

“So Let Me Paint”

Navajo Artist R.C. Gorman and the Artistic, Native, and Queer Subcultures of San Francisco, California

ABSTRACT This article explores the status of R.C. Gorman (Navajo) within the art community of San Francisco, California, in the 1960s. Using Gorman’s personal papers, the article addresses how his queer identity, Navajo heritage, and Native urbanization contributed to his production of world-renowned art. Gorman’s representation of strong Navajo women, which made him a universally recognized artist, stemmed from his own exploration of gender performativity and homoeroticism while living in an urban gay mecca. Moreover, Gorman’s use of both resources in the city and the southwestern Indian art market allowed him to forge a successful art career. A formative figure in the Native American Fine Art Movement, Gorman’s experiences in San Francisco suggest that indigenous creative practices challenged a dominant interpretation and construction of the inferiority of American Indians. **KEYWORDS** R.C. Gorman, San Francisco, migration, queer history, Native art, nádleehí

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the seductive city of San Francisco, California, beckoned artists, writers, musicians, bohemians, and gays. They gathered in coffee houses and nightclubs, bringing with them abstract art, stream-of-consciousness verse, jazz music, jive talk, and uninhibited sexual expression. A cultural mood of rebelliousness and experimentation hung over the city like the thick, billowing sea fog that rolled in from the bay during the summer months. Unorthodox radicals invigorated literary and artistic activity during a movement known as the San Francisco Renaissance. In the North Beach District, the Coffee Gallery, Vesuvio Cafe, and the Cellar, along with other hangouts, became epicenters for poetry, jazz, and art.¹ Galleries, bars,

1. Scholars have dated the beginning of the San Francisco Renaissance to the 1940s when a small group of bohemians from the campus of the University of California, Berkeley formed an underground arts community. The movement grew with the opening of City Lights Bookstore (1952) and received national attention after the publication of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” (1956). See Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century* (New

Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 88, Number 3, pps. 439–467. ISSN 0030-8684, electronic ISSN 1533-8584 © 2019 by the Pacific Coast Branch, American Historical Association. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2019.88.3.439>.

and coffeehouses hosted poetry readings in tandem with abstract expressionist art exhibits. On the night of December 28, 1959, the Coffee Gallery simultaneously launched the career of an aspiring artist while premiering poetry of the well-known San Francisco literary renaissance participant Lawrence Ferlinghetti. When Ferlinghetti read his new poem entitled *Overpopulation* to a packed house of nearly two hundred beats, gays, and bohemians, Navajo artist R.C. Gorman presented his first one-man show of paintings.²

The Coffee Gallery's debut of Gorman marked the beginning of his art career and his rise as an internationally recognized artist known for his depictions of strong Navajo women. His early artistic style fused techniques from modern abstract expressionism and figurative expressionism with aesthetics drawn from his Navajo heritage. Born on July 26, 1931, Gorman, whom his family called "Rudy," grew up on the Navajo reservation in Chinle, Arizona.³ He left reservation life in the mid-fifties and commenced a professional art career when he migrated to San Francisco. By 1968, Gorman had received national attention for his abstract canvases based on Navajo rugs and pottery designs.⁴ These works made Gorman a formative figure in the Native American Fine Art Movement, a movement defined by the development of contemporary art by individuals of American Indian descent. These artists shifted beyond the confines of what was known as "authentic" American Indian imagery by expanding the expressive content of art and adapting modern fine art visions and techniques.⁵ For his representations of Navajo

York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Lewis Ellingham, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England / Wesleyan University Press, 1998); and Allen Ginsberg, *Howl, and Other Poems*, The Pocket Poets Series, no. 4 (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959). For a discussion of the homoerotics of beat culture, see John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 177–82; and Catherine Stimpson, "The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation," (*Salmagundi* 58–59, Fall 1982 / Winter 1983): 373–42.

2. Lawrence Ferlinghetti reading poetry at The Coffee Gallery on Grant Avenue, December 28, 1959, black and white photograph, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library <http://sflib.sfpl.org:82/record=b1027635x>. See also, "The Coffee Gallery Presents Oils by Navajo Artist R.C. Gorman," December 1–31, 1959, folder 17, box 3, Virginia S. Dooley Papers from her Personal Life and Business Relationship with R.C. Gorman, 1916–2008, MSS 844 BC, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico (hereafter cited as Dooley Papers).

3. Spring Herman, draft of "R.C. Gorman: Navajo Artist a Biography," January 1994, folder 1, box 5, Dooley Papers.

4. Virginia Dooley, *R.C. Gorman: Thirty Years in Taos* (Taos, N. Mex.: Navajo Gallery, 1998), 3.

5. I use the term "Native American Fine Arts Movement" to convey that the movement of Native artists who adapted "fine arts" helped to propel the recognition of Native art's place in modern art history. One can trace the evolution of this phrase and the scholarly debates surrounding

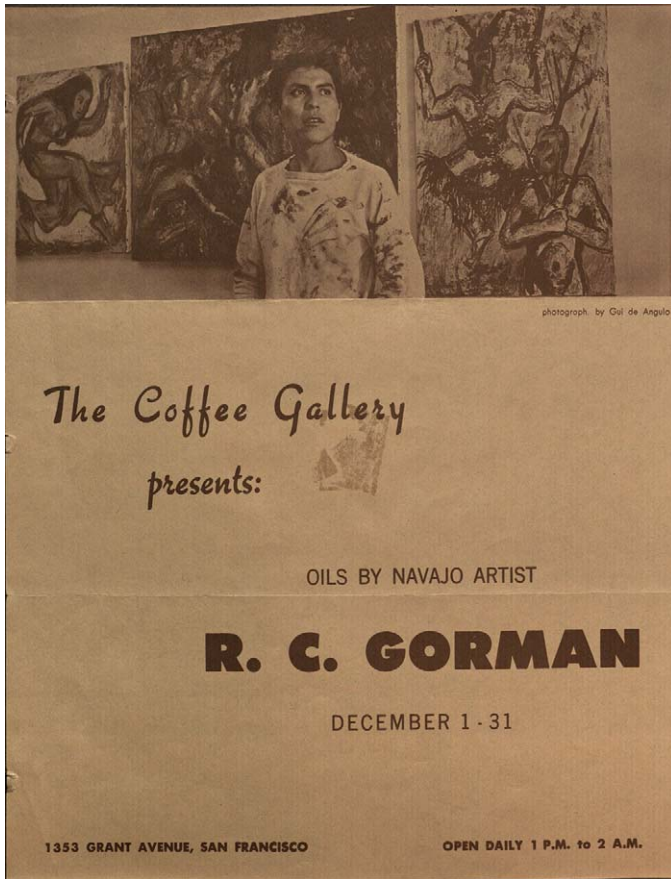


FIGURE 1. Flyer from R.C. Gorman's first one-man show. *Source:* "The Coffee Gallery Presents Oils by Navajo Artist R.C. Gorman," December 1–31, 1959, folder 16, box 5, Dooley Papers, Center for Southwest Research, Universities Libraries, University of New Mexico.

women, Gorman gained worldwide acclaim after he exhibited at *Masterworks from the Museum of the American Indian*, a 1973 exhibit held at the

it in the following sources: Margaret Archuleta and Rennard Strickland, *Shared Visions: Native American Painters and Sculptors in the Twentieth Century* (New York: The New Press, 1993); Margaret Dubin, "Sanctioned Scribes: How Critics and Historians Write the Native American Art World," in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century: Makers, Meanings, Histories*, ed. W. Jackson Rushing III (New York: Routledge, 1999), 149–66; and W. Jackson Rushing, "Critical Issues in Recent Native American Art," *Art Journal* 51, no. 3 (1992): 6.

Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.⁶ Thereafter, news media outlets, such as the *New York Times*, sometimes referred to him as the “Picasso of American Indian Art.”⁷ Gorman’s notoriety as a significant late twentieth-century American artist challenged a dominant interpretation and construction of the inferiority of Native art. His work, along with that of others, created a space for American Indian agency over the meaning of their own art. Indian artists fought against the restrictive category of defining Indian art through a racial lens and produced art that illustrated intersectional identities, numerous cultural influences, and varied art styles and media.⁸

Existing biographies of Gorman give scant attention to the time he spent working and living in San Francisco and instead focus on his upbringing on the Navajo reservation and his life in Taos, New Mexico, connected to his famed Navajo Gallery.⁹ Chinle and Taos were, indeed, crucial to Gorman’s development.¹⁰ However, many biographers ignore other key factors in Gorman’s art career including his exhibitions in San Francisco that garnered national attention for the up-and-coming artist, his blossoming, unique artistic style, which depicted powerful Navajo women, as well as the connections of these developments to the unleashing of his gender and sexual identities. No biographer discusses Gorman’s homosexuality: an essential element to any complete history of his life and works.¹¹ This article will complicate the

6. Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Masterworks from the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973), front and back covers, 59.

7. Denita M. Benyshek, “R.C. Gorman: The Picasso of American Indian Artists,” *Collectors Mart*, September/October 1984, 46–53; Clyde Haberman, “Show by ‘the Picasso of American Indian Artists’ Opens,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1979; Jamie Simon, “The Work of R.C. Gorman, the Picasso of American Indian Art,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 25, 2011, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/the-work-of-rc-gorman-the-picasso-of-american-indian-art-4736433/?no-ist>.

8. For a discussion of how to define American Indian Art, see Anya Monteil, “Native American Expressive Arts,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Indian History*, ed. Frederick E. Hoxie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 454–59.

9. R.C. Gorman bought the Manchester Gallery in Taos, New Mexico, renamed it the Navajo Gallery in honor of his people, and held its first exhibition in May of 1969.

10. Virginia Dooley, introduction to *R.C. Gorman: Chinle to Taos: [Exhibition] Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos, New Mexico, June 3–July 4, 1988*, written and compiled by R. C. Gorman, Virginia Dooley, and Millicent Rogers Museum (Taos, N.Mex.: Navajo Gallery, 1988), 7–9; Stephen Parks, *R.C. Gorman: A Portrait*, photographs Chuck Henningsen (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983), 64. The greatest attention to Gorman’s time in San Francisco is in Doris Monthan, *R.C. Gorman: The Lithographs* (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland Press, 1978), 23.

11. Because Gorman self-identified as a “homosexual,” I use his own term to define his sexual identity. I also employ the term “nádleehí” to help understand his gender identity. I use the categories of “homosexual” and “nádleehí” so as not to conflate sexual orientation and gender identity.

established narrative surrounding Gorman by focusing on his years in San Francisco (1955–1968) to reveal how his multifaceted identity construction—especially his sexuality—contributed to his creative process as an artist.

Between 1955 and 1968, Gorman immersed himself in the San Francisco creative sphere: the cultures of artists, art movements, sexual freedom, and Native urbanization. These physical and ideological movements nurtured him, both in a personal and professional way. Gorman freely expressed his homosexuality when he engaged in his first same-sex relationship; he experimented with abstract expressionism, an art movement that flourished after World War II, characterized by its stylistic diversity, absence of figurative reality, and largely nonrepresentational framework; and he joined the Native American Fine Art Movement, which expanded interest in expressions of Native art outside of the Southwest, Northwest, and Great Plains areas where white entrepreneurs had influenced an Indian art market dating back to the 1920s.¹² Gorman’s interaction with these seemingly disparate, yet frequently overlapping movements reveals how each shaped his identity construction and in turn, the notable role Gorman played in rethinking American culture. By demonstrating this maneuvering through three migrant communities in San Francisco, this article seeks to explain how these identity-affirming spaces intersected, gained prominence in American culture, and thus profoundly defined it. This article engages an interdisciplinary conversation that bridges art history, lesbian gay bisexual trans (LGBT) studies, and American Indian history, which will enable scholars to explore the complexity of an uneven sexual liberalism as well as an increasingly multiracial and urban society in mid-twentieth-century America.

Gorman arrived in the city during the San Francisco Renaissance, a movement sparked by informal gatherings in the North Beach District, which permitted artistic radicals to produce a dynamic burst of art and literature.¹³ Rarely do discussions of San Francisco’s Renaissance include Native American artists, yet Gorman participated in the city’s bohemian art scene as

Sometimes, I call attention to Gorman’s queer identity or the queer identity of others in reference to identities, genders, desires, sexualities, and transgressive erotic life. I also wish to avoid using “Two-Spirit” as a universal category representative of all Native peoples who identify with genders outside of the male/female binary. Because Indigenous LGBTQ+ identities are deeply complex, I have chosen to use “queer” as an umbrella term for the countless gender and sexual identities that fall under it.

12. For a history of the Indian art market in the twentieth century, see Rushing, ed., *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*.

13. Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance*, xi–xii.

evidenced by his first solo show at the Coffee Gallery.¹⁴ Urban life also held possibilities for gay men and lesbians; San Francisco gained a reputation as a growing gay mecca.¹⁵ Historian Martin Meeker explains that San Francisco became “a symbolic homeland of an identity and a city that was a haven for institutional support unknown in most American cities” and thus marked a historical moment for queers who could now identify with a homeland.¹⁶ Sociocultural anthropologist Kath Weston explores the process of this calling it the “Great Gay Migration” and defining it as “an influx of tens of thousands of lesbians and gay men (as well as individuals bent upon ‘exploring’ their sexuality)” who moved “into major urban areas across the United States. San Francisco was the premier destination for those who desired and could afford to live in a ‘gay space.’”¹⁷ Queers made sexual migrations—a movement largely motivated by sexual identities, sexual practices, or for greater sexual liberation—and, bolstered by increasing numbers, used their visibility to reconfigure urban space in ways that both contested and sustained conventional forms of urban geography.¹⁸ They opposed institutions and practices of heteronormativity through the creation of queer neighborhoods, bars, businesses, and political organizations.¹⁹ Gorman and other queer Native people remained on the periphery of both the dominant queer culture largely

14. The Coffee Gallery (1954–1980) was originally named Miss Smith’s Tea Room. It then became known as the Coffee Gallery and was later renamed Lost and Found. See Bill Morgan, *The Beat Generation in San Francisco: A Literary Tour* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2003), 49; Rand Richards, *Historic Walks in San Francisco: 18 Trails through the City’s Past* (San Francisco: Heritage House Publishers, 2002), 289.

15. On San Francisco as a gay “mecca,” see Nan Alamilla Boyd, “Homos Invade S.F.: San Francisco’s History as a Wide-Open Town,” in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge), 75; Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s–1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Josh Sides, *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

16. Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 189.

17. Kath Weston, “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration,” *GLQ* 2 (1995): 255.

18. Gayle S. Rubin coined the term “sexual migration.” She defines it as the movement of a gay person “to live in a gay neighborhood, work in a gay business, and participate in an elaborate experience that includes a self-conscious identity, group solidarity, a literature, a press, and a high level of political activity.” Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984), 286.

19. Oftentimes, within queer spaces, white gay men adhered to national ideals of race, class, and gender, causing lesbians and queers of color to further organize around gender and race identity markers.

defined by urban, white, middle-class gay men, and set apart from their tribal communities as the adaptation to western and Christian conventions contributed to homophobia on reservations.²⁰

The internal migration of American Indians to urban centers overlapped with queers' sexual migrations. In contrast to the birth of a homeland for queers, when Native Americans moved to San Francisco in the postwar era, they left their ancestral lands. The "Great Native Migration," is also distinct from the "Great Gay Migration" because even though many Native people migrated to metropolises, they maintained connections to reservations and successfully moved between both environments.²¹ Ethnographer Reyna Ramirez (Winnebago) uses the term "Native hubs" to describe how Native Americans utilized locational nodes to foster community and belonging in both urban spaces and their tribal homelands.²² Native hubs served as geographic sites in cities or on reservations allowing Natives mobility between urban and reservation life and provided a mechanism for identity, cultural, and political transmission. While other scholars have used activism, education, labor, housing, and social gathering spaces to understand how American Indians blended urban and reservation environments, this article focuses instead on art. By the time Gorman arrived in San Francisco, Native Americans there had begun to develop a vibrant intertribal Native network.²³

20. Literature on queer Native Americans includes Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, eds., *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011); Brian Joseph Gilley, *Becoming Two-Spirit: Gay Identity and Social Acceptance in Indian Country* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Sue Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds., *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures* (Dallas: University of Texas Press, 1998); Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Will Roscoe, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000).

21. Kent Blansett, "San Francisco, Red Power, and the Emergence of an 'Indian City'," in *City Dreams, Country Schemes: Community and Identity in the American West*, eds. Kathleen A. Brosnan and Amy L. Scott (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2011), 261–83.

22. Renya K. Ramirez, *Native Hubs: Culture, Community, and Belonging in Silicon Valley and Beyond* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

23. Scholarship on the San Francisco Bay Area American Indian communities includes Joan Ablon, "Relocated American Indians in San Francisco Bay Area: Social Interactions and Indian Identity," *Human Organization* (1964): 297–304; Blansett, "San Francisco, Red Power, and the Emergence of an 'Indian City,'" 261–83; Susan Lobo, *American Indians in the San Francisco Bay Area and the 1990 Census: Final Report for Joint Statistical Agreement 89–19* (Washington D.C.: Center for Survey Methods Research, Bureau of the Census, 1992); Susan Lobo with the California

Gorman participated in artistic Native hubs through his involvement with two San Francisco–based organizations, the American Indian Historical Society and American Indian Artists, the latter of which produced and promoted “new Indian painting,” a style of art developed by a generation of Native artists who adopted a variety of media and modern techniques as vehicles for their expression of Native and non-Native cultures and identities.²⁴ Gorman’s involvement with new Indian painting demonstrates how American Indians successfully adapted to urban environments by blending urban spaces with close-knit intertribal structures.

Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, a number of Native Americans began to migrate from reservations and rural communities to western cities.²⁵ Several factors propelled the rural-to-urban migration including economic necessity, new employment opportunities in the automotive, railroad, and shipbuilding industries, incentives attached to the Bureau of Indian Affairs Relocation Program (1948), and the destruction of sovereignty through the federal policy of Termination (1953). Enlisted men in the military service accelerated the movement of Native peoples to urban areas. Approximately twenty-five thousand Native men served in the Second World War, and afterward thousands of Native veterans utilized the benefits of the G.I. bill.²⁶ Gorman’s father provides an example. Carl Gorman enlisted in World War II and served as one of the original twenty-nine Navajo Code Talkers, an elite Marine unit that used the Navajo language to generate

Intertribal Friendship House, *Urban Voices: The Bay Area American Indian Community* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002); Wilma Pearl Mankiller and Michael Wallis, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993); Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: New Press/W.W. Norton, 1996).

24. This style of art was first referred to as “Non-Traditional Styles of Indian Painting” in 1959 by Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, Oklahoma (now known as the Philbrook Museum of Art). Shortly thereafter, it became known as “new Indian painting.” See Archuleta and Strickland, *Shared Visions*, 89.

25. For scholarship on one of the first urban Native American enclaves in Richmond, California, see Max Carocci, “Living in an Urban Rez: Constructing San Francisco as Indian Land,” in *Place and Native American Indian History and Culture*, ed. Joy Porter (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 263–82; Alice Littlefield and Martha C. Knack, *Native Americans and Wage Labor: Ethnohistorical Perspectives* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 177–79; Susan Lobo, *Urban Voices: The Bay Area American Indian Community* (Tucson, Ariz.: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 14–16; and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *To Place Our Deeds: The African American Community in Richmond, California, 1910–1963* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 16.

26. Donald L. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 19.

a secret code for military transmissions.²⁷ After the war, Gorman's parents separated, and Carl, funded by the G.I. bill, moved to Los Angeles, California, to attend the Otis Art Institute and pursue a career in art.²⁸ Although Gorman stayed near his mother and completed high school in 1950 at Ganado Presbyterian Mission on the Navajo reservation, he visited his father in Los Angeles. They spent weekends together, eating out in nice restaurants and soaking in the glamour of Hollywood. Gorman felt "for the first time in his life like a foreigner, and he loved the freedom of the feeling."²⁹ Carl introduced a world apart from the Navajo reservation and instilled in his son a yearning for city life.

Gorman's decision to leave the reservation began with his own enlistment in the Navy in 1951.³⁰ First stationed in San Diego, California, Gorman then deployed to the Mariana Islands. After Guam, the Navy transferred Gorman to the *U.S.S. Oriskany*, an aircraft carrier that patrolled along the Pacific Coast from San Diego to San Francisco. The Navy honorably discharged Gorman in 1955 at Moffett Field (between Mountain View and Sunnyvale, California), at the rank of seaman.³¹ Restless after his service in the Navy, Gorman was peripatetic. He stayed in San Francisco for awhile and then briefly enrolled at Arizona State College (now Northern Arizona University).³² He visited his father in Encino, California, and promptly travelled to Mexico for the summer.

In Mexico, Gorman encountered the works of Mexican artists José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. The artists' employment of iconography depicting non-European actors from Mexico's history inspired Gorman and reinvigorated his artistic interest.³³ Upon returning from Mexico, he applied for a one-year scholarship from the Navajo Tribal Council to study art at Mexico City College (now called the University of the Americas), where he received formal art education. After his study abroad in

27. Henry Greenberg and Georgia Greenberg, *Power of a Navajo: Carl Gorman: The Man and His Life* (Santa Fe, N. Mex.: Clear Light Publishers, 1996).

28. Spring Hermann, "R.C. Gorman," January 1994, folder 1, box 5, Dooley Papers.

29. Parks, *R.C. Gorman*, 30.

30. R.C. Gorman, *The Radiance of My People* (Houston, Tex.: Santa Fe Fine Arts, 1992), 12.

31. Navy Discharge Papers, April 15, 1955, folder 9, box 3, Dooley Papers.

32. R.C. Gorman, *The Radiance of My People*, 26.

33. Although he served in the Navy, Gorman's passion for art, present from a very young age, never waned. As a child, Gorman had constantly drawn pictures of the world around him. While in the Navy, he continued to sketch. Enlisted men brought Gorman pictures of wives and girlfriends for him to replicate. Gorman mimicked pin-up girl calendars and drew voluptuous illustrations of navy wives and girlfriends back home. Doris Monthan, *R.C. Gorman: A Retrospective* (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland Publishing 1980), 13–4.

Mexico, Gorman returned to San Francisco in 1959.³⁴ This decision solidified his career path as an artist.

Once in the city, Gorman affiliated with intersecting artistic, queer, and Native subcultures that fundamentally shaped him as an artist. The blossoming alternative art community welcomed Gorman. White, male beatniks are often credited for the San Francisco Renaissance, but a vast array of contributors generated a culture that privileged artistic creativity above all else—these included African Americans, such as the jazz performance poet Ted Joans; female Beat poets like Lenore Kandel; and the openly gay couple Robert Duncan and Jess Collins, who ran the Six Gallery, a gathering place for the movement.³⁵ Participants created racially mixed spaces for the display of art outside of mainstream venues and fostered an atmosphere conducive to producing cultural work that challenged conventional standards of literature and art. They started artistic collective projects that showcased each other's works and brought into the fold new artists whom they helped to support and mentor. The Coffee Gallery's willingness to display the art of an unknown Navajo artist provides an example of such assistance.

In contrast, the mainstream art market withheld endorsement of modern Native American artists. Structured within the art world was a long-established notion of categorizing Indian art as inferior to European art traditions.³⁶ Institutionalized museums invested in the modern art of whites who appropriated traditions in Native American culture as inspiration for their art, but these museums showed little interest in the works of Native American artists painting in contemporary mediums. When art dealers and museums included Native American art, they concentrated collections on "traditional" arts and crafts. As an illustration, one of San Francisco's major contemporary art museums, the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, launched the exhibition *1,000 Years of American Indian Art* on March 28, 1964, featuring traditional art of Native Americans from 900 C.E. to the early decades of the twentieth century.³⁷ Out of 108 pieces, the display included only 6 examples of "new Indian painting," while the bulk focused on ceremonial

34. Dooley, R.C. *Gorman: Chinle to Taos*, 8.

35. Jennie Skerl, ed., *Reconstructing the Beats* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

36. A discussion of the history of Native American art production from the 1890s to the present and its relationship to mainstream art is included in Rushing, ed., *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*.

37. For a history of the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, see Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945–1980: An Illustrated History* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1985), 2.

and everyday objects.³⁸ According to art historian Margaret Archuleta (Tewa), “Art dealers and museums devoted to contemporary art did not embrace New Indian Painting.”³⁹ Museums considered new Indian painting to be derivative of Euro-American painting and therefore not “authentic” Native art. Thus, museums marginalized new Indian painters by refusing to publicize their work.

Gorman, in order to increase his showings, decided to purchase an art studio in Vallejo, California. The Harlequin Gallery formally opened on August 29, 1960. Gorman personally managed the gallery and exhibited his compositions, as well as the work of other up-and-coming artists.⁴⁰ Because only a handful of patrons purchased his gallery’s artwork, Gorman juggled gallery management, painting, and additional jobs. He worked as a model for universities and private classes throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, and he joined the model’s guild to streamline his bookings. During the years he spent modeling, the guild booked Gorman seven days a week.⁴¹ A handsome young man with a strong nose, thick dark hair, a slim physique, and a mischievous glint in his two different-colored eyes, Gorman was, by his own description, “the most popular male model in San Francisco.”⁴² He profited far more from modeling than he did from his gallery.

Within a few years, Gorman closed Harlequin Gallery. In his autobiography, he reflected back on his early works during this period at the Harlequin, which he classified as mostly abstracts. An example includes the piece entitled *Three Navajo Women*.⁴³ Gorman painted with acrylics on a large horizontal canvas; he depicted three women draped in vertically striped shawls who stand facing each other set against a sunset sky, with streaks of purple, pink, and blue. Even though the three women are faceless, their body language suggests familiarity with each other. They stand close together as if in conversation exchanging stories from their day. However, boxy lines that lack shape and movement disrupt the intimacy of the women. Gorman had yet to capture the loose renderings of female figures that would mark his

38. “Indian Art to be Exhibited,” *The Daily Review Sunday Previewer* (Hayward, Calif.), March 22, 1964, 13.

39. Margaret Archuleta, Michelle Meyers, Susan Shaffer Nahmias, Jo Ann Woodsum, and Jonathan Yorba, *The Native American Fine Art Movement: A Resource Guide* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Heard Museum, 1994), 16.

40. “Harlequin Gallery Opens in Vallejo,” *Vallejo Times-Herald* (Vallejo, Calif.), August 28, 1960.

41. R.C. Gorman, *The Radiance of My People*, 30.

42. R.C. Gorman, unpublished manuscript, n.d., folder 17, box 3, Dooley Papers.

43. R.C. Gorman, *Three Navajo Women*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, in *The Radiance of My People*, by R.C. Gorman (Houston, Tex.: Santa Fe Fine Arts, 1992), 30.

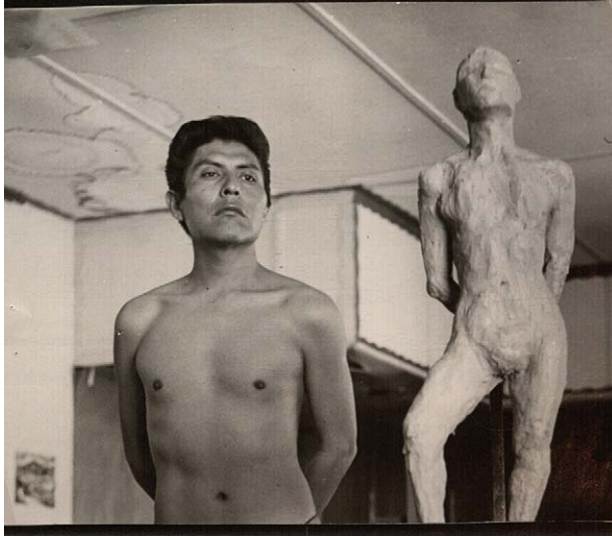


FIGURE 2. In addition to painting, R.C. Gorman worked as a model in San Francisco. *Source:* R.C. Gorman modeling, n.d., folder 16, box 5, Dooley Papers, Center for Southwest Research, Universities Libraries, University of New Mexico.

distinctive style. Furthermore, he failed to apply his own gender and sexual self-expression to emotionally connect with his female subjects. Only, a few of these compositions sold; those that did not, Gorman confessed to destroying.⁴⁴

The closure of Harlequin also illustrates the barriers contemporary Native artists faced in marketing their work. Initially, Gorman was unable to sell his modernist-style works in the traditional Indian markets, and art historian J.J. Brody called him “a transitional figure, outside the pale of earlier Indian painting.”⁴⁵ Situated in a liminal space, Gorman opened his own gallery to market his work, but the high cost of rent, coupled with low sales, forced the gallery’s closure.⁴⁶ Obtaining a secure home for Native American cultural activities required strenuous financial effort that very few individuals, let

44. Because Gorman sold, gave away, or “painted over” much of his early works, it is difficult to find examples of his art from the late 1950s to mid-1960s. See R.C. Gorman, *The Radiance of My People*, 35.

45. J. J. Brody, *Indian Painters & White Patrons* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971), 203.

46. E.M. Polley, “Indian Organization Holds First Annual National Art Exhibition,” in scrapbook, folder 16, box 5, Dooley Papers.

alone organizations, could afford. Gorman considered his Vallejo gallery a “huge set back” and redirected his energies toward intertribal cooperative gallery endeavors and the establishment of a home studio.⁴⁷

Gorman’s connection to artistic Native hubs proved vital for the promotion of his art. Urban Native Americans, in response to their marginalization in the mainstream art market, formed organizations and venues devoted to supporting the validation and value of Indian art and artists. By the late 1960s, institution building in urban Native communities often concentrated on education.⁴⁸ Art complemented endeavors that set out to enhance the educational needs of urban Natives. Two organizations, the American Indian Historical Society and American Indian Artists, proved fundamental in promoting Indian arts in mid-1960s San Francisco. Gorman benefited from the 1964 San Francisco–based establishment of the American Indian Historical Society (AIHS). The AIHS, founded by Rupert Costo (Cahuilla), his wife Jeannette Henry-Costo (Cherokee), and thirteen diverse Native Americans, sought to improve education, cultural exchange, and communication among Indians.⁴⁹ The AIHS’s academic emphasis allowed the group to prioritize Indian arts in its activities.

As one of its first orders of business, the AIHS looked for a site to house its national headquarters with enough space to support meetings, a library, and an art museum. Jeannette Henry-Costo and Bertha Stewart (Tolowa), a member of the AIHS Board of Directors, selected a Victorian residence at 1451 Masonic Avenue in the Haight-Ashbury district of the city. They purchased the property in 1966 for \$57,000 and named it Chautauqua House.⁵⁰ The Chautauqua House opened on May 6, 1967, and shortly thereafter AIHS initiated “what is to be a continuing and important part of its program—exhibits of paintings and drawings by members of various Indian tribes.”⁵¹ The inaugural museum exhibition, scheduled for July 15 through August 15,

47. R.C. Gorman to Carl Gorman, n.d., private collection of Zonnie Gorman (half-sister of R.C. Gorman).

48. Julie L. Davis, *Survival Schools: The American Indian Movement and Community Education in the Twin Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 5–6.

49. Rose Delia Soza War Soldier, “‘To Take Positive and Effective Action’: Rupert Costo and the California Based American Indian Historical Society” (Ph.D. thesis, Arizona State University, 2013), ii.

50. *Ibid.*, 117. For a discussion of the Chautauqua movement, see Andrew Chamberlin Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism, 1874–1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

51. “Indian art on display,” July 26, 1967 in scrapbook, folder 16, box 5, Dooley Papers.

featured the paintings of R.C. Gorman and his renowned father, Carl N. Gorman.⁵² According to local coverage, R.C. Gorman showed “boldly designed abstracts” while Carl displayed “traditional water colors.”⁵³ Subsequently, the AIHS formalized the Museum of Indian Art within Chautauqua House and routinely held exhibitions featuring American Indian artists.⁵⁴ The AIHS committed to Native art and artists by providing them with a physical space to display their work. R.C. Gorman and his father were the first such artists the organization supported.

Outside of San Francisco, Gorman maintained ties with the southwest Indian art market. In the 1890s, non-Native art enthusiasts, the railroad industry, and boosters played initial roles in developing a tourist-centered industry in the Southwest. At first, concerns over the authenticity and preservation of traditional art drove the market and thus discouraged innovation.⁵⁵ This situation changed in 1962 with the establishment of the Institute of American Indian Arts, which facilitated American Indian artists’ study of contemporary art. In turn, some rejected the aesthetic constraints of ancestral artistic production.⁵⁶ Gorman, cognizant of this existing and changing market, stayed connected to it. He used his family connections, particularly his father’s prominent status in the Navajo Nation, to market his work in this lucrative area. For example, Gorman’s father and his stepmother, Mary Excie Wilson, submitted Gorman’s paintings in local competitions and offered to assist with publicity.⁵⁷ At the 1962 New Mexico State Fair in Albuquerque, the elder Gorman and Wilson entered a portrait in oil on Gorman’s behalf

52. “Indian Society,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 21, 1967, 48.

53. “Indian art on display,” July 26, 1967, in Scrapbook, folder 16, box 5, Dooley Papers.

54. Thomas Albright, “Indian Society’s New Museum,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 2, 1967, 45.

55. On authenticity, see Flannery Burke, *From Greenwich Village to Taos: Primitivism and Place at Mabel Dodge Luhan’s* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); Lewis I. Deitch, “The Impact of Tourism on the Arts and Crafts of the Indians of the Southwestern United States,” in *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, ed. Valene L. Smith (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 223–34; Edwin L. Wade, “Change and Development in the Southwest Indian Market,” *Exploration* (1974): 16–21; Marta Weigle and Barbara A. Babcock, *The Great Southwest of the Fred Harvey Company and the Santa Fe Railway* (Phoenix: Heard Museum/University of Arizona Press, 1996).

56. Prior to the foundation of the Institute of American Indian Arts, southwestern American Indians had access to art education through the studio school of Indian painting in Santa Fe (SFSI). In 1932, the SFSI, under the leadership of art historian Dunn, legitimized working in modern idioms, starting a point of departure from traditional Indian art for future artists. Doris Monthan, *R.C. Gorman: A Retrospective*, 4.

57. Mary Gorman to R.C. Gorman, June 1, 1964, folder 3, box 3, Dooley Papers.

and took third prize.⁵⁸ After seeing both Carl and R.C. Gorman's work, Jeanne Snodgrass, curator of American Indian Art at the Philbrook Art Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma (now known as the Philbrook Museum of Art) approached Carl about producing a father-son exhibit. In October of 1964, the Gormans debuted their exhibition, *New Directions in American Indian Art*. Edna Massey (Cherokee), buyer for the Bureau of Indian Affairs program of promoting Indian art, attended the show and thereafter sought out R.C. Gorman's work. She purchased Gorman's art "for our embassies around the world and to use in very important places here in Washington and elsewhere."⁵⁹ Due to the exhibition's success, Mary and Carl contacted the Heard Museum to inquire about the possibility of another father-son exhibition. The Heard Museum presented *Gormans—Father, Son Rebels in Indian Art* in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1965.⁶⁰ Many of R.C. Gorman's exhibitions took place within specialty museums designed specifically for Native American art including the Philbrook Art Center, the Heard Museum, and the Museum of Indian Art. Here, Gorman made use of his artistic Native hubs—Native art institutions in San Francisco and networks linked to the Indian art market.

Back in San Francisco, Gorman participated in the creation of another artistic Native hub when he assisted with the formation of the American Indian Artists organization in 1966. Devoted to encouraging aspiring Native Americans to develop artistic abilities and the establishment of a gallery, Irene Cruz (Caddo) served as the initial chair of the group while Gorman headed its painting committee.⁶¹ In October, the American Indian Artists presented its first juried show, held at the Kaiser Center Mezzanine Gallery. Constructed in 1963, the Kaiser Center was a joint project of the Oakland Museum and Kaiser industries.⁶² Professor of art and ethnic studies Frank LaPená (Wintu-Nomtipom/Tenai) argues that the Kaiser Steel Corporation of Oakland was fundamental in promoting Indian arts in the

58. Mary Gorman and Carl Gorman to R.C. Gorman, September 19, 1962, folder 3, box 3, Dooley Papers.

59. "Bureau of Indian Affairs Collection of Indian Art Exhibit in Interior Gallery," news release, July 16, 1968, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Document Library, <http://www.bia.gov/cs/groups/public/documents/text/idco17253.pdf>; and Edna H. Massey quoted in Mary Gorman to R.C. Gorman, April 8, 1964, folder 3, box 3, Dooley Papers.

60. Greenberg and Greenberg, *Power of a Navajo*, 83–84.

61. "An American Indian Art Exhibit," *Daily Review* (Hayward, Calif.), September 29, 1966.

62. In response to World War II, industrialist Henry J. Kaiser built four shipyards in Richmond, California, impacting the migration of multiple minority groups to the San Francisco Bay Area including Native Americans. See Moore, *To Place Our Deeds*.

mid-1960s and that artists who exhibited at Kaiser “went on to national renown.”⁶³ Gorman entered *Homage to a Dying Race* in the show. During this artistic period, Gorman pivoted from his lack of delineated lines in his earlier abstract pieces and produced detailed facial expressions of grief and despair. The somber figures’ faces illustrate the hardships Navajos endured and highlight Gorman’s capacity to draw emotional art. Still heavily influenced by abstract expressionism, Gorman placed primacy on revealing the interior realm through these series of drawings. Recognizing Gorman’s ability to convey emotional power, the jury awarded Gorman the United Bay Area Council Grand prize. The judges included Pearl Warren (Makah), director of the Indian Center in Seattle, Washington; Marjorie Close from the Society of Western Artists; Glen Wessel, professor of art at the University of California, Berkeley; and Paul Mills curator of the Oakland Museum.⁶⁴

Artistic Native hubs helped to promote Gorman’s art, but the evolution of his artistic style is inseparable from the exploration of his homosexuality. In order to express his queer identity more freely, however, Gorman decided to move off reservation and explore his sexual orientation in San Francisco. Gorman’s exposure to this military port city during his Navy service exposed him to the existence of gay communities and partially inspired his move after his discharge. The Navy used San Francisco as the disembarkation point for men in the Spanish-American War, World War II, and the Korean War; there, large populations of men accustomed to living in same-sex environments in the military reconvened, transforming the city into a space where men and women tested the boundaries of sexuality.⁶⁵ With the onset of World War II, gay bars proliferated and provided a place for gay men and lesbians—normally isolated from each other—to start mingling and meeting. As a result, many gay men and lesbians settled in port cities where they found spaces that stretched the limits of acceptable homoeroticism. These factors helped to produce sexual migrations to San Francisco and, taking note of the shift in the city’s demographics, *Life* magazine deemed San Francisco the gay mecca of America in 1964.⁶⁶ San Francisco’s designated queer neighborhoods,

63. Frank LaPena, “Contemporary Northern California Native American Art,” *California History* 71, no. 3 (October 1, 1992): 386.

64. “An American Indian Art Exhibit”; R.C. Gorman to Carl Gorman and Mary Gorman, September 2, 1966, folder 3, box 3, Dooley Papers.

65. Strange de Jim, *San Francisco’s Castro* (San Francisco, Calif.: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 8.

66. Historian Martin Meeker discusses both San Francisco’s changing demographics and the *Life* magazine article. Meeker estimates that in 1940, no fewer than 2,500 and no more than 10,000 homosexuals lived in the city and that the homosexual population increased to 20,000 in the 1960s,

homophile organizations, and national reputation as a gay mecca made the city stand out as a representational example of a strong queer culture.

Exposure to a growing gay mecca allowed Gorman to engage with an urban sexual culture. In particular, Gorman encountered “fairies,” specifically in relation to artist collectives. Historian George Chauncey argues that fairies functioned as the center of gay urban life in early twentieth century New York: “the fairy represented the primary role model available to men forming a gay identity, and many men found in it both a way of understanding themselves and a set of guidelines for organizing their self-presentation and relations with other men.”⁶⁷ Further, “becoming a fairy was the first step many men took in the process of making sense of their apparent sexual and gender difference.”⁶⁸ In San Francisco, scholar John Loughery discusses a similar eclectic world of fairies and cross-dressers after World War I.⁶⁹ As fairy culture evolved, 1960s San Francisco attracted counterculture participants and hippie culture, which allowed men to embrace feminine dress and physical features, such as long hairstyles. A number of gay hippies began to migrate from lower Haight-Ashbury over to the Castro district, where Gorman lived with his male partner.⁷⁰ Queer culture in San Francisco encompassed a broad demography including spaces for fairies, gender-conforming homophile activists, gender-bending hippies, and marginalized group members—including drag queens, transsexuals, and street youth—who practiced gender transgression through style and performance.⁷¹ Gorman was exposed to a variety of gender presentations, particularly as part of his bohemian art world and living in his neighborhood. As he unleashed his sexual desires, Gorman often embodied the characteristics and performativity of the fairy by relishing theatricality, embracing a flamboyant style, and at times, assuming the performativity of a woman linking his sexuality and gender personas. He embarked on a style transformation at the end of the sixties. His trademark

50,000 in the 1970s, and 80,000 by 1980. Martin Meeker, “Come Out West: Communication and the Great Gay and Lesbian Migration to San Francisco, 1940s–1960s” (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2000), 32–33. See also, Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 151–61.

67. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 99.

68. *Ibid.*, 102.

69. John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence: Men’s Lives and Gay Identities: A Twentieth Century History* (New York: H. Holt, 1998).

70. Sides, *Erotic City*, 83–122.

71. Betty Luther Hillman, “The Most Profoundly Revolutionary Act a Homosexual Can Engage In’: Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964–1972,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (January 2011): 153–81.

appearance, which included headbands, Hawaiian shirts, sunglasses, and beads, stemmed from his interaction with queer culture as well as his traditional Navajo heritage.⁷² For example, in 1968, in honor of the Navajo centennial—the celebration of the federal government and the Navajo Nation’s signing of the Treaty of Peace—he grew his hair long.⁷³ Gorman created his own alternative path to queer identity utilizing ethnic conceptions and urban influences.⁷⁴

Beyond experimenting with fairy identity, San Francisco’s growing queer subculture permitted Gorman access to sexual knowledge and space to “accept himself,” which according to Gorman, was the “biggest accomplishment” he made.⁷⁵ He documented his coming out process in a letter to his father. A mutual contact outed Gorman to his family, forcing him to write home divulging his sexual identity. “I am a homosexual. It’s unfortunate only in that I myself did not tell you,” Gorman confessed. Speaking from his heart, in a meticulously crafted letter, Gorman explained his own coming to terms with his sexual orientation, “One mistaken notion that many people have is that all homosexuals are suffering terribly and that they want to be cured. At first I might have felt that way but which way or to whom was I to turn?”⁷⁶ Gorman turned to San Francisco, a city rumored to be a safe harbor for homosexuals in search of sexual knowledge. Once arrived, he read books in order to learn about his sexual desire; he visited a doctor, and consulted friends. Many women and men who identified as homosexual shared these actions; gay men and lesbians often first sought information on homosexuality and then pursued like-minded individuals before coming out to the larger public.⁷⁷ Gorman’s coming out process illustrates a cultural distance from his homeland as he followed a white, urban identity construction to unleash his sexual orientation. The distance between these two cultures could seem immense despite the spectrum of gendered identities earlier expressed publicly in Navajo life. In his letter, he

72. See R.C. Gorman, *Self Portrait*, 1973, lithograph print on paper, printed by the Tamarind Institute of Albuquerque, N. Mex., National Museum of the American Indian Smithsonian Institution.

73. Lawrence C. Kelly, *The Navajo Indians and Federal Indian Policy, 1900–1930* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1968); C.J. Koltz, “Artist Grows Long Hair for the Navajo Centennial,” news release, November 2, 1967, folder 13, box 3, Dooley Papers.

74. Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, “Trans/Bolero/Drag/Migration: Music, Cultural Translation, and Diasporic Puerto Rican Theatricalities,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3–4 (2008): 190–209.

75. R.C. Gorman to Carl Gorman, n.d., personal collection of Zonnie Gorman.

76. Ibid.

77. Meeker, *Contacts Desired*.

anticipated his father's protestations: "perhaps if he married? Received therapy? Took medication?" but he assured his father, "I can't take pills and be cured." "I just want understanding, and acceptance if possible. No pity or a cure—there is none," Gorman pleaded. "Well, Dad, I've told you the truth. I feel much better. How you take it is up to you."⁷⁸

Gorman also entered into a new relationship. He met Clifton Koltz on March 11, 1963, and embarked on his first same-sex partnership. After developing a romantic relationship, they lived together in the Castro, a gay district of the city.⁷⁹ They shared their top-floor penthouse with a parrot that Koltz had given to Gorman and numerous cats. Early pictures of the young artist on art programs show him painting with the parrot on his shoulder. In his journal, Gorman reflected on Koltz's influence on his art: "not until I'd met Cliff, had I completely thrown myself into my art." Koltz encouraged Gorman to establish a full-time career as an artist. Gorman listened and abandoned all his other moneymaking endeavors. "He has given me no excuse not to paint. He's been nothing but good for me. It seems that he completely understands me—no I can't say that truthfully—I think that he is just incredibly tolerant," wrote Gorman.⁸⁰ Once Gorman met Koltz, he focused solely on producing art and his outpouring of work was prodigious.

Koltz also eased Gorman's financial burden of being a struggling artist by assisting with household costs. Gorman's affluence as an artist did not arrive overnight and he leaned on Koltz for help:

For awhile [sic] here I was quite distressed because of my financial status. My phone bill was ridiculous. I had no idea so many people had called me collect. Where in the hell is Sacaton, Arizona? I got one from there too. I don't know what I would have done without good old serious Cliff. But now things have changed for the good a little. In one week I sold three paintings at three different places. That was good news. I see wine on my table again.⁸¹

Gorman sold these three paintings in the summer of 1964, a large oil to the Heard Museum, a drawing *Navajo Woman Grinding Corn* to Tom Bahti, owner of Bahti Indian Arts in Tucson, Arizona, and a piece to the Jewish

78. R.C. Gorman to Carl Gorman, n.d., personal collection of Zonnie Gorman.

79. Some articles locate Gorman's apartment in the Mission district or Upper Market district, but Gorman in his journal referred to living in the Castro. Personal Diary of R.C. Gorman, 1963, box 14, Dooley Papers. For a history of the Castro, see Sides, *Erotic City*, 83–122.

80. Personal Diary of R.C. Gorman, 1963, box 14, Dooley Papers.

81. *Ibid.*



FIGURE 3. Shortly after R.C. Gorman acknowledged his queer identity, he established a home with his same-sex partner, developed a full-time career as an artist, and began depicting representations of strong Navajo women, which would later make him a universally recognized artist. *Source:* R.C. Gorman painting, n.d., folder 11, box 11, Dooley Papers, Center for Southwest Research, Universities Libraries, University of New Mexico.

Community Center in San Francisco. His drawings sold for about \$100 and his large paintings on canvas retailed for around \$2,500.⁸² Gorman willingly negotiated his prices, but lamented to his parents, Carl and Mary, “Who on earth did dad meet up with that said my drawings were too expensive? I can picture Navajos swarming the galleries to buy an R.C. Gorman because the price is finally right. If anything, I will get more expensive. But I can always make a deal, like selling on time payments.”⁸³ When he hit a big sale, he repaid those who helped him through lean times. “I’m rich!,” he wrote in his diary after one sale. “Tonight I’ll take Cliff and his mother out to dinner.”⁸⁴

By 1965, both personally and professionally, Gorman thrived in San Francisco. When he started to succeed in the art market, he immersed himself in the community. Realizing the importance of networking, he attended and hosted art parties for friends and potential buyers. He was soon known for

82. Ledger, 1962–1968, folder 7, box 3, Dooley Papers.

83. R.C. Gorman to Carl Gorman and Mary Gorman, July 15, 1968, folder 3, box 3, Dooley Papers.

84. Personal Diary of R.C. Gorman, Dooley Papers.

his charismatic personality as much as he was for his art. Just as his gallery in Taos became a social center, Gorman hosted soirées in San Francisco and attended press events. At parties, Gorman indulged in food and alcohol with gusto. He relished the telling of dirty jokes. Quick to laugh, his voice climbed to a high register under emotions of gaiety. His high-living, fun-loving personality enthralled others, including celebrities and artists, like Andy Warhol and Allen Ginsberg. In letters home to his father and stepmother, his wicked sense of humor was evident as he discussed an upcoming party: “I’m going to give a party in April for a few local money bags and whores and what have you.”⁸⁵ For the moneybags he donned a tuxedo. At home, he “slipped into his cocktail moccasins to sample a few.”⁸⁶ When he gave parties for friends he dressed up in the theme of the event. For one, he wrote, “I decided on Japanese food and drink. I wore a silly outfit that Japanese wrestlers wear. We sat on the floor and ate with chopsticks under Japanese lanterns. Everyone got loaded on Sake and I went swimming in the nude.”⁸⁷ In a letter to John Manchester, owner of the Manchester Gallery in Taos, Gorman joked about embodying showwomanship: “What do you think of the idea of me coming in drag to the preview? I mean wearing a sort of Navajo velvet shirt and Navajo boots and maybe one or two pieces of jewelry—a brooch and earrings, maybe. . . . One must be a show woman I have found.”⁸⁸ Gorman, in his private correspondence, often referred to himself as a woman and he called his partner Koltz his “husband.”⁸⁹ Gorman moved fluidly between genders in his performativity. He also reinterpreted traditional pieces of Navajo attire such as Navajo boots and jewelry as “drag.” When he pondered wearing them outside of the Navajo reservation, they took on new meaning as a hybrid expression of both indigeneity and queer identity.

He likely used Navajos’ different cultural understandings of gender to help form his identities. The Navajo embraced in their gender/sex system

85. R.C. Gorman to Carl Gorman and Mary Gorman, March 1965, folder 3, box 3, Dooley Papers.

86. *Ibid.*

87. Personal Diary of R.C. Gorman, Dooley Papers.

88. R.C. Gorman met John Manchester at the Manchester Gallery during the summer of 1964 when he visited Taos, New Mexico, for the first time. Gorman showed Manchester his work and Manchester agreed to give Gorman a one-man show at the gallery in 1965. R.C. Gorman to John Manchester, August 15, 1965, folder 12, box 10, Dorothy Brett Papers MSS 494 BC, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico (hereafter cited as Brett Papers).

89. See, e.g., correspondence between R.C. Gorman and John Manchester, 1965–1967, folder 12, box 10, Brett Papers.

a conception called *nádleehí*, loosely meaning both male and female. Traditionally, *nádleehí* expressed cross-gender identities through their attire, occupation, especially artistic abilities, and sometimes through same-sex sexual partnerships.⁹⁰ In his autobiography, Gorman wrote that when he was a child, his maternal grandmother and Aunt Mary taught him traditional Navajo legends and sang the ancestral songs.⁹¹ Reared in Navajo culture and seeped in the ancestral lands of his people, Gorman developed a Navajo worldview, particularly the state of *Ságh Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó* (a natural order)—where all things interconnect through a continuous cycle.⁹² A framework used for understanding the world, *Hózhó* meant conceptualizing gender as a spectrum. Ethnographer Carolyn Epple describes such Navajo gender traits as “inseparable from the universe” and adds that Navajos “view male and female as situational values. . . . Many Navajos know of masculine and feminine as a dynamic cycling of male into female, with its valuation dependent on the setting.”⁹³ Navajo scholar Wesley Thomas explains that Navajos in 1930s “started to be discrete about exposing their identities to the outside world. They moved underground due to pressure from Western secular and religious beliefs.”⁹⁴ Thus, although it is impossible to determine if Gorman, who came of age in the 1930s, specifically learned about *nádleehí*, it is certain that he was raised within a culture that contained notions of gender variation as an essential component of the Navajo worldview.

Most importantly, Gorman’s homosexuality and flexible conceptions of gender led him to seek a deeper connection to female subjects in his art. While Gorman’s early works, such as *Three Navajo Women*, were clearly influenced by the techniques of abstract expressionism, he found his own unique style when he applied the confessional nature of expressionism to painting his own

90. In understanding *nádleehí*, I have been influenced by Carolyn Epple, “Coming to Terms with Navajo *Nádleehí*: A Critique of *Berdache*, ‘Gay,’ ‘Alternate Gender,’ and ‘Two-Spirit,’” *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 2 (May 1, 1998): 267–90; Roscoe, *Changing Ones*; Wesley Thomas, “Navajo Cultural Constructions of Gender and Sexuality,” in *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, eds. Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang (University of Illinois Press, 1997), 157–69; and Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

91. R.C. Gorman, *The Radiance of My People*, 19.

92. In order to understand *Ságh Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó* (the natural order), I rely on Jennifer Nez Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 134–35; and Epple, “Coming to Terms with Navajo *Nádleehí*,” 276–78.

93. Epple, “Coming to Terms with Navajo *Nádleehí*,” 279.

94. Thomas, “Navajo Cultural Constructions of Gender and Sexuality,” 157.

interior realm. A lyrical representation of Navajo women emerged and dominated his work starting in the late sixties. These paintings invite intimacy because Gorman drew “subjects who look as if they didn’t know anyone was looking at them.”⁹⁵ In so doing, Gorman delivered a perceptiveness and softness absent from his earlier works. Gorman honed these skills in San Francisco, when he began hiring live models. Writing a letter home to his parents during the summer of 1965, Gorman concluded in a rush because, “I’m having a huge mob drop in on me in a few minutes so I’ll close here. We’re having a sketching session. I hired a nude model and suddenly all my friends who don’t know the right end of a pencil are artists.”⁹⁶ Gorman relied on using female models both nude and clothed, in order to capture the strength and beauty of women. The process transformed his art. “When you’re drawing a human being, you’ve got a piece of life in front of you, a living breathing soul. And I relate to that,” illuminated Gorman.⁹⁷ Throughout his career, interviewers almost always asked Gorman why he painted women. The answer to this question is more complex when his own queer identity is taken into account. In a letter to gallery owner Manchester, Gorman explained why: “It’s me. I am every, fat, nude woman I draw.”⁹⁸ Gorman’s self-representation of gender, which he creatively depicted on canvas as Navajo women, challenged the heteronormative Western binary construction of male/female. Here, Gorman drew on Navajo conceptions of gender to help form his identities as well as his art.

Unfortunately, Gorman’s visits with his family became strained, particularly with his father, once he disclosed his sexual identity.⁹⁹ This context suggests that by the 1960s, it would likely have been extremely difficult for him to publicly express a queer identity on the Navajo reservation.¹⁰⁰ By the

95. Gorman quoted in R. C. Gorman, Virginia Dooley, and Millicent Rogers Museum, *R.C. Gorman: Chinle to Taos: [Exhibition] Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos, New Mexico, June 3–July 4, 1988* (Taos, N.Mex.: Navajo Gallery, 1988), 42.

96. R.C. Gorman to Carl Gorman and Mary Gorman, June 27, 1965, folder 3, box 3, Dooley Papers.

97. Gorman quoted in *R.C. Gorman: Chinle to Taos*, 36.

98. R.C. Gorman to John Manchester, February 18, 1965, folder 12, box 10, Brett Papers.

99. To be fair, R.C. Gorman and his father harbored lingering hurt feelings about a variety of topics, in addition to R.C.’s disclosure of his homosexuality—for example, R.C. resented Carl’s absence after enlisting in World War II. Zonnie Gorman in discussion with author, March 2010 and email correspondence July 15, 2016.

100. The imposition of a modern state format has reconfigured gender structures in the Navajo Nation—for example in the passage of the Diné Marriage Act in 2005, an anti-gay marriage law. See Jennifer Nez Denetdale, “Chairmen, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 21, no. 1 (2006): 9–28.

time Gorman came of age, governmental efforts at assimilating Natives grew more intense (especially the imposition of Christianity), and gender variance classification receded as part of the public culture of Navajo society.¹⁰¹ Navajos and other American Indians began to conceal non-binary gender conceptions from the outside world and moved these practices underground sometimes even from each other.¹⁰² In the postwar years on reservations, invisibility enveloped many queer American Indians. Maurice Kenny (Mohawk), the first gay Native American to publish literature on the topic, recalled that on reservations one rarely saw an open queer person and that most “went off to an urban center.”¹⁰³ According to the organization Gay American Indians (founded in 1975), “For many gay Indians, the path to a positive self-image begins with a break from reservation and family.”¹⁰⁴ Another Navajo who abandoned reservation life for San Francisco, Erna Pahe, remembered that “When I came out here [San Francisco] I finally got that feeling that I had control over my own life. When I did go back to the reservation I was ready to deal with ‘Hey, I’m just me, but I’m independent and I do have my life to live whichever way I choose to live it.”¹⁰⁵ Similar to the experiences of other gay American Indians, access to an urban space loosened Gorman from the constraints of close proximity to family and a close-knit community and permitted him the freedom to engage in a same-sex relationship. The extent to which Gorman would have experienced homophobia within the Navajo Nation is unknown because he left, yet his father’s negative attitudes toward Gorman’s sexual disclosure certainly weighed in his decision to live off the reservation.

101. See scholarship on Indian boarding schools, e.g., Cathleen D. Cahill and William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies, *Federal Fathers & Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869–1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); and David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997).

102. The practice of third and fourth gender categories disappeared by the end of World War II. See Will Roscoe, *The Zuni Man-Woman* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), 194–200.

103. Maurice Kenny published a poem “Untitled” and an essay “Tinselled Bucks: An Historical Study of Indian Homosexuality” in *Gay Sunshine: A Journal of Gay Liberation* nos. 26–27 (Winter 1975/76): 17–48. Maurice Kenny quoted in Charley Shiveley and Clover Chango, “Maurice Kenny: Gay Native American Poet,” *Gay Community News* June 21, 1980.

104. Will Roscoe, “Gay American Indians Creating Identity from Past Traditions,” *The Advocate*, October 29, 1985, 46, folder 28: “Gay American Indian,” carton 1, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, California (hereafter cited as GAI Papers).

105. Erna Pahe quoted in Will Roscoe, “Gay American Indians Creating Identity from Past Traditions,” *The Advocate*, October 29, 1985, folder 28, carton 1, GAI Papers.

Still, even urban living had limitations for a gay man of color. Gorman lived in San Francisco during the homophile movement, the first organized resistance to homosexual oppression in America, but because of his race, he remained on the margins of forums for constructing queer culture. Largely, white, middle-class gay and lesbian activists connected through homophile politics. In 1968, criminologist Roxanna Sweet conducted a study of San Francisco's homophile movement and concluded that homophile activity was a "norm-oriented" social reform movement whose members consisted of college-educated, white, middle-class men and women who shunned "undesirables" such as people of color and effeminate men.¹⁰⁶ They strove to maintain a "respectable" image of homosexuals and distanced themselves from outlaw behavior, such as bar spaces where gay men and lesbians of color were sometimes welcomed.¹⁰⁷ The social world that queers constructed in bars and taverns overlapped with sex and race tourism in San Francisco.¹⁰⁸ Queer bars often combined gender-transgressive and racialized entertainment, a pattern that continued through the postwar years. While there were many queer bars to choose from, no bar in San Francisco specifically catered to queer Native Americans. Gorman did not engage with queer bar culture or homophile organizations, two major points of interaction for gay men and lesbians in the city. Instead, he preferred to live in a growing gay district of the city where he had access to partners and connected with other like-minded individuals. Additionally, he primarily organized his social life around bohemian art circles where gay status was a common and accepted form of sexual choice.¹⁰⁹

Creative communities cultivated spaces for the exploration of homoeroticism but still faced condemnation of such identities and behaviors from mainstream America. As historian Michael S. Sherry argues, "agitation about homosexuals in the arts became more frenzied and conspicuous in the early 1960s" and peaked mid-decade.¹¹⁰ "Queer artists of almost any aesthetic were

106. Roxanna Thayer Sweet, *Political and Social Action in Homophile Organization* (New York: Arno Press, 1968).

107. Not all historians agree that homophile activists were "norm-oriented" or "assimilationist." Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 33.

108. Boyd, *Wide Open Town*.

109. For studies that analyze how art and homosexuality have been significantly entwined, see Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer, *Art & Queer Culture* (London: Phaidon Press, 2013); Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

110. Michael S. Sherry, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 105.

attacked as creators of the twisted and the artificial,” explains Sherry. The attacks stemmed from the Cold War, an era when homosexuals themselves became suspect. Purportedly, like communists, homosexuals threatened the security of the nation.¹¹¹ The increased visibility of queer artists during the sixties led art critics and media outlets to criticize and draw heightened attention to their presence and to openly queer lifestyles. At first, Gorman boldly proclaimed that he would not “hide anything,” but as his career grew and when he considered moving away from an urban gay mecca, he began to bury his sexuality as an “open secret,” a strategy many artists employed.¹¹²

In the historical records Gorman left behind, once he moved to Taos, he seldom mentioned his sexuality. His reticence indicates the increased scrutiny of gay artists in the 1960s and secondly, suggests that the locational specificity of his life influenced his navigation of sexual identity. Gorman, being a gay man, was limited in where he could publicly express homoeroticism. His career as an artist and his sexual identity were therefore always linked. Ultimately, Gorman felt he belonged in the Southwest, a better fit for his racial and ethnic identity. In addition, Gorman knew his artistic style sold well in that region of the country and could produce a living wage, as evidenced by his lucrative shows at the Manchester Gallery. The question remained, for both Gorman and Koltz, whether their sexuality would be welcomed. Gorman wrote to Manchester about desiring to move: “I believe that I mentioned before that each time I leave Taos it has been with a certain amount of sadness—if I had some kind of security I think I could live there. I’m most anxious for Cliff to see the place.”¹¹³ By 1967, Koltz had visited Taos with Gorman and both agreed that they could live there: “We’d like to leave here by all means but we’d like to sort of settle down into our own place.”¹¹⁴ They moved together in 1968. Interestingly, Gorman made a second sexual migration from one artist community to another and from a space that cultivated queer culture to one that harbored an underground one.¹¹⁵

111. An excellent example of homosexuals as security risks is David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

112. Of course, there were exceptions. Visibly queer pop artist Andy Warhol and poet Allen Ginsberg both succeeded in the arts as open homosexuals.

113. R.C. Gorman to John Manchester, August 15, 1965, folder 12, box 10, Brett Papers.

114. R.C. Gorman to John Manchester, October 30, 1967, folder 12, box 10, Brett Papers.

115. Queers moved into major urban centers with publicly visible queer cultures, but they also moved to smaller urban outposts and small towns. Urban-to-rural sexual migrations are a less-understood aspect of sexual migrations. For an example of such scholarship, see Peter Boag, “Gay

Taos lacked an open queer culture, but the town's reputation as an art colony aided in the development of non-conformist behavior and ideology. The world-famous Taos Society of Artists had established Taos as an artist colony in the early 1900s, spurring an influx of artists to Taos that continues into the present. Poet Spud Johnson, modernist painter Cady Wells, and others lived as gay men in Taos in the 1930s, where they knitted together the bohemian atmosphere of the art community with their sexual identities and paved the way for future gay artists.¹¹⁶ However, the Cold War unsettled the formative queer culture made up of artists and writers and altered the sexual landscape that gay men and lesbians had created. By the time Gorman arrived, queer culture moved underground.¹¹⁷

Once he left San Francisco, Gorman "straightened" his public persona, and Koltz and Gorman parted ways shortly after their move to Taos. Gorman then lived a public life as a straight man. The image he produced for the public incorporated his engaging, outgoing, and youthful spirit but masked the private, complex man he embodied as both a Navajo *and* a gay man. When Gorman emerged as a prominent figure in the Native American Fine Art Movement, public recognition of his sexual orientation may have jeopardized his prosperity as an artist. At the same time that queer artists faced an insecure place in the 1960s art world, American Indian artists began their ascendancy. Gorman followed the tide toward success. He privileged "artist" as his main identifier, followed by Navajo. This trajectory resulted in a huge commercial success for Gorman. He opened his own gallery, his artwork received international recognition, and he became immensely wealthy. Critics condemned Gorman for his willingness to profit from his Navajo heritage. They especially critiqued his implementation of lithography, which commercialized his art on a massive scale and garnered large profits.¹¹⁸ Further, Gorman capitalized on romantic images of women that omitted issues of poverty on the Navajo reservation while he indulged in a materialistic

Male Rural-Urban Migration in the American West," in *City Dreams, Country Schemes: Community and Identity in the American West*, eds. Kathleen A. Brosnan and Amy L. Scott (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2010), 284–305.

116. Flannery Burke, "Spud Johnson and a Gay Man's Place in the Taos Creative Arts Community," *Pacific Historical Review* 79, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 86–113; Lois Rudnick, ed., *Cady Wells and Southwestern Modernism* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2009).

117. A new wave of queer artists began arriving in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the 1970s; they revitalized the city's queer climate.

118. For a summary of Gorman's critics, see Allan Parachini, "R.C. Gorman—Art and the Marketplace," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1985.

lifestyle. From his fortune, he bought and renovated a property in Taos, adding a ballroom-sized studio, an Olympic-length swimming pool, and a Japanese style sculpture garden. He purchased and drove multiple Mercedes and sometimes traveled by private plane.¹¹⁹ Gorman achieved material success unrivaled among Indian artists. Whether one is an admirer of his work or a critic of his luxurious lifestyle, Gorman undeniably popularized Native American art, a process he began in San Francisco.

A nuanced account of Gorman's lived experiences in San Francisco's bohemia, artistic Native hubs, and queer cultures demonstrates the collage of many different migrant communities that diversified both artistic expression and American cultural representations. The deeply confessional nature of abstract expressionism exposed the interior realm of marginalized groups to a broad audience. As art critic Edward Lucie-Smith explains, "The importance of Abstract Expressionism was arguably more to culture as a whole than to painting in particular."¹²⁰ Gorman's works brought national attention to modern art produced by American Indians and assisted with breaking down cultural barriers. His years in the city demonstrate creative change for Native Americans as they gained access to new media and experienced urban culture. Most notably, they used art as a way to promote cultural activism, assert their tribal identities, and emphasize American Indian pride during the 1960s.¹²¹ Prior to the Native American Fine Art Movement, national institutions rarely collected contemporary Indian art. Gorman, an integral artist of the movement, accomplished compositions as exceptional as many high-profile practitioners in the field of modern art did, and he assisted with prompting a shift in the deserved recognition of Native art in non-Native society. Many viewed his art at prestigious venues such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. In turn, Gorman's composition of the archetypal ideal of a Navajo woman exposed a larger number of Americans to the Native American Fine Art Movement. Through artistic production, Gorman and other Native American artists brought new awareness to Americans about Native peoples.

At the same time, silences around Gorman's sexual identity have allowed his art to go unrecognized as a contribution from a gay man. Gorman found inspiration for his art in his sexual and gender personas. Therefore, his unique

119. Susan Lawrence Rich, "R.C. Gorman: A Self-Portrait," *Radiance*, Summer 1990, http://www.radiancemagazine.com/issues/1990/gorman_selfportrait.html.

120. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in Art Since 1945*, new edition (New York: Thames and Hudson World of Art, 2001), 38.

121. Ablon, "Relocated American Indians in San Francisco Bay Area," 297.

artistic sensibility stemmed from both his private and public life. Bohemian art and queer culture overlapped, allowing Gorman a space to unlock his artistic ethos. The erasure of his sexuality from the discussion of his artistic impact has obscured its queer aspects. While perhaps silenced in the public discourse on homosexuality, queer artists played a major role in American cultural production. Their artistic compositions, like Gorman's, often captivated audiences. Gorman's work commanded attention. Powerful, poetic, rooted in the sensibilities of his Navajo heritage but universal in its impact, style, and message, Gorman's work conveyed the force of female energy; and thousands collected his art. Lastly, the culturally sophisticated city of San Francisco invited creativity and experimentation and caught the attention of Gorman. When he first arrived in the city, he proclaimed to a stranger on the street, "So let me paint" announcing his intent to use the city as the jumping-off point for his own art career. He found himself in San Francisco, both personally in embracing his queer identity and professionally in his discovery of women as artistic muses. On March 18, 1986, San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein honored R.C. Gorman by marking the date as "R.C. Gorman Day" and affirmed the artist's connection to the city.¹²² Gorman will forever be linked with his images of strong women that he made famous. Once he committed to being an artist, Gorman painted every single day of his life, and San Francisco is the place where he first let himself paint.¹²³

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NOTE

Special thanks, to Zonnie Gorman, who shared materials from her private collection with me and provided invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this article. I am grateful to archivist Beth Silbergleit and Mike Kelly, former director of the UNM Center for Southwest Research, who both provided continued support and guidance of this project. I'd also like to thank the staff at CSWR, especially Samuel Sisneros.

122. Archivist Jessica M. Herrick, California State Archives, e-mail message to author, November 23, 2015.

123. According to a promotional pamphlet, when Gorman arrived in the city, he proclaimed to a stranger on the street, "So let me paint." See E.E. Atkins, "The Artist," n.d., in scrapbook, folder 16, box 5, Dooley Papers.