



**Sonny and Lisa Moeckel, Contemporary Portrait Painters
and 2024 Spring Best of the Northwest show's Cultural Connection artists**



Sonny and Lisa met at an art exhibit in Spokane. On their first date they jointly created a painting; the rest is history.

This began the story of Sonny and Lisa Moeckel who currently reside in Spokane, WA. They paint together, giving us powerful works which reflect their tribal traditions and ancestry. The contemporary portrait painters now spend all their free time painting together.

Lisa, who is part Sioux, was encouraged by her grandmother and started drawing and painting at age 2. Her grandmother was very passionate about her indigenous culture and Lisa always wanted to pursue art to honor her grandmother's legacy. Lisa's early artwork started primarily with drawing, often with colored pencils and continued

Sonny is Navajo and Jicarilla Apache, growing up on a Navajo reservation in Arizona. The Navajo Tribe has always been adamant about preserving their culture, traditions and language; Sonny spoke Navajo before he spoke English. Navajo remains the primary language used by his family – parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents and is taught in schools within the Navajo Nation. As many know, during WW2 the Navajo Code Talkers, an elite group within the US Marines, created a code based on the complex, unwritten Navajo language. This code was successfully used during the war and as of the end of that war was never broken.

Sonny's early life was influenced by many artists in his family. Two uncles were painters. His grandmother wove intricate and colorful Navajo rugs, never writing down the patterns but keeping the complex designs in her head. Others made jewelry. Because there were not many employment opportunities on the Reservation where Sonny grew up, many in his family created artworks which they sold at the nearest trading post.

Sonny has experimented with most types of mediums and had one of his early paintings shown at the Heard Museum in Phoenix AZ when he was only 13.

Sonny and Lisa both attended Whitworth University. Since the two met they have painted together almost exclusively and primarily with oils though since the birth of their daughter they have begun experimenting with acrylics. Ninety percent of each work is done together at the same time on the same canvas. Certain parts they do independently – one will step back and let the other do their thing and then switch roles. Sonny is more abstract while Lisa started out with more realism. Lisa says she focuses more on details while Sonny sees the big picture and then they combine their styles.

Lisa explained that this collaboration has worked very well for them, and they do a lot of indigenous paintings – chiefs, warriors and others. Many paintings aren't of any specific person but just the essence and likeness of them, the spirit of the indigenous people. Their works express the balance between reality and distortion to

evoke human emotion and vulnerability. They usually start with the abstract part first – the big brush strokes. Then they step back and begin to see the direction the painting will go.

Sonny added that when you see their paintings in person you will see hundreds if not thousands of paint lines – the result of two people painting at the same time. He says he always tells people that they have such an advantage because they make such a great team.

When asked what motivates or inspires them to start a painting the answer was simple. First and foremost, it is their 11-month-old daughter Sunshine. Next, Lisa explains, they just start painting, throw some brush strokes and color on canvas then just let it speak to them and see where it takes them. It is hard to come up with a collective vision beforehand so they just see where the paint takes them. Being married, they have a lot of personal attachment to each other so often the emotions they are feeling come out in their work.

Sonny continued that the only thing they really discuss before each painting is the color scheme and because they have been doing this for so many years he likens it to making bread. You make the bread for so many years, develop and tweak the recipe and come up with something that is perfect and becomes second nature. They have developed this chemistry and system of painting together that has taken years to perfect.

Their Tribal ancestry is a strong influence because it is so personal for both of them. People looking at their works will feel the emotion in their paintings, even bringing a tear to the eye.

Lisa adds that they always want to keep their work relevant, not just of long-ago ancestors from the 1800s but more contemporary abstracts to remind people that we, the indigenous peoples are still here today and we are still very relevant.

The last question to them was will your daughter learn the Navajo language. As expected, the answer was a firm YES!

You can learn more about them and see their work at their website <https://www.moeckelstudio.com/>

Article written in April 2024 by NWAA board member, Marti Castle