

CHUCK SABATINO

'I JUST LOVE TO PAINT'

By Myrna Zanetell

Greek sculpture, Chinese silk paintings, and even the lush oils of the Renaissance are examples of enduring art forms that gave permanence to the creative zenith reached by artists of those cultures. Often considered to be unique to a specific time and place, on occasion such masterworks are given new life through modern reinterpretations. Such is the case with the luminous Southwestern still life paintings of Arizona artist Chuck Sabatino, paintings that preserve and honor one artistic tradition while creating another.

Having been born and raised in the Bronx borough of New York City, Sabatino might be expected to create still lifes that depict classic arrangements of fruit and flowers rather than Southwestern pottery and other Native American artifacts. This dichotomy is best explained in light of Sabatino's lifelong passion for the West.

"As a kid, I was always going to Western movies, and then my friends and I would come home to recreate the adventures we saw on the screen," Sabatino says. "When I wasn't acting out these sagas, I was drawing them. In fact, my sister recently sent me a little line drawing of a stagecoach going over a cliff that I must have done when I was about 12 or 13." As Sabatino matured, he exchanged the games of cowboys and Indians for weekly visits to the Museum of the American Indian in Manhattan. It was there that he gained a deeper knowledge of art and the Native American



Blackfoot All Brave Dog Society Headdress, oil, 40" by 16"

"Headdresses like this were worn in an all brave dog society dance in which two members designated as 'bear braves' imitated the motions and growling of bears."



Arapaho Beaded Bag Ca. 1890 & Curtis Photo Canyon De Chelly, oil, 30" by 40"

"This painting features my favorite Curtis photo. I've been told that the second rider from the right is Curtis' daughter, Florence."

culture by immersing himself in the museum's profuse collection of pottery, weavings, baskets, and other Southwestern artifacts.

Hoping to combine his passion for art with practical career training, Sabatino enrolled in New York's School of Cartoonists and Illustrators (now the School for Visual Arts), where he majored in advertising and graphic design. Following his graduation, Sabatino was hired as an art director for a large New York ad agency. Once the head of the agency realized that Sabatino's talents lay in the more visual end of the business, he promoted him to the position of TV Producer/Director.

In his new role, Sabatino's first big account was American Motors, and he produced commercials for Jeep, an assignment that challenged his creative imagination for the next 18 years. Location shots for those com-

mercials frequently took Sabatino into the Red Rock country of northern Arizona, where the settings he encountered were even more dramatic than those he remembered from the movies of his youth. Not only were those locations visually appealing, they also were smack dab in the heart of Indian country.

"It was déjà vu," Sabatino says. "Suddenly, I was surrounded by Native American pottery and artifacts similar to the ones I had seen in museums. Like a kid in a candy store, I began to collect pottery and baskets, and the things I couldn't afford, I learned to make myself. I studied books on how the Indians tanned leather, did beading and quill work, and crafted arrowheads."

Sabatino later also tried his hand at learning the centuries-old technique of making hand-coiled pottery. "If you paint a subject, you ought to

know what the artist went through to make it," he says. "What I found out is that it's incredibly difficult to make a good pot, even using modern equipment. This gives me profound respect for artists who used little more than sticks and rocks to achieve such marvelous shapes."

In 1988, Sabatino retired from advertising and at last was free to pursue his desire to paint fine art. He and his wife Millie moved to Scottsdale, Arizona, where they set up housekeeping in a traditional adobe home with a large attached studio area. With a wealth of subjects to choose from, he experimented with everything from landscapes to cowboys herding cattle. What sold best and pleased him most, however, were still life groupings of Native American pottery. With that as his focus, Sabatino began to haunt auctions and antique shows, venues



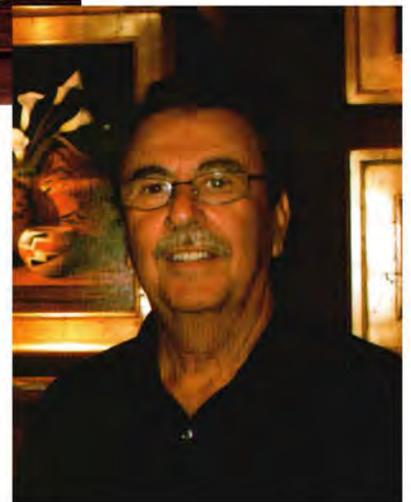
*Southern Cheyenne Dress,
oil, 60" by 42"*

"For every major show, I paint a large painting of a dress or a war shirt. This dress has a nice concho belt."

where he could physically hold the pots and study the work in intimate detail. Before long, not only was he able to identify the unique designs of Acoma, Zuni, Santa Domingo, and San Ildefonso pottery by sight, he also began to develop a feel for which vessels complemented one another both in terms of design and aesthetic spirit.

"When creating a composition, I almost always combine pots from several pueblos," Sabatino says. "The only exception is the dramatic black ware from the Santa Clara pueblo, which I feel needs to stand alone." He is particularly drawn to ancient pieces such as those made by Anasazi (from 1100 to 1300 AD) and those known in the trade as "antique," any made prior to 1920. Sabatino says he especially loves those that depict animals and birds.

Wanting a change of pace from painting only pottery, Sabatino began to





Dancing To Restore An Eclipsed Moon, oil, 30" by 48"

"This Curtis photo always intrigued me. It is thought that an eclipse is the result of an attempt of some creature in the sky to swallow the luminary."

expand his compositions by adding artifacts such as moccasins, tobacco bags, shirts, dresses, and even war bonnets. "The beading and feathers on these pieces not only allow me to introduce touches of color but the contrasts of rough rawhide and pottery against the smooth beads opened a whole new area of design in working out textures and composition," he says. "At times I may put in a replica of one of the Curtis photographs and most recently I've included Indian ledger-book drawings. Made with crayon in small books, these document activities such as hunting or battles.

"Although the Indians fashioned many items for personal use, the coming of the railroad had a major influence on Native American artwork. Once they realized that outsiders valued these things, the Indians began to produce pottery, blankets, and baskets for sale to the tourists,

and designs became more intricate as they competed for sales. In fact, I've heard it said that the Indian women were some of this country's first abstract artists."

Responding to Millie's suggestion, Sabatino varied his compositions even further by adding flowers. "I loved the idea, but I confine my choices to white varieties such as calla lilies, star lilies, and even orchids," he says. "Others add too much color. I still love the warmth and glow of the earth-tone palette I use, so I try not to stray too far from that."

Using black and rich brown backgrounds as a constant, Sabatino says, "I find that using these dark colors as negative space really brings out the details on the shirts and beaded bags, giving these items a nice glow. This coloration is reminiscent of Rembrandt's style, and even now I love David Leffel's work because it

has that same classic look."

While his paintings have earned Sabatino a myriad of awards, so have his endeavors with another medium. Before turning to fine art, he carved birds, specializing in crafting lifelike shore birds and birds of prey out of basswood. That work garnered him First Place and Best of Show awards in the U.S. National Decoy Show in 1980 and 1981.

Sabatino's career seems to have hit full stride. Glowing from within, much like his paintings, he says, "I just love to paint. I'm in the studio by 8:30 almost every day, and I work until late afternoon." That work ethic, combined with the joy of new discoveries, has made Sabatino one of the West's most sought after and prolific still life painters. 

Myrna Zanetell is a writer living in El Paso, Texas.