

Lecture Subject:
Langdon Kihn-Internationally Recognized Artist
Dr. Clifford R. Bragdon, Professor Emeritus
East Haddam Historical Society and Museum
July 10, 2019
7:30 pm

Langdon Kihn, born in Brooklyn (1898-1957), was an internationally acclaimed artist known primarily for his Native American portraits and landscapes. An accomplished painter and illustrator, he studied under Winold Reiss and Homer Boss at the Art Students League in New York. He was motivated by a desire to document the disappearing aboriginal culture and land holdings. Between the 1920's and 1950's Kihn successfully painted at 35 different tribal sites, spending from two weeks to three months at each of these locations. He accurately detailed these Indians in their native habitat and historical dress. During this time he travelled over 30,000 miles from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Mexico to the Arctic Circle, creating over 450 paintings of American Indians. To date Kihn has been the only artist to accomplish this massive, challenging undertaking. Dr. John La Gorce, Ethnologist for the Smithsonian Institute and former President of the National Geographic Society said it this way, "Kihn's artistry and painstaking research have produced the most complete, authentic and dramatic picture record of the American Indian ever achieved."

Indians of the Americas, published by the National Geographic Society in 1955, contains 105 Native American oil paintings by Kihn, commissioned by the NGS. Some 350,000 copies of this notable work were printed. He was also the author of seven articles appearing in the monthly editions of National Geographic between March, 1936 and October, 1949. Beside his work for the National Geographic Society, Kihn received commissions from two Canadian railroads, the Great Northern Railway (now Burlington Northern), Cunard Lines, Wellcome Trust of London (world's largest independent charitable trust, valued at \$22.1 billion) and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's WPA Federal Arts Project. In addition, he illustrated thirteen books including Marius Barbeau's *Indian Days in the Rockies* and *Pocahontas and Her World*, by Francis Carpenter, and created art work for the covers of many magazines and professional journals.

His works were featured at exhibitions in over 100 museums and galleries within the U. S., Canada, England and France. These included the Los Angeles and San Francisco Art Museums, Chicago Art Institute, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Santa Fe Museum, Minneapolis Museum, Brooklyn Museum, Cincinnati Art Museum, National Geographic Society-Explorers Hall, American Museum of Natural History, Vancouver Art Gallery, McCord Museum, Royal Ontario Museum, Provincial Museum of British Columbia, the Ottawa Parliament, The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, Charpentier Galleries-Paris, along with trusts and private collectors.

The New York Times reported that Kihn's first traveling exhibition (held at 40 institutions west of the Mississippi, sponsored by the Brooklyn Museum of Arts and Sciences and the Santa Fe Museum. This Kihn exhibition of 78 American Indian portraits in 1922 was "one of the most brilliant exhibitions in color that has ever been seen in the City of New York." There were similar praises from scores of newspapers coast to coast, as well as from professional fine art publications. *New York Evening World* stated, "This exhibition is like a breath of fresh air." *Art and Decorations* reported, "This represents one of the most remarkable artistic expressions of the American Indian." His notoriety followed him to Paris where the *New York Times* (Paris Edition) did several photographic front page stories showing Kihn at work in his Parisian studio on a variety of projects.

Kihn was well received in the tribal nations by Indian Chiefs, Medicine Men and their members wherever he travelled to paint and historically document their lives and history. Curly Bear, the Blackfeet Indian Chief, proudly gave him the name Zoi-och-ka-tsai-ya, which means Chase-Enemy-in-Water. Wherever he painted the Indians honored him with noteworthy tribal gifts and artifacts. He, his wife Helen and daughter Phyllis "Fifi" Kihn were all devoted to the Native Americans and their permanent well-being.

When Kihn met Duncan Scott, Head of the Department of Indian Affairs in British Columbia, Scott remarked that he admired all of Kihn's paintings. Then he asked, "Why do so many of these Northwest Indians have their eyes nearly closed?" The noted artist replied, half of these Indians were going blind. Following this meeting Scott sent a team from Ottawa to investigate. The team found medical practices in support of the Canadian Indians to be severely inadequate. Personnel changes were quickly made to upgrade and improve medical treatment for the Indians throughout Canada.

Langdon Kihn cared deeply about the North American Indians and their environment. He saw the last of their civilization in western United States and Canada, a culture which will never be seen again in its historic context. His artistic legacy will remain to tell the story of a strong and heroic people.