

Bold designs, painted faces, and resplendent costumes give K. Henderson's Native American portraits an instantaneous appeal, but the feature that proves most striking is the one that is the most subtle: the eyes. "The eyes are the most important part of my paintings," Henderson says. "The eyes are what I paint first, then I work my way out from there." As she paints, Henderson says it seems like a real person springs to life in the pigment under the brush, complete with emotions and a point of view. "Even though I've got the painting planned out and I know what the finished piece is going to look like in general," she says, "I don't know how it's going to end. I don't have a preconceived idea of what the emotion on the face is going to look like because it develops as I paint."



Such creative spontaneity is what breathes life into her subjects and empowers her paintings. It's one of the reasons Henderson chooses to paint formal portraits rather than action scenes. "I like to have the viewer be able to look the person in the eyes and kind of sense what they're feeling."

Henderson is inspired by the historical accuracy of western explorer-painters such as Catlin and Karl Bodmer, who used their artistic skills to record the new people and scenes that they encountered on the vast western frontier in the 1800s. Like them, Henderson paints Native Americans from the 19th century and

relies on extensive research to ensure that she authentically depicts the jewelry, ceremonial costumes, and items such as shields and rattles that would have been used by her subjects. Artistically and technically, Henderson has been inspired by French academic painter Adolphe William Bouguereau and the Renaissance portrait painters. In particular, she strives to achieve the flesh tones and smooth glossy finish of Bouguereau, and she works with classical-style under painting and layered colors in the tradition of the Renaissance painters.

Frequently Henderson's works depict faces painted with striking designs and colors. A warrior may have a face painted white with red streaks of tears. Another may wear a painted veil of blue or red and yet another may wear blue and white stripes for a ceremony. The Plains Indians painted their faces one way going into battle, but before returning to the village they would repaint their faces so the spirits of the dead people would not follow them back. "There were some face paintings that were specific battle paintings, like the line from the eye down the cheek, which was a tear for those warriors who would fall during the battle," says Henderson. "If a hand was painted on the face or the body or on a cloak or shirt or even on the horse, it was a warrior's mark--a coup mark--that showed he had touched an enemy during battle. And touching an enemy was actually considered more brave than killing an enemy."

Henderson's remarkable sense of style and attention to detail have made her one of the most collected contemporary artists of our time.