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# Middle Waters: A Visual Historical Fiction of the Osage Nation

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MIDDLE WATERS: A VISUAL HISTORICAL FICTION OF THE OSAGE NATION

by

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A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
of the University Scholars Honors Program

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*Approved* \_\_\_\_\_

*Date* \_\_\_\_\_

The following project is in two parts: A series of concept art and illustration pieces surrounding the history of the Osage Nation, and a research paper detailing that history and exploring the process of creating the aforementioned visual pieces. The artworks are designed around an original story set during the 1920s on the Osage reservation, and explore past history of the Osage people as a part of that. The paper also discusses the author's personal response to the research, and explores themes of ignorance and social justice as the project draws to a close.



Fig. 1

I grew up being told from a very young age that I had some small amount of Native American ancestry in my family tree. While this was always portrayed as a positive thing, I, and my family, knew very little about that ancestry. All I knew was that my Great-Great Grandfather was a member of the Osage Nation, and grew up on the Osage Reservation in Oklahoma. That's it. I knew absolutely nothing about the Osage people, not their story, their culture, I didn't even know if the reservation still existed.

Eventually, I decided to do some digging into Native American history. I consider myself a bit of a history geek, but I knew very little about Native American peoples in general. Sadly, it wasn't a subject that had been covered much in my education. So for my senior show, I decided

to learn more about Native American history. The indigenous people group I decided to focus on was the one I was most fascinated with due to my above mentioned personal ancestry — that of the Osage Nation.

The oldest origins of the Osage people are uncertain, though they are a sub-group of the Dhegiha people, once a large tribe that amidst a wave of migration eventually divided into five groups — the Omaha, Ponca, Kaw, Quapaw, and Osage (La Flesche, 43). The Osage group migrated from the Illinois area to what is now Missouri, and expanded their territory from there.

At the height of their expansion, the Osage people had quite an extensive presence in the American Midwest (Fig. 1). I later learned that part of what made their nation so unusual was that their height of power coincided with the Revolutionary Era, around the end of the 18th century (Burns, 35). Extensive control of the Missouri River and a largely peaceful relationship with French traders contributed to this.

However, The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 changed all that. The influx of American settlers led to a gradual forced cession of Osage land over the 19th century, eventually delegating them to what is now the Osage Reservation in Oklahoma (Burns, 35). I won't be able to dive into this relocation much, but I do not mean to downplay the brutality of this. The Osage were not the only indigenous people group being relocated at this time, resulting in a conflict with other tribes, most notably the Cherokee, for land. The packed quarters and scarce means led to poverty, illness, and death (Burns, 230). This state of poverty continued in the Osage Reservation itself, at least, for a while.

The devastating events that befell the Osage people over the next century seemed to momentarily fade away, when oil was discovered on the Osage reservation around 1897.

Overnight, the Osage people became the wealthiest people group per capita in the nation (Grann, 6). However, in 1907, Congress added the qualification to the Osage allotment that any landowners half-Osage or more must have an appointed guardian to monitor their finances (Grann, 78). This was, in theory, to prevent the Osage from abusing their wealth. In reality, it enabled these white guardians to abuse the Osage wealth. Guardians would often embezzle funds, giving the headright owners a mere sliver of what they were due each year (Grann, 79). Over the following years, this abuse escalated, in the form of guardians and other white leaders in Osage County pocketing wealth from the Osage, rewriting their wills, and often intimidating or bribing others into silence.

In the early 1920s, the situation came to a head. Between 1921 and 1924, at least two dozen Osage people were killed in various ways — through shootings, poison, and on one gruesome occasion, a house was blown up. It was a time that came to be known as a “Reign of Terror” amongst the Osage people. The killings became so frequent, that the newly founded Federal Bureau Investigation became involved, eventually imprisoning one William Hale on the count of one murder in 1929. None of the others cases laid against Hale or the other corrupted officials managed to stick.

When I first heard about these events, my initial response was that of confusion. I was confused as to why I hadn’t heard about these events before. Outside of my family history, I had never even heard of the Osage people, let alone the many injustices that befell them. Considering the fact that at the time it was one of the first FBI cases, surely such an event would be better recorded in the history books.

What is more, I soon found out that many of my peers, family, and friends had also never heard of this “Reign of Terror” in Osage County. I couldn’t understand, and to some extent still don’t understand, how this chapter of Osage History is not better known by the vast majority of Americans.

The emotional and mental turmoil that I have had to address since coming across this narrative has been significant. The acts committed here I know, are just one example of the many abuses and injustices that have been committed against indigenous people across the country, across the centuries. I was left wondering what I, a white college student, could possibly do to begin to understand and take steps toward reconciliation with the Osage people. For a moment, my senior project seemed pointless, futile even.

After being in conversation with my family, peers, and professors, I came to the conclusion that even the smallest of steps can still be a step in the right direction. My senior show, then, became an attempt not only to bring understanding to myself, but to spark thoughts and conversation with others, and hopefully fight the ignorance of these events that is so present across America.

I created a series of concept art pieces for what I may someday turn into a graphic novel, or animated film. The story at the center of this show is that of a fictional Osage boy, named Steven (or Steve) living in Osage County during the events of the 1920s. Steven is a witness to these events, and has to grapple with his own identity as a member of the Osage people at a time when being, and living culturally as an Osage was quite dangerous. Over the course of the story, Steven learns to embrace who he is, all that he is, despite the world telling him he must be as “white” as possible in order to succeed and survive.

I opted to tell a historical fiction story with my art, rather than a purely factual one, out of respect for the victims of the Reign of Terror and their descendants. Whilst their story should be remembered, I did not feel that I was the one to render out these very real, unique lives that each one of them lead, but rather to tell a story inspired by them that could provoke others to do research of their own and begin to grapple with the facts imbued into the story.



Fig. 2

One of my first steps to creating the visual component of my Honors Project was selecting the color palette. Gold of course, would be a pivotal color, due to both its connotations in the subject matter — first, that the sunrise is central to traditional Osage beliefs, and second, of course, the wealth that the Osage people possessed through the oil reservoirs (Burns, 208). From gold, the color palette extended to red (a color deeply significant in Osage culture), and turquoise (a warm color that could be used for sky and water). I then took all three colors and from them drew a full palette of sage greens, browns, and dusky purples, along with a variety of other shades (see Fig. 2).

Animation concept pieces, of course, are all anchored to a principal story. Throughout a lot of my research, there were two witnesses to these events that I kept coming back to, the children of Mollie and Ernest Burkhart. Mollie was an Osage woman who lost all three of her sisters and mother to the killing spree. Her husband, Ernest, was the nephew of William K. Hale, and was eventually convicted of being an accomplice in the murders. Hale's eventual imprisonment hinged heavily on Burkhart's testimony (Grann, 215). The Burkhart's two children grew up carrying the burden of what one side of their family had inflicted on the other. Their



story, perhaps more than any other, struck me as the most heart-breaking and compelling. Watching your family members be killed one by one only to discover your own father was responsible was unimaginable to me. So when I began to create a narrative set in this time, the idea of a child protagonist stuck with me and compelled me in a way that the idea of an adult protagonist did not. I wanted my protagonist to be fictional (it would be nigh impossible to do justice to a real individual from this time) and I decided I wanted the protagonist to be a boy. A female protagonist, though just as compelling, would have more difficulty being a player in these events, as female Native Americans were seen as even less human than males by the white people of Osage County, and wouldn't have nearly as much say in their actions.



Fig. 3

So the first piece I created was a turnaround character design for my protagonist, named Steven (Fig. 3). Osage children at this time would have been given a Christian name upon beginning their federally required Catholic education (Grann, 46). I chose the name Steven to tie back to Saint Stephen, who whilst being stoned asked the Lord to forgive his persecutors, for they knew not what they were doing. In the story, Steven must go through a similar ordeal; forgiving his persecutors after they have inflicted so much pain on him and his loved ones. For Steven's Osage name, I chose what would translate to English as "Little Soldier", the name is both ironic and metaphorical — referring both to Steven's eventual decision to choose non-violence, and his own kind of internal warfare that he must deal with in finding his identity and accepting his heritage. It is a reference to his becoming a culture warrior for the Osage people.

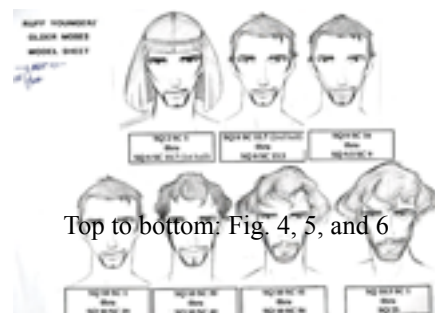
In terms of the visuals of the character, the design for Steven was a priority of mine in taking on this project. The voice of Steven as a character had to come through in the design, and I knew the boy that emerged through this design would set the aesthetic standard and look that all the rest of the project would be held to.



I considered many influences in working on my design for Steven. There have been many well thought out and designed young male protagonists over the years, but there were a few that I specifically



studied in designing Steven. The three primary influences were Ben from *Song of the Sea*, Sokka from *Avatar the Last Airbender*, and Moses from *The Prince of Egypt* (Fig. 4,5, and 6 respectively). Each of these characters possessed



different qualities that I felt Steven possessed as a character, and I felt that their respective creators were exceptionally successful in communicating those qualities through their design. Ben shares Steven's youth and innocence, as well as curiosity, Sokka shares Steven's awkwardness and character arc of growth through sorrow and coming out the wiser, and Moses shares Steven's identity crisis and witnessing the persecution of his people. These three choices also enabled me to study how the character designers communicated different ethnicities — Ben is Irish, Sokka is Inuit, and Moses is Egyptian. I also studied photographs of Osage boys to attempt to grasp physical features specific to American Indigenous peoples.

Steven is around 12 years old during the majority of the story, so I designed him to be long and lanky, contrasting that with a rounded square for a head shape, communicating both brains over brawn and highlighting the strong jawline so present in the Osage people. Large round feet help him to feel grounded as a character whilst communicating his awkwardness, and his hairstyle is made up of geometric shapes that would be easy to render repeatedly throughout the work, whilst still maintaining the organic feel of hair. Steven's flat nose, wide mouth, and long eye shape all are designed to communicate his Osage ethnicity. After I finished the turnaround, an expression sheet and poses soon followed. I went through about fifteen different versions of Steven before I arrived at the final design.



The crystal that accompanies Steven's character design is one that appears throughout the remaining body of work. In the story, I felt the need to a physical reminder of the suffering of the Osage people, and the forced relocation from their homeland. I researched minerals native to what is now Missouri (the region I decided Steven's tribe originated from), and found that among others, barite is a mineral that is mined in Missouri, though common throughout the world (Burns, 29). I found that the crystal will in rare cases be a deep turquoise color, and decided such a mineral would contrast nicely with a color palette made up of largely warm browns and yellows (see Fig. 7). The crystal that I eventually designed does not quite resemble barite in shape, for simplicity's sake, it is rendered with fewer facets and spikes, taking on an almost cylindrical silhouette. This crystal serves as a reminder to Steven of where his family has come from, and represents the Osage culture that is rapidly dying during the 1920s.

Once I had the design for Steven complete, I turned to what was probably the most time consuming piece for my project — a color script (Fig. 8, 9, & 10). A color script is used in animated films to explore the color palette of a film during different key scenes or moments in a film, using color and lighting to set the moods in given moments. For my color script, I drew forty different moments from the story, arranged in chronological order.



Each moment was drawn roughly, the goal being to examine color and lighting rather than line, shape, or expression. Not only did this piece firmly establish the color palette for the entire show, it also firmly established the story, and other key characters.

My third piece followed a more traditionally illustrative route (the final pieces are about half concept art and half traditional illustration). I was inspired by photos of fall foliage in Oklahoma, and wanted to create an illustration expressing the beauty of autumn, that



Fig. 8, 9, and 10

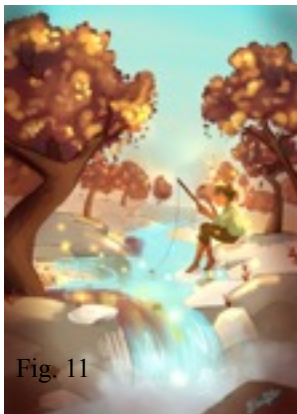


Fig. 11

communicated that warm, fall glow. I selected a triadic section of the color palette, working principally with purer hues of turquoise, maroon, and marigold. The piece is designed to capture a small moment of peace amidst the tumultuous times the rest of my project addresses (Fig 11).

Next, I had to design what other characters in the story were going

to look like. By the 1920s, a large portion of Osage County residents were in fact white, and I wanted my lineup of character designs to reflect that (Grann, 44). I created a lineup of characters of various ages, ethnicities, and financial classes, all using a more muted version of my original color palette, as I knew many of these designs could be used as background characters (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12

The goal was to be able to look at a character design and perceive something of that character's personality and story.

For the next set of pieces, I designed a single environment, a view of an Osage residence. I was fascinated by the idea that the Osage people were living in these extravagant

mansion in the middle of nowhere, essentially, and wanted to design a space that reflected this surprising opulence (Grann, 7). I then replicated the design three times over, and in each of the three versions I added lighting to reflect three different times of day — morning, afternoon, and night (Fig. 13, 14, & 15 respectively). The room is due east in orientation, giving clear, almost harsh morning light, a soft glow of afternoon light, and an ambient interior-lit evening light. This was an attempt to study lighting and the effect it can have on a given space, based on how it changes the color and mood of the room. These pieces were also an exercise in my perspective drawing, a very technical aspect of the visual arts that enables a space to appear believable as receding back in space. After



Fig. 13, 14, and 15

spending years studying organic spaces, I desired to practice rendering a more technical, geometric, artificial residence, and this project enabled that.

Turning back to the traditionally illustrative, I decided to create a mood piece that counter-balanced my autumn illustration. I also wanted to take the opportunity to convey Oklahoma weather and landscape, and the lighting bolt emerged as a visual form that both conveyed physical location (thunderstorms are quite common in Oklahoma), and represented the stormy, chaotic, and sorrowful events of the 1920s (Fig. 16). The lighting bolt in the finished image is representative both of the events of the time and a reflection of the inner turmoil Steve



Fig. 16

is experiencing in witnessing these events. I divided the composition evenly into thirds, as is typical of film shots, lending itself to the animation medium, despite being an illustration.

After creating all the above work, the goal of my visual work began to shift, resulting in three images that served a very different purpose. While I had created several concept art focused images, none of them really addressed any aspect of Osage history outside of the 1920s, and I still very much wanted to incorporate that. In addition, I had a growing curiosity for traditional illustration, as opposed to concept art. So I decided to create a series of three prints, which I initially imagined as postcard size, each highlighting different chapters of Osage history.

While there are eons of Osage history that are principally preserved by the Osage people via the oral tradition, I referenced Louis F Burns *A History of the Osage People* to be as concrete with dates as I possibly could. I had already read Burns' compendium during the research phase

of my project, as Burns is perhaps the only Osage historian who is in fact of Osage ancestry. I decided to create three images based on the periods of 1675 to 1803, 1803 to 1906, and 1906 to 1927.

Due to the very little amount of information that remains regarding the Osage people before their first contact with Europeans in 1675, it felt risky to try to create visual imagery representing a



Fig. 17

chapter whose narrative relies mostly on Osage legend and mythology, such as design, though interesting, would be conveying a mythology and culture rather than a chapter of history. I felt unprepared to create artwork communicating a culture that despite all my research, remained very distant in my attempt to understand it. So I began with 1675, creating a design that though it begins with the contact between Osage and Europeans, communicates that there is a rich, ancient culture that has thrived for centuries before European settlement, a culture that has meaning and significance and that due to injustice and prejudice, has been nearly lost to time (Burns, 177) (Fig. 17). The eagle, elk, and sun are all important in Osage culture and beliefs, and thus are featured prominently. the Missouri River guides the viewers' eye through the image, ending with the dark silhouette of incoming Western settlers, waving flags for France, Britain, and Spain, foreshadowing what is to come.

1803 kicks off the second design, as 1803 marks the Louisiana Purchase, a treaty that does not immediately affect the Osage people, but effectively puts their land under ownership of the United States, and enables the many atrocities that will befall the Osage People over the next century (Burns, 177). For the design of this postcard, I was thinking about how the Louisiana Purchase really marks an about face in Euro-American policy regarding the Osage people, and

an about-face in the fortunes of the Osage nation. Before 1803, the Osage Empire was actually at the height of its power, benefiting from trade relations with the French, and effectively dominating their neighboring Native American tribes. They were a force to be reckoned with before the United States took over (Burns, 140). When considering how to represent this visually, I again harkened back to the lighting bolt I had used in an earlier illustration, but this time



Fig. 18

applied it on a more metaphorical level. Throughout the 19th century, the Osage people were faced with an internal conflict as well as an external one, and that was the assimilation into Western culture. Do they as a nation make peace with the United States and assimilate with the settlers, accepting Christianity, or attempt to stem the tide and hold onto their traditional ways? This question of response saw a widespread identity crisis emerge amongst the Osage people (Grann, 44, 48-49, Burns, 196). I decided to represent this division by having the lightning bolt be representative of the Louisiana Purchase and Western Culture as a whole, striking clear through the Osage people, dividing them (Fig. 18). Using branches in the image lended to this feeling of a family being splintered in two. On the left side of the image, I drew Osage people in their more traditional garb and hairstyles, on the right, I drew Osage adopting Western style of dress and hair. I was careful to secure neither side seemed pleased with their decision, for there were no winners here, all suffered from injustice and abuse at the hands of several treaties with the U.S. over the 19th century (Burns, 148, 233). In the clouds above and the ground below, I drew various treaties, most notably the Louisiana Purchase, symbolic that these caused the division, but their presence in both directions implies no escape. In the background, one can see the



outlines of a map, and a path leading from Missouri to Oklahoma, implying the downsizing of Osage Territory and forced relocation.

For the third design, we begin in 1906, the year the U.S. Congress passed the Allotment Act, which gave designated areas of the Osage reservation to specific Osage members. This land included the abundance of oil that had been found on these allotments. While the passing of this act made the Osage people incredibly wealthy, it almost marked them as targets in the years to come, and signaled the beginning of widespread corruption and crime in Osage County,



Fig. 19

resulting in the murders around which so much of this project is centered (Burns, 440). The use of oil as an imagery for both wealth and death was interesting to me, so I used the path of an oil spill to both guide the composition, and to communicate the chaos this mineral brought to the Osage people, as the curve of the oil guides the viewer through piles of gold into flames, and finally, gravestones (Fig. 19). I was also sure to include Steven, thereby tying all three designs back into the narrative present in the rest of my work. The source of the oil spill is a shadowy figure in the back, a representation of William K. Hale, the only man convicted of the killings during the 1920s. I made his glasses intentionally opaque, in an attempt to make him even more impersonal and threatening, guarded and manipulative. News headlines tell more about the atrocities and chaos of the time, and a speeding 1920s vehicle in bright red shows the physical representation of the wealth briefly enjoyed by the Osage people.

All three designs get progressively darker chronologically, as the Osage people are treated with less and less respect and viewed as less and less human by the Euro-Americans who have brought them such suffering.

As I signed the last postcard design, I felt something akin to shock course through me. I knew this was the last visual piece I would be creating for the project, but it had been a part of my life and my creative practice for so long (over a year now), that I wasn't really sure how to conclude it. How does one walk away from a project that, despite its physical completion, still feels so far from an emotional and mental conclusion?

There is still a great deal about the Osage people and their story that I don't know or don't understand. But, like all people, I am limited by my own background, and my own story. All I can do is my very best to understand and encourage others to do the same. I set out with this project to solely further my own understanding. Now that's complete, I hope it becomes a way to share this story with the many other people in the world who are in complete ignorance of it, as I myself once was. I now hope that my work has an impact on others, and drives to research and try to understand as well. Perhaps this encouragement to know and understand will bring us one step closer to reconciliation between the white people and the Children of the Middle Waters.

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