

Ernest Whiteman, Inuna-ina (Arapaho) United States, born 1947
Untitled, 1991
Steel and neon
H.73¼ x W.44½ inches
The David Draper Dayton Fund, 92.140

Key Ideas

Ernest Whiteman grew up on the Wind River Reservation in southwestern Wyoming, immersed in contemporary Arapaho [a-**rap**-a-ho] culture. His sculpture *Untitled* draws upon the forms of ancient Arapaho petroglyphs, or rock carvings, found in the Wind River Range of mountains. Whiteman seeks in his art to blend ancient traditions with contemporary life and acknowledge the balance between people and their natural surroundings.

Inspiration in Ancient Images

The shape of this sculpture is based on ancient Native American rock carvings or petroglyphs. These flat images are incised, scratched or pounded onto rock formations in many areas of the United States, usually located near water sources and found throughout the Plains. They range in date from about 2500 B.C. to the middle of the 19th century. Representations of humans and ANTHROPOMORPHIC beings, such as this one, are one major category of petroglyphs.

As a child, the artist Ernest Whiteman often visited a famous petroglyph site known as Dinwoody, which is located in the Wind River Range in Wyoming. Whiteman describes experiencing a feeling of great respect and awe whenever he visited this site, which he continued to do as he grew older. Much later, these images began to appear in his art.

A Source of Spiritual Power

Little is known about why petroglyphs were made or what they meant to those who made them. They predate written records, and we can only guess at their purpose by studying them in the light of oral traditions of nineteenth and twentieth-century Indian peoples. It appears that these carvings were filled with spiritual power. Whiteman calls them "rock-writings" and believes they were an ancient form of written communication; he sees their gestures as a means by which the rocks speak to people. By reintroducing rock-writing images through his own art, Whiteman hopes to give them the respect and dignity they deserve.

Blending Tradition with Contemporary Life

In this sculpture of a silhouetted human-like figure, Ernest Whiteman blends the traditions of his native culture with contemporary life. He uses the modern materials of steel and neon to update imagery from ancient American Indian rock carvings, derived from his Arapaho background. Reverence for the natural world is key to the beliefs of the Arapaho (or Inuna-ina, as they call themselves). They honor and respect the earth as a living being, a gift from the Creator. They believe that people can survive and flourish only when they live in harmony with the animals and the land.

Harmony with the Environment

Whiteman's anthropomorphic figure embodies harmony between people and their surroundings. The elongated shapes hanging from its outstretched left arm represent rain falling from the sky and bringing life to plants and animals. Its cupped right hand reaches forward to scoop up and harvest the gifts of the earth. The long wavy line cut through the steel and illuminated by a bright red neon light is the heart line. An important Native American symbol, the heart line connects the mouth of a person or an animal to its heart. It is a sign of great power.

The placement of the bright red heart line gives visual BALANCE to Whiteman's ASYMMETRICAL sculpture. It directs attention to the center of the image and away from the outstretched arm and the downward, harvesting GESTURE. The red wavy line echoes the elongated forms cascading from the figure's left arm. For Whiteman, the heart line centered inside the figure represents the necessary balance between what nature gives to us and what we take from the earth. As Whiteman explained it in a conversation with museum staff, "When we nurture growth and take only what we need, our hearts and heads are connected, and we can enjoy the blessings of peace and prosperity which come to us from earth and sky."

The Old and the New

This sculpture was made from a new sheet of steel. Whiteman loosely sketched the original design on the steel with chalk. He then cut into the steel using a plasma cutter, a tool, similar to a laser, which uses a beam of intense heat to cut the steel. In order to give the new steel a more aged appearance, Whiteman applied a concentrated salt mixture, which caused the steel to rust, giving it a more ORGANIC and natural look. The reddish-brown tones of the rusted steel contrast with the wash of diluted blue and green paint that drips down the surface and also echoes the falling lines on the right side of the sculpture. The blue and green paint not only mirrors the use of pigments on some ancient petroglyphs, but also adds the type of color often found in nature. Whiteman compares his use of color to the blue-green colors found in some caves caused by minerals dripping over a period of time and coloring the walls. The artist also found ways to break up the smooth, even surface, such as deliberately leaving the cut edges rough and adding brass arm bracelets to the figure's right arm. Whiteman feels his choice of materials and the technical aspects of his work are very important to his art. He said, "I want this to be a marriage of materials that would work as one."

Keeping a Tradition Alive

Ernest Whiteman is an Arapaho artist living in St. Paul whose work centers around American Indian history and the Indian experience. He grew up on the Wind River Reservation in southwestern Wyoming, with a rich exposure to his Arapaho culture and tradition. He knew he wanted to become an artist someday and studied art in high school. He studied sculpture in college, receiving a BFA at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and an MFA at the University of Minnesota. In addition to working as a sculptor, painter, printmaker, and jewelry maker, Ernest Whiteman is an arts educator. He feels it is important to give back to other people by sharing and teaching, because someone took the time to teach him. "Through my work," he says, "I keep alive a tradition and give respect and power to the images so that they can speak once again in the twenty-first century."

Extend the Discussion

See "Tips for Talking about Art" in the introductory pages for more ideas.

Look

What do you recognize in this sculpture? What seems odd or surprising to you?

Ernest Whiteman is interested in the balance between people and their natural surroundings. What do you see that looks man-made? What do you see that looks natural?

Contemporary sculptors choose to work in almost any material you can think of. What materials do you think Whiteman has used here? What do you see that makes you say that? (consider colors, textures) If you could touch this sculpture, how would it feel?

Think

The artist said he wanted this figure to represent both the rain and the harvest. Do you think he has done this? What do you see that makes you say that? What's so important about the rain and the harvest?

Ernest Whiteman gets ideas for his art by looking at Native American petroglyphs thousands of years old. What seems old? What seems new? What do you see that makes you say that? What might the artist be trying to tell us?

The artist calls this piece *Untitled*. Why might he have done that? What title would you give this work? Why?