use bone engraving tools,” she said. “They didn’t have tables so I roll the clay out by hand.”

She said the best clay is found near Marshall, Texas, around where many of the ancient pots have been excavated. Don Henley is a founder of the Caddo Lake Institute there and owns a Redcorn creation presented to him by the Caddo tribe.

“I heard about him during my very first showing in Austin,” she said. “When I got home and was talking about the Institute, my son asked if I knew he was the lead singer for The Eagles.” She didn’t, but “Hotel California” rang a bell for mom.

Redcorn’s decorative designs in the clay follow inspirations from nature favored by her ancestors. Often these are representations of fantastic creatures such as the “Flying Horned Panther Rattlesnake.” Abstract and geometric patterns are common as well. Sometimes contemporary themes are reflected in her creations. “Life and unity are universal and timeless,” Redcorn said. “One of my modern designs is titled *Dance All Night, Celebrate the Morning*.” The piece was included in an art show for the 2007

Oklahoma Centennial which focused on the Native American perspective of that anniversary.

Redcorn rekindled the Caddo pottery fire single-handedly and now has lit the flame in other young hearts. It's her fondest hope that the art never comes close to extinction again.

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