



"Something to Crow About," oil, 40" x 60"

THE ARTS

A RICH PAST EMERGES IN THE PRESENT

Chuck Sabatino's luminous paintings of pueblo pottery and Plains Indian artifacts.

By Gussie Fauntleroy

As a kid he was always on the Indians' side, while his friends were cowboys brandishing toy guns. Now Chuck Sabatino focuses his lifelong respect and admiration for Native American cultures into masterfully rendered still life paintings featuring those cultures' artifacts and art.

In particular, historic and prehistoric southwest pueblo pottery provides Sabatino with beautifully symmetrical shapes, the smooth, cool texture of clay, an unending variety of designs, and a sense of time gone by—all elements which capture and hold his interest as a painter and a student of

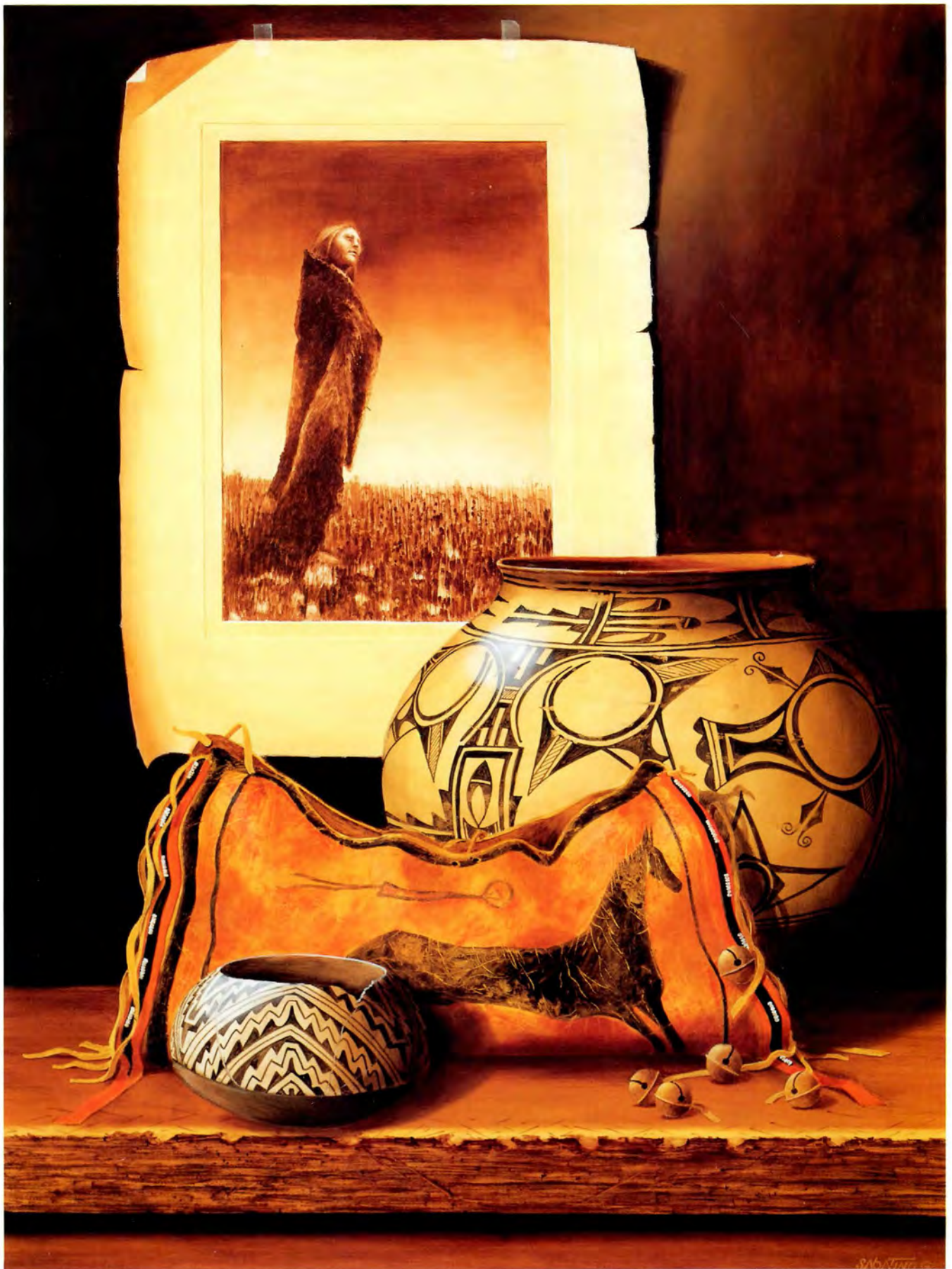
Native American history and culture.

In recent years he has begun expanding this visual vocabulary with artifacts from Plains Indian tribes and turn-of-the-century Edward Curtis photographs. The results are warmly hued, finely detailed images that bring to life a solid sense of the past and the rich cultures at the heart of his chosen subject.

In a way, Sabatino has come full circle with his art. As a boy in New York City he spent hours at the Museum of the North American Indian, enthralled with the artifacts he saw and imagining the life that

went with them. He also constantly drew and painted, producing his first still life in eighth grade. Formal art training was gained at New York's School of Cartoonists and Illustrators (later known as the School of Visual Arts), where he prepared for a career in the advertising field.

During almost 30 years as an award-winning art director and advertising executive, Sabatino continued painting on his own as well. In the evening and on weekends, he also created intricate waterfowl carvings in basswood, earning acclaim as U.S. National Champion bird carver in the 1980s. Mean-



"Crying to the Spirits II," oil, 40" × 30"



"Nez Perce Beaded Dress," oil, 60" × 42"



"Cheyenne Warrior," oil, 30" × 48"

while, advertising was opening doors to his current artistic interest by taking him to the southwest several times a year.

As art director, producer, and senior vice president of Saatchi & Saatchi Compton, Sabatino produced all of American Motors' Jeep commercials for 18 years. In the process he scouted such sites as Monument valley, as well as a Sonoran desert area very near his present home in north Scottsdale, Arizona, for settings to shoot television ads. With every trip, his love of the west and the southwest—and of Indian art and artifacts—grew.

When he retired in 1988, the artist and his wife moved to a home they had built among desert boulders, and Sabatino turned his attention to painting. Soon he was creating small still life images of Native American objects, especially old pueblo pottery. Every piece sold right away, and the market began requesting larger works.

Over the years Sabatino has acquired an extensive personal collection of pottery from the pueblos of New Mexico and Arizona, which he combines in various groupings for his paintings. He has studied the history of pottery making at such pueblos as Zuni, Acoma, Santo Domingo, Cochiti, San Ildefonso, and Santa Clara. And to increase his understanding of this centuries-old craft, he has learned to build and paint hand-coiled pottery himself.



Today, his bright, roomy studio is almost always the site of two or three paintings in progress. He mixes his own materials and applies layers of paint in very thin oil glazes. This painstaking technique, along with a chiaroscuro-style emphasis on light and shadow, yields a rich luminosity—almost as though the paintings are lit from within. At the same time, a warm palette of amber, gold, and browns contributes to a sense of timelessness well suited to the subject.

"All the west is those colors. It's the

warmth of this part of the country, and I'm trying to bring that out," the artist observes. Then he chuckles and adds, "Friends of mine, who are also artists, sometimes tease me and give me a tube of blue or green paint. I use it for beads."

Indeed, Sabatino has become adept at depicting tiny beads as he increasingly adds artifacts and objects from Plains Indian culture to his compositions, including beaded moccasins, arrow bags, war shirts, dresses, and painted shields. These provide a diversity of texture, color, and visual and historical interest, and offer fresh new challenges for the artist.

"I don't want my work to be photo-realism—I always want people to see my hand in it," Sabatino reflects. "But I always want it to be better."

Not so perfect that it appears to be a photo, yet with so much depth, solidity and realism that—as a collector recently told the artist—it almost seems you could toss your car keys into the pueblo bowl.

Chuck Sabatino's paintings are represented by McLarry Fine Art, 225 Canyon Road. Hours: 10:00-5:00 Monday-Saturday and 11:00-4:00 Sunday. (505) 988-1161 or 1-877-983-2123. www.mclarryfineart.com. A show featuring his work takes place August 10-September 28, with an artist's reception from 5:00-7:00 August 10th.