

# **R. C. GORMAN**

**1931 - 2005**

## **American Artist**

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**The Art Heritage Program's R. C. Gorman unit meets the following Colorado Department of Education-Visual Arts Standards (2009)**

- 1. Observe and Learn to Comprehend**
- 2. Envision and Critique to Transfer**
- 3. Invent and Discover to Create**
- 4. Reflect and Connect to Transfer**



### **LEARNING TARGET:**

- I know two important facts about the artist R. C. Gorman.**
- I can create a print.**

### **SETTING THE SCENE**

R. C. Gorman is part of the "Dineh" or "the people" as the Navajo call themselves. The Dinétah or Navajo Nation is the largest Indian tribe in the United States. The word "Navajo" comes from the Spanish and refers to a pueblo or village. Gorman's ancestors were masters of the traditional Navajo arts of weaving, pottery, silversmithing and the sand paintings that were part of their religious rites. Gorman was unusual in that he became an expressive painter and lithographer - both non-traditional Navajo arts.

Gorman was raised on the Navajo reservation in Arizona. The family hogan had no running water or electricity. He did not have store-bought toys to play with. From an early age, he was expected to contribute to the survival of the family group. Any toys or playthings he had were fashioned from sticks, pieces of junk and other things he could find. He used his imagination to turn these into something fun. What could have been considered a childhood of poverty and deprivation was

actually one of nurture for Gorman. While there may not have been enough food to go around, there was always someone who cared about and loved him.

Many Navajo are considered private, reluctant to share their feelings with outsiders. Gorman is an exception to this cultural stereotype. He was not shy and was very demonstrative about his feelings. He enjoyed attention from others and liked to paint while listening to "wild" Mexican music.

Traditional Navajo society is built around a matriarchic clan system. The most influential people in Gorman's life were women. Gorman put it more succinctly, "...The women in my life are my charcoal. They are soft and strong." Almost all of his artwork has woman subjects although, ironically, most of the models he uses are not Navajo. He says he looks for interesting faces and bone structure. Many of his models have been Oriental, Hispanic or racial mixtures.

## R. C. Gorman: A Self-Portrait

*In his own words, this well-loved contemporary artist gives us a sketch of his work and his life*

**By Susan Lawrence Rich**

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*I called R. C. Gorman in late December to set up a phone interview for this article. We settled on January 4 at 10 a.m. California time; 11 a.m. his time, New Mexico time. I put down the receiver as his parting comment filtered through my good-bye to him: "We'll go out to lunch," he said. Or had he? No. Had I heard him right? Did he think I was going to show up in New Mexico? Should I call him back to clarify? He must have known it was to be a phone interview; we'd discussed the time difference. It would be too embarrassing to call back. No, I just had misheard him.*

*January 4 arrived. Downstairs, my husband was in charge of a tape recorder rigged up to the phone in the kitchen. While feeding the baby, to keep her occupied, he was to start recording when Gorman got on the line, turn the tape over when a half hour had passed and turn it off when I'd finished the interview.*

*I was upstairs on the bed surrounded by pens, pencils, notes on Gorman and pads of paper. At precisely 10 a.m., I punched the numbers of Gorman's private line. "It's ringing," I yelled down to my husband. Someone in New Mexico answered. This someone informed me that Gorman was not quite home yet, but he was expected at any minute; he had an 11 a.m. luncheon date. I responded that I was that date, but I wouldn't be coming for lunch.*

*A half hour later, with baby still in the high chair and husband still standing by the tape recorder, I phoned again. We had a laugh about our scheduling mix-up. And for the next 45 minutes, with muted cooing and gurgling from downstairs, I conversed with R. C. Gorman. When I'd finished, I regretted missing lunch with the man.*

*Like his celebrated Navaho women, Gorman is clear, simple and colorful. I wanted him to appear that way in the article. I decided to create a portrait of the artist painted only with his words. What follows is a selection of observations by R. C. Gorman about his work and his life.*

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"The R is for Rudolph, the C is for Carl, but I'm not a Rudolph Carl type.

I was born in Chinle, Arizona, on a Navaho reservation in 1931, July 26. I started kindergarten in Chinle. My first art effort in school was a drawing of a naked woman. I got a whipping from my teacher and from my mother.

After I'd grown to be a little older, my parents sent me away to school. It was World War II, my family was working and it was convenient for them to send me off. I went to a Catholic boarding school. I was about nine, and I often ate prune sandwiches. While nuns were looking the other way, I'd mash up some prunes with a fork, spread the mixture between two pieces of bread, and stick it in my shirt to eat later during chapel. I graduated from a Presbyterian boarding school in Ganado, Arizona. My teachers encouraged my art in Ganado, but one named Jenny Louis Linda, she was the most helpful. She let me do anything I wanted.

I've been doing artwork since I was three. I used to use whatever was at hand. I drew in sand and mud and on rocks. I used to herd sheep with my aunts, and they showed me how to work in clay. Those were my first lessons in sculpture. My first subjects were Mickey Mouse, Shirley Temple and automobiles. That's what I liked.

For inspiration, I read a lot. I get involved with the people I'm reading about, the character, not a particular author. Graphically, I'm inspired by a lot of people and some galleries and museums. There's a museum in southern France, in Antibes, a Picasso museum. It's my favorite museum in the world. Picasso inspires me to try to work more in ceramics. I like to look at his work there.

In contemporary work, I like the Mexican artists. I'm greatly influenced by the galleries and museums in Mexico City. The artists deal with the same subject I do: their own people. I like Rivera, Orozco, Tamayo, Siqueiros. The color is too intense for words.

You know what else helps my creativity? Eating. People give me parties. Someone gave me a party in Rome. They had the best pasta, with finely ground salmon in with the pasta. The hosts prepare meals especially from my cookbooks, *Nudes and Foods* (Volumes I and II). The recipes were sent to me by people from all over, and Virginia Dooley, who runs my gallery in Taos, put the book together.

I myself am rather large. People think I make too much of it. For my age, I guess I'm okay. I wish I were lighter, but I love to eat. I am a lunch man. I eat my big meal at lunch. When I'm traveling, lots of restaurants don't open up until dinner. And that's really too bad.

I'm not married. My only companion is a fat cat named Lola. She's been with me for eight years. She has her ways. She likes one kind of cat food, and she won't even eat scraps. And there's Rose, Miss Rose Roybal. She's my cook, and she's a great cook too. Rose has a big heart if you eat her food. She loves Danny De Vito; he cleans his plate, and that means a lot.

For the women I paint, I have models come to my studio. I work only with models. We have reservations right here in Taos, the Taos Pueblo. But I've done Japanese and Spanish women, too. A model comes in with her costume, and she sets the stage. I paint what I see; I don't think. I don't have any message. I think it's so phony for artists to have this huge meaning. I don't.



I am not obsessed with large women or even skinny women, but I do prefer to paint women. I'm attracted to them. And larger women, they fill up the paper more. There is more space to work with. My own aunts were large women. Maybe I am reflecting them.

My father told me that in the old days, Native American men were proud to have a large woman. That meant she was well fed and her husband was rich. In those days, too, a man could have many wives. A whole bunch of little fat women meant he was really rich. Besides, I like to reach out and grab something.

My advice to big ladies would be, "Maintain your beautiful, graceful image. Look at what I paint: large beautiful women all dolled up with native costumes."

Sometimes I have dry spells. I'm in one right now. I'm not doing anything. But I don't worry about it. I can afford it. When you're young, you're charged up. It's different; you're always working.

Success? I don't think about that sort of thing. Actually, I never thought all this would happen. I started off just doing group shows. Then, at one show during the Fifties, in Scottsdale, Arizona, two gallery owners really bought my stuff: Elaine Horowitz and Suzanne Brown. They gave me my biggest boost.

Now that I'm well known, I'm doing more but at a slower pace. I work with more printers. I go to three different cities to work on my lithographs. I transport models. I go to Santa Fe to bronze. I go to Mexico for my tapestries.

I like to help other artists. I buy their work. I send kids through school. I think what goes around comes around.

I get hundreds of letters. I answer lots of them. Three weeks after Christmas, I'm still going through my Christmas mail. Friends, I just phone them.

Famous people want to meet me. Liz Taylor, she's in the large-woman category now, I've had lunch with her. And Arnold Schwarzenegger, he sent me something for Christmas: a deer sitting in a red park. Now, he loves food.

With my work, I've gone through different phases. It's changed since I first started to sell it in the seventh grade. When I was in the Navy, I painted ships and islands. Well, I painted pin-ups then, too. My shipmates would show me photographs of their girlfriends, and I drew them with luscious bodies: \$5 for officers, \$3 for the enlisted men. There's my rig motif, the pottery series, the surrealistic series, but I've settled on the women. I'm perfectly comfortable with them. They've treated me right. Why should I leave them?"

The cookbook *Nudes and Foods: Gorman Goes Gourmet*, written by Gorman's cooking friends and compiled by Virginia Dooley, provides many funny Gorman tales, accompanied by recipes and Gorman sketches. Its sequel, *R. C. Gorman: Nudes and Foods, Vol. II*, can be purchased for \$20 plus \$2 shipping from The Navaho Gallery, P.O. Box 1756, Taos, NM 87571.

### Gorman's Famous Fans:

R. C. Gorman met once with former Vice President and Mrs. Mondale. Once while out dining, Rosalind Carter approached Gorman and said, "I've been a fan of yours for years, and I'd like to introduce someone to you." She brought over her husband, President Jimmy Carter. Gorman lunched with Elizabeth Taylor. Jackie Onassis asked to come by and visit; she said she'd like to meet him. Vincent Price has visited Gorman's studio, Alan Ginsberg delighted him with an afternoon stop and Gorman hobnobs with soap opera stars Ruth Warwick from "All My Children" and Jean Cooper from "The Young and the Restless" (or "The Young and the Rest of Us," as Gorman rephrases it). Flautist Paul Horn, orchestra leader Ray Conniff and singer Anita O'Day are fans. Gorman notes that Peter Fonda is really rather shy, and Cloris Leachman expends energy galore.

Collectors of his art include, in addition to many of those mentioned above, Barry Goldwater, Gregory Peck, Erma Bombeck, Lee Marvin and Andy Warhol.

### Education and Honors:

R. C. Gorman boarded at St. Michael's Junior High School for a time before the administration expelled him. Gorman graduated from Ganado Presbyterian Mission School.

The Navy provided the next installment in Gorman's education. He attended Guam Territorial College. Gorman majored in American literature when he was enrolled at Arizona State College. After the Navaho Tribal Council awarded him its first scholarship to study at a foreign university, he became a student at Mexico City College. He remembers, "I went to Mexico, and discovered Diego Rivera and myself." Next, Gorman attended San Francisco State University and took art classes there. To put himself through school, he worked nights at the post office and modeled nude for art classes, where he listened to the lectures and took mental notes.

Several institutions, including the College of Ganado in Arizona and Eastern New Mexico University, have awarded Gorman honorary degrees. Harvard, in 1986, awarded R. C. Gorman a certificate recognizing his "notable contributions to American Art and Native American Culture." In 1979, the Governor of New Mexico decreed that January 8 was to be R. C. Gorman Day. On March 19, 1986, Mayor Dianne Feinstein declared a Gorman Day for San Francisco. Gorman has the key to the cities of San Francisco, Palm Springs, Scottsdale, Houston and San Antonio.



### Gorman Quips:

When asked about his gold Mercedes, his Olympic-sized swimming pool, his odd pets (iguanas, skunks, pigs, etc.), his jet-set travels, Gorman laughs and responds, "I've never gone for the string quartet. I prefer the whole orchestra." He attributes his success to "America's new awareness of itself. Before, everything was imported-like cheese." Gorman often wears outlandish

Hawaiian shirts and headbands. He describes the shirts as "custom made, loud and comfortable. The headbands are gifts from fans. I don't care that they don't match the shirts."

-S.L. Rich ©

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## **What Is Lithography?**

[http://www.elainefineart.com/art\\_terms.htm](http://www.elainefineart.com/art_terms.htm)

Lithography is a planographic method of printing, which was invented in 1798. The name derives from the Greek words for litho (= stone) and graphein (= to write). The litho stone, a fine-pored limestone, is water and grease friendly. With the aid of grindstones of different grains the wet stone is cut completely plane.

Afterwards the design is put or sprayed on with lithocrayon and lithographic drawing ink. Then, the stone is etched. The aim of etching is to make those parts of the stone, which are covered by design, able to absorb grease, whereas those parts which are not covered by design are prepared to absorb water and to repel grease. In order to protect the design it is then covered with talcum. Afterwards, a mixture of dissolved gum Arabic and nitric acid is applied, which has to dry up. In this way the pores in the stone close at those parts which are not covered by the design, whereas at those parts which are covered by design, the acid saponifies with the lithocrayon. Thus, crayon and ink become insoluble in water.

Then the etching is washed off and the design is again supplied with grease by applying a washing-out solution, consisting of asphalt, dissolved in oil of turpentine, virgin wax, wood tar and lavender wax. Now the design is perfectly visible on the stone.

Onto the stone, which is always kept wet, the desired printing ink is now applied with a rough leather or rubber roller. Printing is carried out with the stone press. The strong pressure exerted by the scraper transmits the printing ink from the stone onto the paper. For every new ink color, a new stone is prepared. The number of inks to be used is unlimited; still, it is also a question of cost.

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## POWERPOINT PRESENTATION

*Observe and Learn to Comprehend & Envision and Critique to Transfer (VA 1 & 2)*

- 1. PHOTOGRAPHS:** Rudolph Carl (or R. C.) Gorman was born in 1931 on a Navajo reservation in Arizona. His father was a “code talker” during World War II; the code talkers used the Navajo language to communicate in a way the enemy wouldn’t understand.

Because there was no school on the reservation, the children went to a boarding school and came home on holidays and during the summer. R. C. was interested in art from the time he was 3 years old. He used whatever materials he could find to make art, including sand, mud and rocks. He enjoyed herding sheep with his aunts and they showed him how to work in clay. His first subjects were Mickey Mouse, Shirley Temple and cars because that was what he liked.
- 2. R.C. GORMAN IN TAOS, 1987.** R.C. liked to paint pictures of women. In this photograph you can see one of his paintings behind him. He studied art in college and made money by selling his paintings while in the Navy. In addition to paintings, he also created lithographs and sculptures. He was proud to be the first Navajo to own an art gallery (in Taos, New Mexico.)

He said he was not good with math and was glad he had competent people helping him. He usually wore a Hawaiian shirt and headband. The headband is the traditional headgear of an unmarried male. (He says he wore it because he didn’t like the look of his forehead.)
- 3. PHOTO OF GORMAN PREPARING A LITHOGRAPH:** *1976: Editions Press: (video available online)*

Gorman produced hundreds of “*lithographs*” in his effort to make his work available to a wide audience. This print making process takes a lot of work but lent itself well to Gorman's style of large, massive, simple figures and few, but vibrant colors.

To make a lithograph: flat limestone rock slabs are drawn on with a black grease pencil. A separate stone is used for each color and each must be perfectly aligned. The wet stone is pressed onto wet paper, one at a time to set the color. The ink must dry before another color can be applied. Although Gorman could draw one of his pictures in a few minutes, it may take months to complete a lithograph process for the prints.
- 4. THE BEAD MAKER:** *Western Graphics, series of lithographic prints.* The making of a multi-color lithograph is very involved. It becomes a teamwork process between the artist and the printer. This shows some of the process as the lithograph is created. (Upper left to right spiraling toward center)
- 5. NAVAJO MOTHER IN SUPPLICATION:** *Lithograph: 1966: One color: 20" x 26":* One of Gorman's favorite subjects were mothers and their children. In Navajo mythology, the earth is the mother of all life, an ancient and powerful symbol. His women are the sacred providers, the source of life and inspiration. This was one of the first lithographs he produced with the Sanchez family of Mexico City. He spoke little Spanish and they spoke little English. Gorman noted they communicated with grunts and hand signs to produce this lithograph.

6. **POTTERY KEEPER:** (*Women Suite, First State*): 1977 Lithograph: 4 colors: 22" x 30": Gorman made two large series of prints about women, most of whom are pictured doing a traditional craft or everyday chores.
7. **INDIAN CORN:** 1978: Lithograph: 12 colors: 30" x 22": In this painting he is using a different style. His figures are blocky, almost like carved, stone figures. Corn was one of the traditional crops grown in the bottom of Canyon de Chelly in the summer. The bowed back of the woman remind us of the harsh reality of survival. Hunger was a real part of Gorman's childhood. The woman's shirt echoes the colors of the earth's harvest. Gorman made the original drawing in oil pastel then used slab crayon and pencil to transfer it to the stone. He then brushed the crayon area quickly with water to partially dissolve the crayon, creating a combination wash and crayon look.
8. **YA-NA-BAH:** 1977: Lithograph: 7 colors: 30" x 22": This is a picture of Gorman's cousin, Grace McCullough. The title is her Navajo name. She was visiting him in Arizona and while he was making this figure he felt he needed a face as a model. She said that even though she had grown up with him, it was the first time she had modeled for him. Gorman always worked from live models. Look how few lines and colors are in this print.
9. **THUNDERSTORM:** Lithograph 1983, edition of 175, 29.5" x 38.25."
10. **BISBEE:** 1988, 30 x 39.5, edition of 225. Gorman liked to show women surrounded or engaged in traditional arts and crafts. Here traditional pottery and turquoise are shown. What is this woman thinking or saying? Gorman says: "I choose models who have full bodies...I like ample figures because they fill the space softly."
11. **CARMEN AND CHILD:** 1988, 27 x 36, edition of 225 Lithographs are numbered by how many prints were made. There were 225 lithographs made here. If you had one of them it would be numbered as "x"/225 with "x" being the edition you had.
12. **NIGHT STORIES:** 1994, 26" x 34" edition of 200 Was Gorman remembering times with his grandmother when they would stand under the evening stars as they tended sheep? His grandmother told him the stories of the stars and moon and sun and their Navajo names and the myths of how they came to be in their positions in the heavens.
13. **SILENT RIVER,** 2002, 9" x 12" Gorman has returned to the simple lines of his earliest work in this painting. The work he did in oil pastel and charcoal were very different than the work he did as lithographs.

14. **BRONZE SCULPTURES** Gorman made sculptures of women as well as lithographs and paintings.

15. **SELF-PORTRAIT and photograph:** R. C. Gorman died in 2005. He created art from the time he was 3 years old until he died in 2005 at the age of 74. He never married, and he used the money he made from his art to help his nephews and nieces go to school.

R. C. Gorman never lost touch with his Navajo soul. His sister stated, “He never lost touch with his roots, and that kept him very humble. His soul emanates in his work, whether it was a beautiful scene with mountains and canyons, women or whether it was a simple sketch.”

**REFLECT AND CONNECT TO TRANSFER** (VA Standard #4)

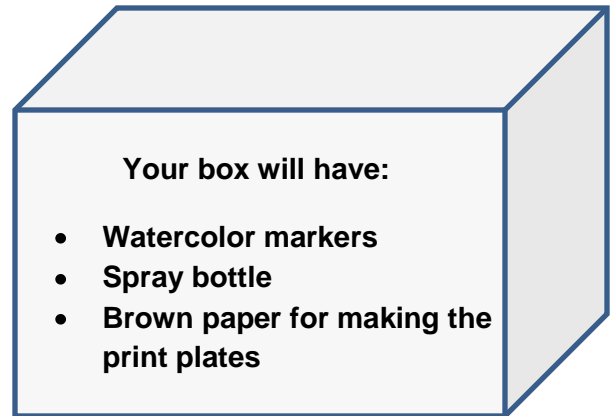
*During the last 5 minutes with your students, perhaps as they are cleaning up or while they are creating, take a moment to encourage the students to discuss and review their understanding of R.C. Gorman:*

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:**

1. *What was one thing you learned about R. C. Gorman?*
2. *How did Gorman use images to create?*
3. *How will you (did you) use printing to create?*
4. *What do you wonder?*

## FEATURED ART PROJECT

*Invent and Discover to Create (VA Standard #3)*



1. Students will make their own prints using the brown paper and markers. Historically, artists have used stone and wood to etch their design for printmaking. Foam plates and other materials can be used to etch for a print plate. We are providing the brown paper, which is easy to cut and etch.
2. To prepare ahead of time: The brown paper will need to be cut into smaller pieces, approximately 6" X 5". Much of the white paper will also need to be cut into appropriate-sized pieces.



3. Have students draw with a ball-point pen or pencil onto the brown paper to "etch" their design. They might want to sketch on a piece of scratch paper beforehand, and use Gorman's designs as inspiration. *Remember—the image will be reversed when printed, so and words or letters will be*

*backwards!*

4. Using the watercolor markers, apply color to your etched design.
5. Lay a piece of white paper on paper toweling (or newspaper, etc.) and spray. Rub the water into the paper a little, and blot any excess water (it should not be puddled or shiny).



6. Press the paper onto the etched plate, rubbing the back of the paper all over, but being careful not to let the paper move.
7. Gently pull the paper away from the plate. You will have your first print. To make an "edition" of prints, you will want to repeat the process, adding color to the plate each time.

8. The prints will curl a bit when they're dry. They can be pressed under heavy books overnight (just be sure they're dry before you do this!)



## **Alternative projects:**

1. Sand Painting is done as part of Navajo religious ceremonies. Historically it was destroyed after the ceremony, but now many patterns are being preserved for collectors and tourist trade. To replicate a sand painting, mix dry tempera with cornmeal until you get the colors you desire. Have students draw with pencil on mat board to create their design, then apply glue to the lines and sprinkle on the cornmeal. This activity might be best outdoors, as it can get messy. Otherwise, cover tables and floors with plastic or newspaper.
2. Read a Navajo or Southwest Indian story or myth. Have students draw illustrations of the figures in the story. Create a myth to describe natural phenomena like how the Big Dipper got its name or why lizards lose their tails when they're caught. Illustrate the myth.