

Mühsam's life, artwork reflects Native American culture

Like many young boys, Armin Mühsam, associate professor of art, grew up fascinated with a fictional character in his favorite author's novels. His interest in this character, and by extension the Native American culture, shaped his life in many ways, and continues to be a part of who he is today.

Mühsam was born in Transylvania, part of modern day Romania. As a young child, he recalls reading Western-themed dime novels at his grandfather's house. To pull him away from these "trashy" reads, Mühsam's father introduced him to the German author Karl May, whose books feature a character named Winnetou, a fictional Apache chief.

"May's books shaped my Native American image. These books were extremely popular in Germany," Mühsam said. "I began reading all of them thinking they taught me all I needed to know about Native Americans."

Although May is virtually unknown in the United States, Mühsam said he was once the most popular author in Germany. "To Germans, Winnetou used to be like Paul Bunyan, Abe Lincoln and Elvis rolled into one."

However, when Mühsam discovered that what was presented as fact in May's books was just as clichéd as the dime novels, he set out to learn the facts about Native American history. His friends and family thought his interest in the subject matter was simply a passing infatuation, but it wasn't. In fact, Mühsam's love and respect for Native American culture formed many of the

decisions in his life, including his pursuit of higher education.

"I chose to go to graduate school at Montana State because there are

seven reservations nearby," Mühsam said. "My plan was to paint Cheyennes and Crows 'on site,' but I soon decided that this would be just another form of colonialism."

Early in his profession, Mühsam's paintings often featured human figures; however, his experience of the vast open spaces in Montana and knowledge of Native American history led him to depict human intervention with the natural environment.

"The artificial environment of machines and concrete mixed in with the natural beauty of the land shape society's views and, ultimately, how they feel about something," Mühsam said. "My art attempts to visualize this by showing landscapes 'populated' with basic man-made elements. It often describes humanity, without depicting specific people."

After graduate school, Mühsam, whose paintings are showcased internationally, began teaching at Northwest in 2000. He also was a member of the team that organized the University's first powwow in 2004, an event that has become a popular annual tradition at Northwest.

"I saw my first powwow in Canada when I was 14. It blew me away," Mühsam said. "It exemplified the vitality of a living culture whose resilience should make Americans pause and think."

The culture has indeed made a lasting impression on Mühsam, whose life has been guided by a subject that started as a boyhood interest.

"Native Americans are a minority like no other minority," he said, "because they were the continent's majority population for millennia. They know this land like no one else, and we should look to their vast experience in all matters regarding our interactions with the natural world. My studies of several Native American cultures have certainly influenced the way I view myself and my own culture in this context." ■



Northwest's annual powwow in Bearcat Arena is the ideal venue for Armin Mühsam to observe the Native American culture that he often depicts in his artwork.



"Badger Wahwasuck Singing and Drumming," Marker/Watercolor, 2007