

## Touchstone

BY PENELOPE HUNTER-STIEBEL

A Native woman and child can be found in mute interaction in front of the portal of the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, which celebrates its thirtieth anniversary this year [read more about that on page 24]. Commissioned when the museum was built, Doug Hyde sculpted the work from a massive limestone block in 1987. The monumental sculpture, titled *Sharing Knowledge*, has since been surrounded by many bronze sculptures. Still, the stone figures continue to convey something we don't expect and rarely find in contemporary art: a quiet statement of the permanent value of human communication and of the continuity of present and past. The artist is of Nez Perce, Assiniboine, and Chippewa heritage, but his message is universal.

A little girl stands at the knee of a seated woman in traditional Pueblo attire with her hair tied in a chongo bun. In this composition, carved from a single piece of limestone, a pot on the ground beside the woman identifies her as a potter. The focus is, however, on another pot, ambiguously supported between the figures. One might assume that the woman, perhaps her mother or aunt, is making a gift to the child. But that was not the reaction of a five-year-old friend I took to the museum some time ago. She ran up to the figures, asking, "Does she like it?" as she searched the impassive face of the older woman for an answer. She related to the eagerness Hyde imbued in the figure of the child. Drawing on personal experience of art sessions with her grandmother, my young friend was sure that the small pot was of the child's own making, and that she sought approval from the woman who had lovingly taught her the craft.

"She had it right," says Hyde as he talks with me by telephone from his Arizona studio. "The little girl made the pot." He explains, "When I won the competition," (a competitive commission of 1% for the Arts, administered by the New Mexico Arts program of Art in Public Places), "I asked myself, 'Why will people be coming to the museum?' It's to learn and find out about Native peoples. Renewal and sharing of knowledge is special to Native peoples...If you work on something yourself, it stays with you, and potting is the perfect example." Almost invisible carvings of antelope on the base of the sculpture, like rockwork pictographs, serve as

a subtle reminder that this transmission of knowledge is an age-old process.

Hyde responds intuitively to stone, searching quarries for a flawless piece of rock that will become the right vehicle for a form. For bronze editions, Hyde bypasses the normal process of making a model in clay, using instead molds made from his stone originals. For his smaller pieces, he may choose marble or alabaster, polishing it to a smooth finish. For large outdoor works, he prefers limestone. With most surfaces textured and absorbing light, but others smooth and reflective, his sculptures appear to change with the movement of the sun.

The style of Hyde's stolid, earth-bound figures recalls the influence of his teacher Allan Houser. In 1963, the seventeen-year-old Hyde was accepted into the new Institute of American Indian Arts, where Houser was to become his mentor. He went on to study at the San Francisco Art Institute, but soon left to enlist and serve in Vietnam, where he was severely wounded. While recuperating, he learned to use power tools while working for a tombstone company, until Houser recruited him to teach at IAIA in 1972. He has since won innumerable awards and public commissions. Recently, Santa Fe acquired another majestic Hyde sculpture, *Navajo Woman with Child and Parasol*, that stands on the staircase of the new wing of the Wheelwright Museum.

The artist's son, Frank Buffalo Hyde, has chosen painting as his art form. His large canvases bathed in colors of neon intensity are the subject of the exhibition *I-Witness Culture* at MIAC through January 7, 2018, and were featured in this spring's *El Palacio* [bit.ly/fbh\_elpal]. They constitute a searing social commentary on our digital society, where nothing is perceived unless recorded and passed on through an iPhone.

Leaving that exhibition and its unsettling truths, I returned to *Sharing Knowledge*, the woman and child and their pots. More than a visual statement of the museum's purpose, Doug Hyde's sculpture offers a touching affirmation of direct human connection in an ephemeral moment writ in stone. ■

**Penelope Hunter-Stiebel** was a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Portland Art Museum, Oregon, and recently curated *Mirror, Mirror: Photographs of Frida Kahlo* for the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art.



***Sharing Knowledge***, by Doug Hyde, 1987.  
Limestone, 72 × 34 × 34 in. Museum of Indian  
Arts and Culture. Photograph by Janel Herrera.  
MIAC 54397/13.