

Spirit Lines

Helen Hardin (1943 - 1984)



All 23 of her copper plate etchings completed between 1980 - 1984

Tsa-sah-wee-eh 

Spirit Lines: Helen Hardin Etchings



Helen Hardin (1943-1984), emerged from the 1970s and 1980s as the most significant contemporary woman artist of her era. With her work, her career and her individualism, Hardin formed a path for other Native women artists wishing to break out of Indian traditionalism.

Helen Hardin's father was an Anglo government worker and her mother an artist from the Santa Clara Pueblo in north-central New Mexico. Hardin's mother, Pablita Velarde (1918 - 2006) broke from conventional female pottery making, to painting scenes of pueblo life. Hardin began her early childhood in the pueblo amongst her mother's family, but spent most of her life in and around

Albuquerque, New Mexico. Although she was not allowed participation in the traditional Indian pueblo ceremonies because of her mixed ethnicity, Hardin studied the art and design of her heritage and was fascinated by the images created by prehistoric peoples.

Hardin began painting at a young age, and, in high school took a drafting class that introduced her to drafting tools and processes. She used these in her art and repeated complex geometric forms used in rock art and pottery made by her Pueblo ancestors. In 1962 Hardin held her first one-woman show and began exhibiting her works in galleries and winning prizes at shows throughout the Southwest. In 1968, she took her young daughter Margarete to Bogotá, Colombia to visit her father. While in Colombia she was able to paint and exhibit her work on her own merit without the shadow of her mother's fame.



Upon her return to the States her paintings became more linear and intricate, combining images and symbols from her heritage with modern abstract techniques. Featured on the March 1970 cover, *New Mexico Magazine* noted

that Hardin brought a “new look” to Native American art. With this publication, Hardin’s work drew attention and buyers began to seek her work. She was filmed as part of a series on Native American artists for the Public Broadcasting System.

Hardin studied art and anthropology at the University of New Mexico and was a part of the University of Arizona Southwestern Indian Art Project that led to the establishment of the Institute of American Indian Arts. Working in acrylics, Hardin departed from the popular “flat style” painting used by conventional Native American artists including her mother, Pabilita Velarde. Hardin began layering color upon color and incorporating a splattering technique that created a translucent lacquer effect on her multifaceted compositions.

In the 1970s Hardin’s distinctive style further developed with her katsina figure paintings. Katsina, a spirit being in western Pueblo religious beliefs, is represented by masked members of a community at religious dance ceremonies. Hardin never participated but often watched the dances that served as inspiration. These paintings and subsequent etchings such as *Unity of Prayers and Song* are not images of specific katsinas, as that would go against Pueblo practice. They are, instead, imagined and artistically envisioned with depth, energy, and captivating surfaces. “I paint as I feel it, not as I see it,” Hardin said. “I paint the song. I paint the abstract terms associated with that day.” [Albuquerque Living, 1984]

In 1980 Hardin began using the process of copper plate etching. This printing technique suited her style of creating precise

lines and detailed compositions. After Hardin was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1981 she continued to create her distinctive geometric abstractions until her death in 1984.



Spirit of Spring.



Unity of Prayer and Song.
completed 1983



Spirit of Autumn

The scope of the twenty-three etchings in this exhibition, completed from 1980 to 1984, provides a narrative into the world of Helen Hardin. *Spirit Lines: Helen Hardin Etchings* begins with *Fireside Prayers*, an image of six men, wrapped in blankets, with their backs to the viewer. From the onset Hardin was on the outside of that traditional circle. However, she was intent on portraying her



heritage, as she uniquely interpreted it. Contrasting her use of modern techniques, Hardin signed her work with her Tewa name, *Tsa-sah-wee-eh*, meaning *Little Standing Spruce*.

The three copper plate etchings portraying women have become known as *The Women Series*. Hardin spoke of the series with Jay Scott author of *Changing Woman The Life and Art of Helen Hardin* (1989).

Hardin was completing *Medicine Woman* when she found out she had breast cancer. She said, "It was almost as if I needed that person, that healing spirit." In the spring of 1984 Hardin stated, "*Listening Woman* is the woman I am only becoming now. She's the speaker, she's the person who's more objective, the listener and the compassionate person."

Guardian of the Mist, a dramatic presentation of an eagle, is arranged with precise patterns of lines, shapes and forms. The abstracted eagle is set against a marbled-like, free form background. This piece is an example of the paradox contained in her compositions and her struggle to maintain order in a world of contrasts and dualism. Throughout her life Hardin was faced with the cultural challenges of mixed ethnic background, with the intellectual and physical struggles of being a woman, mother, artist and wife and with her obsession for perfection as evidenced in her work.

Mimbres Kokopelli would be Hardin's last etching completed just before her death. Hardin studied the petroglyphs and images of the ancient peoples such as the Mogollon culture and the Mimbres region of southwestern New Mexico. The kokopelli figure, akin to the one depicted in this etching, has various explanations but is often associated with fertility and prosperity. The hunch on his back is thought to depict a sack of seed and the staff or the planting stick represents abundance and fruitfulness. During her lifetime, Hardin created a body of artistically significant work, relevant to any age and gender. Her collective works and her resolve continue to bestow inspiration and certainty to other artists to believe in their career. Helen Hardin stated, "This medium is allowing me to do the best work of my life. So, I feel this need, this compulsion to do a series of my best works to show the noble women for what they are: intelligent, thinking, hard-working and spiritual. This is the goal I hope to reach through my etchings."