
EXHIBIT PREVIEW

The Hollywood Indian: An exhibit of movie posters shows how filmmakers molded images of American Indians that linger to this day

By Bob Keefer

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Hollywood didn't actually create the American Indian, but in some ways it might as well have.

That, at any rate, is the argument of Rennard Strickland, a legal scholar and art collector of Cherokee and Osage heritage who curated "Marquee Massacres," an exhibit of Hollywood movie posters about Indians that opens Friday at the Hult Center's Jacobs Gallery.

In the past century, he argues, Hollywood's Indians have had a profound influence on the lives of real Indians. That's because the movie version has been the main source of information, he says, for the non-Indian lawmakers who have decided the fate of real indigenous people.

Strickland is no stranger to either art or law. He teaches at the University of Oregon School of Law, focusing on Native American law. He collects art and has curated museum exhibits that have traveled the country.

He was co-curator of "Shared Visions," an exhibit of Indian art that originated at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Ariz., and later traveled to the Portland Art Museum.

"Very much of what we do with regard to Indians grows out of how Indians are portrayed in the media," he says. "Most people's image of the Indian is related to what one sees on the screen, whether in TV or movies. And most decisions (about Indians' lives) are made, under the trust relationship, not by Indians themselves but by non-Indians."

Strickland began collecting Indian movie posters 25 years ago, about the same time he began collecting posters about law. He can rattle off the names of movies about Indians with ease, from the widely known, such as "Dances With Wolves," to the obscure. (He also loves movies about law: The most popular, he notes, is "To Kill a Mockingbird.")

"These movie posters represent the ideas of Indians that society has," he says. "We have worked to find posters that are, from an artistic and esthetic point of view, interesting."

The exhibit will contain about 60 posters and smaller lobby cards used to advertise movies, and includes the earliest surviving poster for a movie about Indians, "Doctor Denton's Indians," which was made in 1900. The movie no longer exists, Strickland says. "All we have are some advertisements and the posters."

A huge influence on our perception of Indians was moviemaker John Ford. He once quipped he had killed more Indians than the Seventh Cavalry.

“Ford depicted Indians generally as tragic figures on their way to extinction,” Strickland says. “Dangerous, vicious people who were savage primitives.”

Delmer Daves' 1950 “Broken Arrow,” with Jimmy Stewart as an Indian agent, marked a turning point in Hollywood's depiction of Indians, Strickland says.

Stewart was actually sympathetic to the Apaches: “I learned something that day,” he says in the film. “Apache women cried over their sons.”

“Dances With Wolves” was the first film primarily about Indians to win an Oscar. It helped introduce an era, flourishing in the 1980s and '90s, Strickland says, in which the noble savage returned to the screen in the guise of New Age savior.

The height of this romantic view came in 1995 with Disney's “Pocahontas,” Strickland says.

In his 1997 book “Tonto's Revenge,” Strickland traces a number of misconceptions typical to the Hollywood version of Indian reality. For example:

- That Apaches were the most common Indians. In fact, he says, Cherokee and Navajo Indians make up about 20 percent of the Indian population of the United States.
- That no Indian woman who marries a white man ever lives long. That common plot convention, Strickland says, is because moviemakers didn't think the public was ready to accept interracial marriage.

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