

Charlie Willetto

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Charlie Willetto was a daring artist who navigated the boundaries between taboo and honor, the known and the mysterious, tradition and innovation. Willetto was born in 1897 in the Diné Bikéyah, the homeland of the Diné, or the Navajo. His carvings, all done in the last few years of his life (between 1961 and 1964), challenged a tribal taboo against figural representation in Navajo art. At first, Willetto's figures were feared. Later they were regarded as a sign that he had a powerful relationship with the spirits. Willetto's oeuvre straddled worlds and captured magic. In many ways he himself was kindred to the owl, a creature he depicted time and again.

For the Navajo, artistic practice is closely aligned with the sacred. To create a representation of a figure was an act of ritual engagement with a deity—forbidden in other contexts. The groundbreaking Navajo artist Hosteen Klah set a precedent for figural weaving in the early part of the twentieth century, moving away from entirely abstract patterns and replicating the imagery of ephemeral, figural sandpaintings in his woven designs. Klah, however, was revered as an exception, and carved figures—which have a particular association with sickness and healing—remained taboo until after Willetto had died.[1]

Willetto carved his sculptures from soft woods like cottonwood and pine; their blunt, undetailed shapes exude an ancient quality. They appear time-modeled, worn by the bite of sand in the wind. They seem wise, as if they have somehow witnessed the ages. The idea of the witness, the sage or seer, may well be relevant in Willetto's affinity for the owl—a creature

known for silently watching through large glowing eyes. Willetto himself was a seer, a tribal healer relied upon for his wisdom and supernatural powers.

The owl has many powerful associations. A silent, camouflaged watcher in darkness, a wise keeper of secrets, the owl stays hidden until the time of its choosing, and its exceptional vision easily penetrates obscure realities. Many cultures associate the owl with death, but other interpreters argue that the death the owl portends is symbolic, not a physical death but a time of extreme change or transition.

The owl's frontal eyes make it resemble a human in a way other avians do not. Willetto took particular interest in the great horned owl. Many of his owls feature these "horns"—tufts of feathers that look like ears—and a painted mustache, or a smile; some even display a toothy grin. The great horned owl does not really have whiskers, but the feather coloration on its face can lend the appearance of a mustache or a mouth. The variations of facial markings heighten the parallel between owls and humans—the individual is not generic, but instead unique and recognizable.

Willetto carved with a seeming fervor in the last four years of his life, and in keeping with tribal modes, it was not uncommon for a family member to aid the artist. Greg LaChapelle, an early collector of the work, differentiated between Willetto's style and that of his wife, Elizabeth, who was also a respected tribal healer. "Her painting is distinguished by the precision of the applied pattern, line, and color," LaChapelle explained. "Willetto painted with a more direct hand and with less attention to detail; and he applied paint with sticks as well as brushes."^[2] While it is not known to what extent Charlie and Elizabeth discussed the sculptures or their finishing, many of the figural pieces are indeed painted with a hand that seems delicate, inclined to smaller

features and greater specificity in the painted-on adornments. Others are characterized by larger, blocky areas of paint, bold graphic coloration, and larger facial features with quirky expressions. It seems likely that Charlie himself painted all the owls, for there is great unity within this group.

Willetto's owls are depicted in a way that captures their essential form and nature; they do not strive for realistic representation. They range in form from identifiable winged creatures to highly abstracted beings. The great horned owl from the Smither collection, with its attached, widespread wings is among those that are relatively easy to identify as an owl. This particular example is fully swathed in bold symmetrical chevrons that more closely resemble the patterns of Navajo ceremonial dress than natural feather markings. The face is a hybrid: human and animal. The long attached piece in the center of the face looks more like a human nose than a short and fiercely sharp owl beak. The "mouth" is similarly hybridized. Its overall shape is human, sliced out of the face in a crescent that reveals a row of teeth. Beyond the fact that owls don't have teeth, the dentation here is not fierce or animalistic, but squared off, flattened, and large, like a human's.

Instead of a mustache, this particular owl has whiskers flaring off at either side of the mouth, giving him the look of a wizened elder, like Willetto. His eyes are immense visual receptors; he sees all. The creature's wings are outstretched—this owl, symbolically, is soaring, hunting, seeing—not perched. The feathered tips of his wings and tail, depicted as jagged forms rather than smoothly folded, splay in the air and indicate both silent stealth and command of his domain. Willetto fashioned the "horns" from wood and added a solitary feather, symbolically signifying the creature's regal crown as well as his ability to occupy both earthly and heavenly realms.

Some of Willetto's owls seem to sit perched, talons gripped as if on a branch. Some feature a cylindrical profile and wings; others, scarcely more than planks of painted wood, are almost entirely abstract. Regardless of form, the owls share a range of patterned, geometric markings and the quirky grin or mustache. Willetto's humanoid figures often also feature horns. In most cases, these seem to refer to Navajo horned deities, traditionally depicted with sheep or cattle horns. Yet on a few such figures the horns more closely resemble the tubular tufts of Willetto owls. One is led to wonder if these figures, and all of the owl carvings, were partially, or even entirely, self-referential—Willetto adopting the spirit of the Great Horned Owl.

As a tribal healer, Willetto may have called upon the owl as a spirit animal, or totem, channeling its abilities to see through the veil of the mundane into the world of mysteries. Willetto's own role as a healer—a bringer of profound change—makes a personal connection to the owl still more compelling and was inseparable from his artistic nature. His taboo-breaking carvings confronted the spirits head on and ushered the Navajo into a new era. These carvings came to be regarded as evidence of tremendous wisdom and insight, and Willetto himself as a visionary.

Notes

1. For additional information on figural representation in Navajo art, see Leslie Umberger, "Charlie Willetto: The Edge of Taboo," in Umberger et al, *American Story* (Sheboygan, Wisconsin: The John Michael Kohler Arts Center, published on the occasion of the exhibition, *American Story*, June 21-December 31, 2009), 14–19, and Lee Kogan, "An Ordered Universe: the Art of Willetto," in Begay, Hopps, Kogan, LaChapelle, *Collective Willetto: The Visionary*

As Essential As Dreams, Willetto Text by Leslie Umberger
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Carvings of a Navajo Artist (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2002), 13–25. For an example of a figure possibly painted by Elizabeth Willetto, see figure XX. (if you are showing more than one, then stet.)

2. Greg LaChapelle, “Charlie Willetto: 1897–1964: A Recollection,” in *Collective Willetto: The Visionary Carvings of a Navajo Artist* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2002), 8.