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## PRESS RELEASE

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A unique and exceptional collection of 7 works by Frank Overton Colbert (1895-1953)  
“The Redskin of Montparnasse”  
From an American collection  
will be sold at auction in Paris at Hôtel Drouot on 18 May 2018

### Frank Overton Colbert’s work, a moment in the History of American Art

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Frank Overton Colbert “Immortalising the Art of His Fathers”, in *World’s News*, 16 February, 1924

Frank Overton Colbert was a major artist of American art in the early 1920s. The first Indian to exhibit in New York, this Chickasaw painter, celebrated by the critics of the time, told Indian myths and legends through his paintbrush. He settled in Paris in 1923, frequenting Bohemian Paris where he was known as the “Redskin of Montparnasse”. His whirlwind career, which was followed by serious depression in 1926, left just a handful of works, only 70 of which are currently catalogued and 5 stored in public collections in the United States. On 18 May, we will have the honour of presenting a collection of 7 exceptional works, almost all of which were exhibited at the famous Montross Gallery and have not been shown to the public for 55 years.



Frank Overton Colbert, at the Academy of Fine Arts of New York, in *The Evening Star*, 19 March, 1921.

## Rediscovering a major artist

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Frank Overton Colbert

In November 2017, ADER NORDMANN offered a Frank Overton Colbert painting for auction for the first time. Discovered by chance, we did not know who he was nor what he had created. We were astounded by this canvas with an impressive atmosphere, featuring multiple small strokes, depicting a scaffold burial typical of the North American Indians and protected by an owl hidden in a tree. There was just one single clue; the back of this painting had a label from an exhibition in 1921 at the Montross Gallery in New York. After detailed research and through our contacts in the United States, we understood the importance of this artist in the New York artistic community of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, eager to return to their roots.

Born in 1895, Frank Overton Redfeather Colbert was descended from a long line of Chickasaw Indian chiefs and belonged to one of the oldest families in the United States. Colbert spent his childhood in Oklahoma. After the First World War, he settled in Greenwich Village, a bastion of artistic culture and studied at the School of Applied Arts in New York at the same time as William Gropper. In 1921, the artist joined the Inje-Inje movement and exhibited at the famous Montross Gallery<sup>1</sup>. His many exhibitions in New York and particularly at the Whitney Studio Club brought immediate acclaim for his works. In 1923, he settled on the Left Bank in Paris with his wife to study at the School of Fine Arts. In the same year, he exhibited our painting *The Undersea God* at the Salon d'Automne, then *The Indian* at the Salon des Indépendants in 1926. Nicknamed the “Redskin of Montparnasse” and a regular at cafés, he frequented the Parisian artistic community and usually drew on the wrapping paper that he collected from butcher shops<sup>2</sup>. Suffering from depression, he returned to the United States in 1926. In 1941, suffering from a mental illness, he was hospitalised in Colorado where he died on 20 March 1953. Ten years after his death, a retrospective exhibition was held at the Paula Insel Gallery in New York. According to recent research by Brian Hearn, only 5 works by Colbert are today stored in public collections in the United States<sup>3</sup>, and only 70 works are catalogued and documented.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1921, Frank Overton Colbert exhibited twice at the Montross Gallery. In 1923, his third exhibition was entitled *Indian Folk Lore Pictures*. These three exhibitions would be promoted by many journalists of the time.

<sup>2</sup> Benezit, E. “Colbert, François Overton Redfeather,” *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, etc.* Paris, 2015, Oxford Art Online.

<sup>3</sup> Four works are stored at the Oklahoma Historical Society (donations from his ex-wife in the late 60s) and the fifth is at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma. (Ref. Brian Hearn, *Art historical problems of research and recovery: Frank Overton Colbert, Chickasaw modernist painter*, December 8, 2015).



## Between Dadaism and Primitivism, the Inje-Inje movement

Colbert's involvement in the Inje-Inje movement was a springboard for the dissemination of his works. Created in 1920 by Holger Cahill<sup>4</sup>, this movement combines aspects of Dadaism, primitivism and the search for beauty<sup>5</sup>. Inspiration for the name comes from an Indian tribe based in the region of the Amazon and the Andes, which was so "primitive" that its oral language consisted of just two words: Inje-Inje<sup>6</sup>. This tribe communicated solely with gestures. Cahill wanted to return the arts to a comparable simplicity and discover basic and most direct forms of human expression<sup>7</sup>. He recruited a small number of artists including Mark Tobey, Alfred Maurer, William Gropper, John Sloan and the poets Malcom Cowley and Orrick Johns. Inje-Inje maintained a very close relationship with the growing interest in the primitive arts in the early decades of the 20th century and Colbert's presence, due to his identity, gave it immediate meaning. It is also said that he was the first Indian artist to exhibit in New York<sup>8</sup>.



*Indian, circa 1921*  
Oil on canvas board



*Monwu, circa 1921*  
Gouache



*Monwu, Hopi Kachinas:*  
*Drawn by Native Artists, p. 79.*

The works to be sold at auction on 18 May reflect his colourful palette, his pointillist technique, his dynamic symmetry and his steady stroke but above all they illustrate the Indian myths and legends with which Frank Overton Colbert was connected. Having spent his youth travelling among the tribal Native American communities from Mexico to Alaska, the artist seized upon their intangible cultural heritage. Most of the titles of Colbert's work relate to the "Gods" or the spirits of the many Native American tribes: *The Cactus and the Rain God*, or *Monwu*, Hopi Kachina.

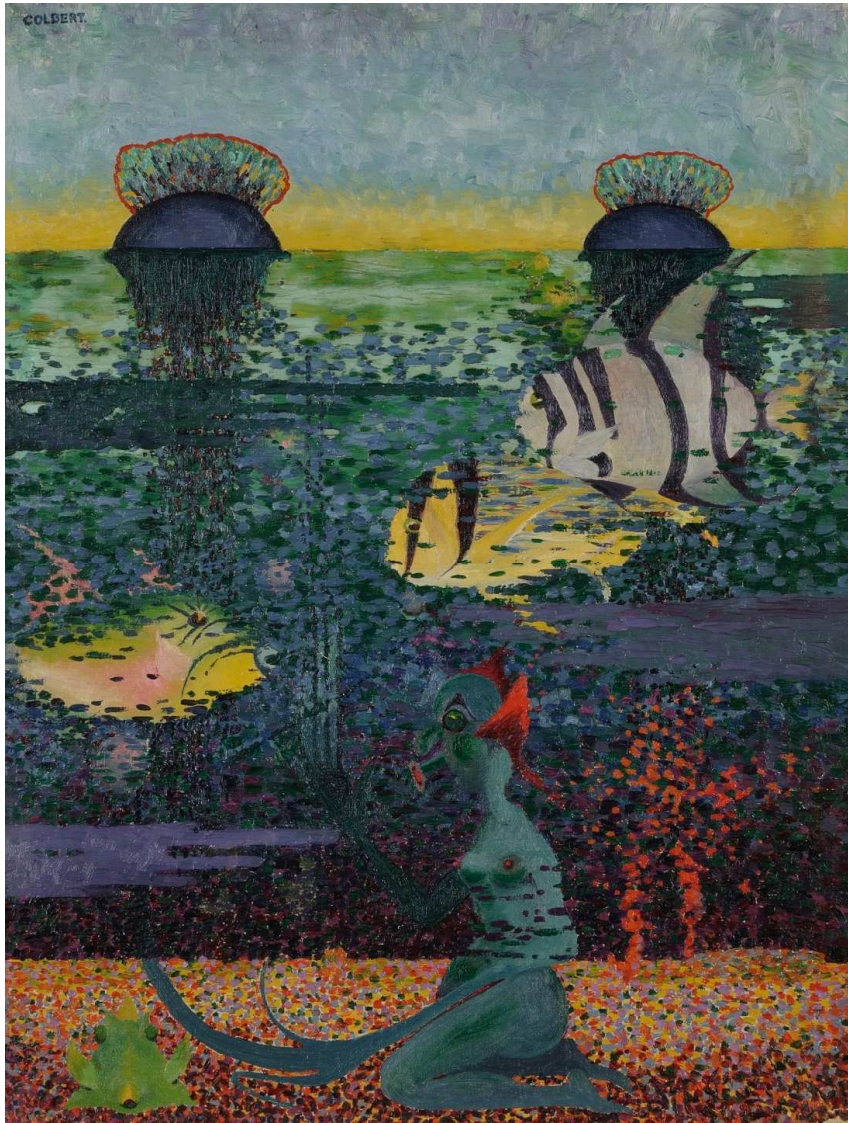
<sup>4</sup> Holger Cahill is known for having organised the first exhibition of American folk art in 1920 at the Newark Museum, New Jersey.

<sup>5</sup> The Inje-Inje movement clearly led to the foundation of the New York Dada magazine the following year by Duchamp, Man Ray, Hartley, Arensberg... (Ref. Ruben Fernandez Abella, *Dada/USA. Connections between the Dada movement and eight American fiction writers*, Doctoral Thesis, Universidad de la Rioja, 2016, p. 39.)

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Holger Cahill, Columbia Oral History Programme, 1957.

<sup>7</sup> John I.H. Baur, *The Machine and the subconscious: Dada in America*, Magazine of Art, vol. 44, no. 6, October, 1951, p. 233-37. Contained in Alan W. Moore, *Holger Cahill's Inje-Inje: The Story of a Modernist Primitivism*, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> According to Debora Rindge, Ph.D., Art Historian.



*The Undersea God*, circa 1921  
Oil on canvas board

Brian Hearn<sup>9</sup>, recently found direct parallels between the Kachinas painted by Colbert and those reproduced in the work by Jesse Walter Fewkes<sup>10</sup>. Wanting to document the practices of the Hopi religion and the Katchina cult, Brian Hearn made friends with several members of the tribe who he paid to make watercolours of Kachinas, which was forbidden by the Hopis. These watercolours were published in *Hopi Kachinas: drawn by Native Artists* in 1887<sup>11</sup>. After looking through this publication, we found *Monwu*, the position and clothing of which are very similar (plate reproduced). Colbert treats *Monwu* in a much more stylistic way. Here he combines primitivism and modernism.

Told by his paintbrush, *The Undersea God* illustrates the Inuit myth of Sedna, a beautiful young woman living alone with her father who was seduced by a shaman, or in other versions by a fulmar, a birdman or a dog. She travelled to a distant island with her husband, but her father heard her crying across the sea; his daughter was being subjected to the worst possible treatment. He left to find her and returned to sea with her. Her furious husband, who had supernatural powers, ordered the sea to unleash its power. Seeing death approaching, the father sacrificed Sedna by throwing her into the sea. But she clutched at the boat so her father took his oar and struck her fingers, frozen by the cold. Her fingers broke and fell into the water, becoming the fish of the ocean. But Sedna held on even more tightly, her father struck her again and the frozen hands of the beautiful young woman fell into the water and became the marine mammals. Before she disappeared completely beneath the waves, her father put one of her eyes out with his oar. Sedna, as can be seen in our painting, sank to the bottom of the ocean where she lives as a goddess, similar to the mermaids. She is depicted on her knees, arms ending in long tentacles and her single eye watching us. Surrounding her are the fish and marine creatures born of her fingers and hands.

In *The Origin of Birds*, Colbert celebrates the birds that play a wide variety of roles in Native American mythology. They are often messengers of the Creator, or between humans and the spirit world.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Hearn, *Art historical problems of research and recovery: Frank Overton Colbert, Chickasaw modernist painter*, December 8, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1880s, Fewkes conducted the first archaeological and ethnographical study of the Pueblo cultures of south-western America.

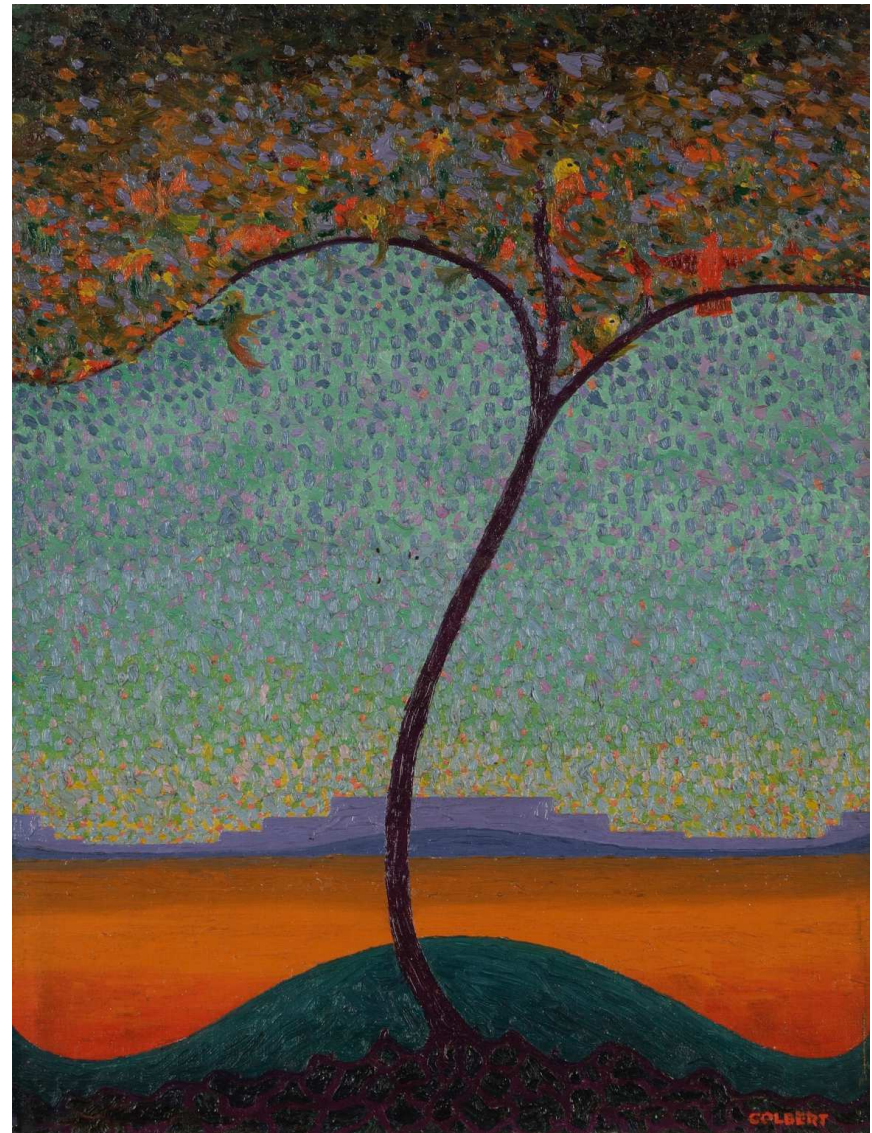
<sup>11</sup> Bureau of American Ethnology, Jesse Walter Fewkes and John G. Bourke. *Hopi Kachinas: Drawn by Native Artists*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1887).



The famous William F. Cody, known as Buffalo Bill who showed great interest in Colbert sums up his philosophy and the duality of this unique artist quite well: “Red Feather, you dip your brush in the rainbow and paint the Indian from the soul of all the generations of Indians, with the philosophy and precision of European thought. In your art you belong to the poet with the painter’s eye for colour and arrangement. You must be an Indian first and last, however well you become educated.”

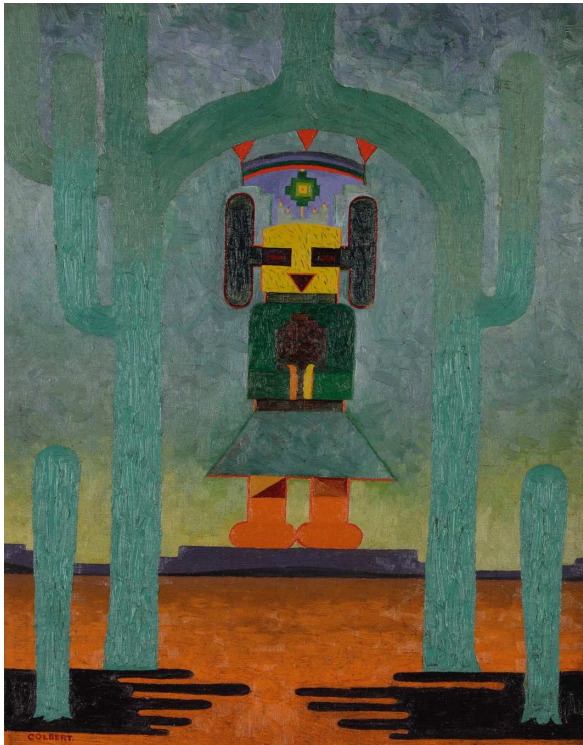


*The Origin of Design*, circa 1921  
Oil on canvas board

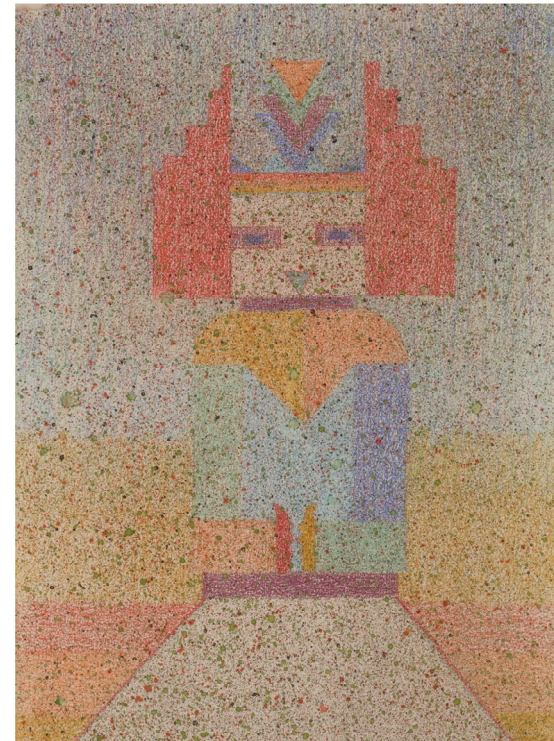


*The Origin of Birds*, circa 1921  
Oil on canvas board





*The Rain God and Cactus, circa 1921-23*  
Oil on canvas board



*Untitled, circa 1921-23*  
Watercolour

The sale will be held on 18 May at 2.00 pm at Hôtel Drouot, Room 6.

Estimates for the works range from €6,000 to €8,000 for the watercolour, €10,000 to €12,000 for the gouache and €12,000 to €15,000 for the oils.

Exhibitions:

Thursday 17 May from 11.00 am to 9.00 pm

Friday 18 May from 11.00 am to 12.00 pm

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