

# NATIVE SON

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## IROQUOIS GAMES AND DANCES: PAINTINGS BY TOM TWO ARROWS

ALBANY INSTITUTE OF HISTORY AND ART, THROUGH DEC. 2007

THE VIBRANT PAINTINGS NOW AT THE Albany Institute of History and Art by Tom Two Arrows (Thomas Dorsey), with their striking colors and elegant, modern design, embrace Native American tradition, not as a relic of the past but as a hopeful, joyful present. They are so full of life—and design savvy—that they discourage any viewer from wearing a purely anthropological lens. As the artist wrote in an explanation for the series, “The Iroquois, or as they call themselves, the Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse) still conduct these ceremonies, play these games, perform these dances, and sing these songs even if they wear modern clothes while doing them.”

When John D. Hatch Jr., then director of the museum, commissioned these gouaches (and a couple of silkscreens) by Tom Two Arrows in 1942, the nation was undergoing a sea change in its attitude toward Native Americans, thousands of whom fought in World War II. The Iroquois Confederacy had declared war on Germany, and the Navajo language was used in code. Tom Two Arrows, who entered the Air Force the same year he did this series, was a member of the first generation of Native Americans who grew up with the right to vote in America. Interest in native art was burgeoning. As his son, Tom Dorsey Jr., told me, “At the time dad did the AIHA series, New York State native culture was not known well to non-Indians at all.” It is thanks to people like Tom Two Arrows that we now know about this culture that was and is so important to the identity of all Americans.

A lifelong Albany resident who attended Albany High School, Tom Two Arrows, who died in 1993, was a member of the Delaware (Lenni-Lenapee) tribe, who was adopted by the Onondagas (part of the Iroquois). The paintings stand out because of a saturated, bold color scheme and an art-deco symmetry of design.

*DA.HOON.GU.GWA.A.GWA*, or *La-Crosse*, shows rival teams arranged in chevrons on a brilliant yellow background, leaning back with their sticks ready to play. Balletic movement is suggested by their raised legs and stances. There are no facial features, but body language speaks: In *GLEO.A.O.WAN.NA*, or *Partridge Dance*, dancers with delicately detailed feather headdresses strut their stuff; in *Green Corn Dance*, two dancers in costumes of red raise their legs to the beat of a drummer. The many shades of analogous reds and pinks of the figures are accentuated by the

was 21 when he did them.”

Another painting shows the 1794 signing of the Canandaigua treaty, a guarantee of the sovereignty of the Iroquois confederacy, on which the fledgling United States was modeled. As Tom Two Arrows wrote, “The Haudenosaunee are a powerful and sovereign political force in America today.”

While Groft assured me that museum officials believe the series is “really important to the museum’s collection and to the history of the region,” I was left puzzled by the lack of buzz. None of the museum’s banners announce the exhibition, rather calling attention to the admittedly larger in size *Full Steam Ahead: Robert Fulton and the Age of the Steamboats* and *Paul Cushman: The Work and World of an Early 19th Century Albany Potter*—two somewhat stuffy catalogs of regional history.

In contrast, Tom Two Arrows is an artist who grabs your attention. Not surprisingly, he was also a performer and musician, playing flute and drums, and demonstrating native costume for a variety of audiences.

*Iroquois Games and Dances* was picked up in the 1940s by the American Federation of Arts and traveled to the Museum of the American Indian in New York City and the Denver Art Museum among others. Tom Two Arrows painted murals during his time in the United States Army Air Corps: He designed backgrounds for the American Museum of Natural History, and he also painted a series of animal hides at the Indian Quadrangle at the University at Albany. He also did graphic design, textile and china design, children’s books, and taught at both UAlbany and the Helderberg Workshop.

Through all this creative output, Tom Two Arrows clearly was dedicated to his people and meticulously accurate about portraying authentic Iroquois styles of dress and symbol.

Each item of clothing and object of ceremony has its own meaning that echoes with other patterns. A feather raised in a headpiece means victory. A deer in a silkscreen represents a clan animal and a chief’s authority. Each game or dance tells a story. Art in this context is inseparable from ritual and from the cosmos—a celebratory concept of life we could all learn to love. ■



Graphic splendor: Thomas Dorsey's *Da Hoon Gu Gwa A Gwa* or *Lacrosse*.

muted grey of the background and the corn design (common in Haudenosaunee art) in subtle shades of green and pink.

One painting, *Snow Snake*, depicting a game of the same name, uses a smattering of white paint to connote a player’s frozen breath on a midnight-blue background. “They are graphically striking,” noted Tamis Groft, the curator of the show, “and he