## ART ALL AROUND

Before he was a politician, Ben Nighthorse Campbell sold his renowned jewelry at Santa Fe Indian Market

INTERVIEW BY Shari Morrison PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jonas Grushkin

When American Cheyenne politician Ben Nighthorse Campbell reported for duty to the 100th U.S. Congress in 1987, he confesses that he rode into Washington, D.C., on a Harley Davidson, his long hair gathered into a braid trailing down his back.

This illustrious entrance was an appropriate beginning to his political career, as Campbell continued to represent Colorado's third congressional district for three terms until 1993. He then served 12 years in the U.S. Senate, from 1993 to 2005. Campbell was the only American Indian in Congress while serving as a U.S. Senator, and he was the first American Indian to serve in the U.S. Senate in more than 60 years.

During his career, laws about Native American rights, law officers' and veterans' rights, and water rights were among the issues addressed in bills he sponsored. In La Plata County, Colorado, Lake Nighthorse was named for his years of advocacy to gain protection for water-right holders along the Animas River and water storage for tribal lands.

Campbell championed laws that outfitted police officers with bulletproof vests. "We've saved a lot of lives by passing that legislation," he says.

He also helped write the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990, making it illegal to sell any art or craft falsely misrepresented as being made by a Native American. Another of his proudest legislative moments was his involvement with the National Museum of the American Indian Act, which created the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

Before earning notoriety as a politician, Campbell was renowned for his contemporary jewelry, receiving more than 200 awards for his designs. He minored in fine art at San Jose State University, but he says that many Native Americans grew up with art as a way of life.

"In the old days, Indian people had art all around them; they painted their bows and arrows and their tipis. Warriors painted their war shields and their horses, and of



Linda Campbell and Ben Nighthorse Campbell live on a ranch in Colorado. They met in 1966.

course, their faces and bodies," Campbell says. "They were nomadic and couldn't carry heavy things, so wherever they settled, they had their tools to create art."

Campbell learned to craft jewelry at age 12 by working alongside his father, who taught him the rules, including that everything must be handmade. "We used coins for our silver, at times letting the trains flatten them to make our designs," he says. "We weren't making jewelry for sale, but just to trade for food or other goods. It wasn't until the late 1950s or 1960s that Indian jewelry became popular."

Arizona Highways also helped advance Campbell's career when, in the late 1970s, it included his jewelry in a feature about the "new Indian," focusing on artists who created contemporary designs. He says, "That issue was a sell-out. It was about a dozen guys doing their own contemporary jewelry, and it launched our careers."

He credits the Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial in Gallup, New Mexico, and the Santa Fe Indian Market as vehicles that elevated Native American jewelry and artwork. The events provided exposure, and when they began giving sizable awards for the best works, collectors flocked to buy them.

For many years, Campbell participated in various art shows, including Santa Fe Indian Market for 12 years. He began showing his work there in the mid-1970s, and only stopped when he was elected to Congress because the law prevented him from earning additional income over a certain amount.

Today, he's actively creating his line of popular jewelry, which his daughter, Shanan Campbell, sells at Sorrel Sky galleries, with locations in Durango, Colorado, and Santa Fe.

Campbell lives on a Colorado ranch with his wife of 56 years, Linda, and has been collecting art for his lifetime. His friendships with artists whose works are in his collection include Kevin Red Star, Jesse Monongye, Ray Tracey, and Amado Peña, among many others.

WA&A: What advice would you offer someone who wishes to start their own art collection?

Ben Nighthorse Campbell: Get as close to the source of the art as you can, meaning know who the artist is. There are many entities importing 'Indian jewelry' copied from legitimate artists in the U.S. but manufactured in other countries. The best way to know what you're buying is authentic and perhaps collectible is to ask the person selling it who made it and learn about the artist. Then you're probably okay. Most legitimate galleries, trading posts, and stores don't mind if you ask all the right questions.

WA&A: Is your art collection focused on one subject?

**B.N.C.:** No, we have Indian baskets and pottery, but also, we have a fondness for wildlife and have collected Star York's animal bronzes for years. We have 20 or more of her pieces. We also have a number of paintings of ranch life by Jim Rey. My wife Linda's family settled in Colorado; she is a third-generation rancher, so we identify very strongly with ranch life.

WA&A: Where do you get inspiration for your designs?

B.N.C.: There's an Indian belief about creativity: If

you have a gift, no matter if you are a potter, painter, or sculptor, that's only part of the deal. You're supposed to develop it and share it. Almost all Indian people believe that design is not yours. The Creator decides who gets that design, so give credit where it's due.

WA&A: As an artist and a collector, what do you think about derivative art?

**B.N.C.:** There is a lot of plagiarism, but nobody is an island. We must recognize that cross-fertilization happens all the time; it's unavoidable. When one visits galleries and museums, it stimulates their imagination. In particular, leading-edge or award-winning designs often stimulate other artists' imaginations and the desire to emulate the design.

WA&A: As an artist who's garnered more than 200 awards for your jewelry, have you ever been copied?

**B.N.C.:** Yes, one time years ago, I bumped into a guy at Santa Fe Indian Market wearing a pendant that looked familiar. He took it off and showed it to me, asking me what I thought about it. I told him the fittings were bad and the joints were sloppy. I said, 'It's not a good pendant.' He said, 'Well, you made it.' I replied, 'Somebody made it, but it wasn't me.' He was disappointed.

WA&A: Where do you see your collection in 100 years?

**B.N.C.:** I can't answer that. I'm not sure what my daughter, Shanan, has in mind for that; she may already have something in the works.

WA&A senior contributing editor **Shari Morrison** has been in the business of art for more than 40 years; she helped found the Scottsdale Artists' School and American Women Artists, and she directed the Santa Fe Artists' Medical Fund for some years.

Jonas Grushkin's love of portrait photography has lasted over 50 years, with a career highlight of photographing for the Grateful Dead. He operates a portrait studio in Durango, Colorado, and his passions include jazz piano, letterpress, and off-the-grid living; grushkin.com.

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