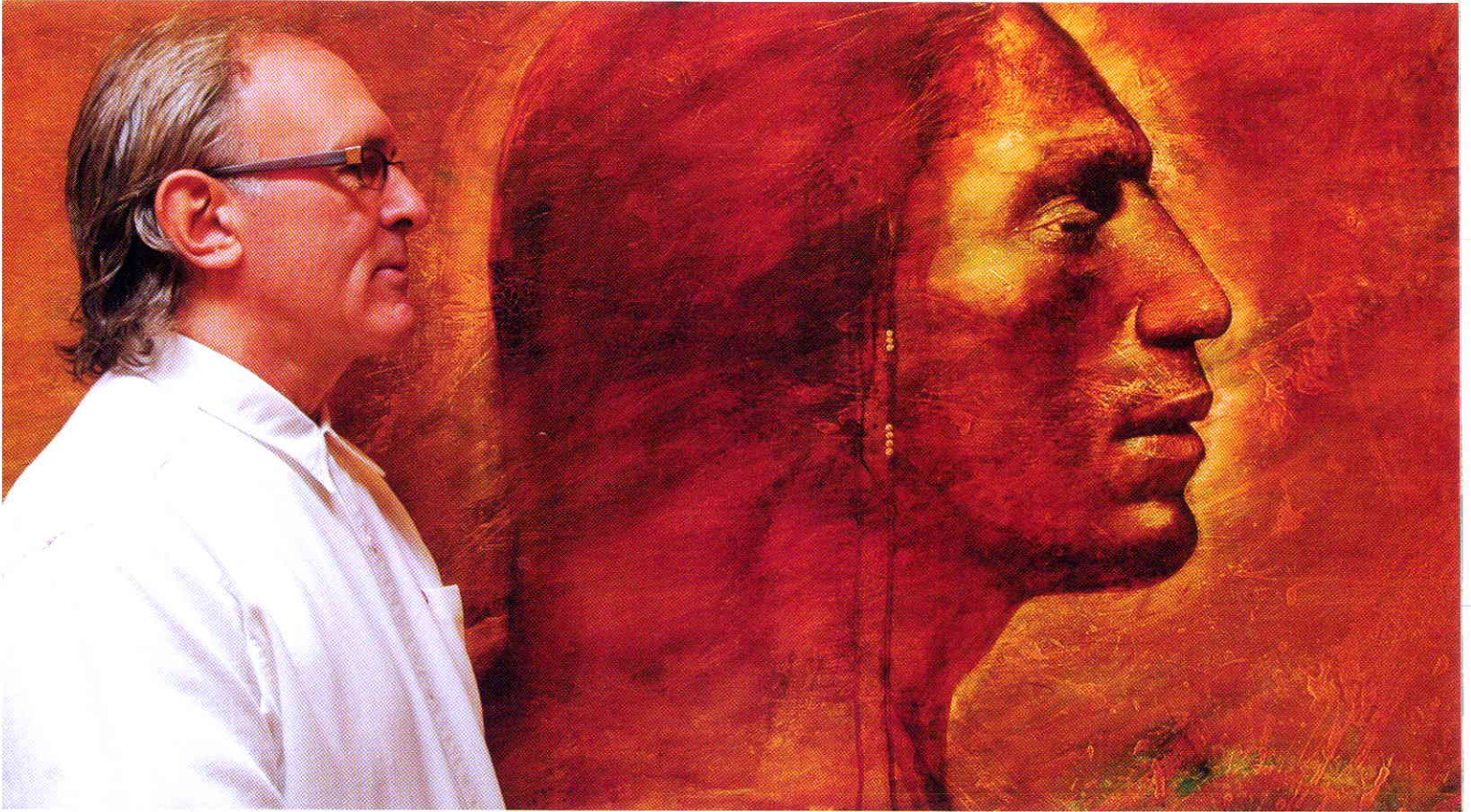


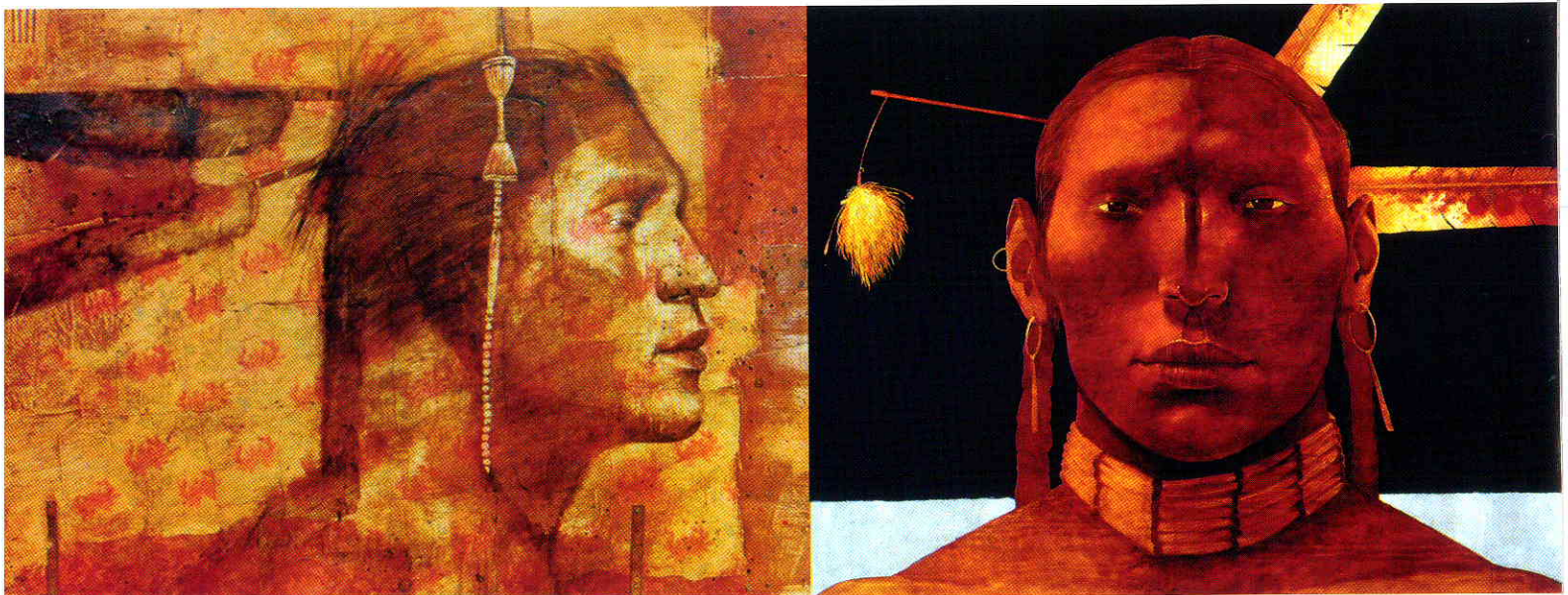
# OPEN BEN PORTFOLIO WRIGHT



We first met Ben Wright in May 2004 when he spoke to us about the inspiration behind his Native American figurative paintings – when we revisited his West Sedona studio it became obvious his work had evolved in the last four years. Ben went through a phase where he softened his images and made them more expressionistic than realistic; he played with texture for a while, an obvious influence of his wife of ten years, artist Marcela Panasiti, who he works beside every day. Now he says his pieces have become a blend of realism and impressionism with contemporary colors and odd textures added to the mix. Ben is still heavily influenced by his time spent in the couple's on-site sweat lodge and laughs when asked if he can picture himself doing anything other than painting. "I'm unemployable," he says. Ben and Marcela recently opened their bright and airy home studio to the public – anyone can stop by to watch them work, discuss commissions, or make purchases (though they do prefer it if guests call first). Ben's work also adorns the walls at Kurt's Main Street Café and he's now working closely with local interior designers. To see Ben in action visit the studio at 385 Arroyo Pinion Dr. in West Sedona (928-204-5551) or visit [www.benwrightinfo.com](http://www.benwrightinfo.com)

**BEN:** Since we last spoke my work became more impressionistic – I started using more found objects and more texture as an underlay. I even started using maps for texture. I also started using narrative images so it's just not a picture of an Indian but there's a story involved beyond the figure, like a medicine wheel. The texture was really inspired by [my wife, artist] Marcela [Panasiti]. Of course when you live together 24/7 something is going to rub off. I also went through a brown phase where I used a lot of earth tones but then I decided to interject some screaming color – it makes the pieces more contemporary. These paintings wind up in modern and Southwest homes. I think the direction in décor right now is contemporary so these new paintings are appealing to a wider audience. Remember, there are contemporary Native Americans out there. Marcela suggested a while back I paint hip hop Indians, it's just something I haven't done yet. To stereotype Native Americans in traditional roles isn't beneficial.

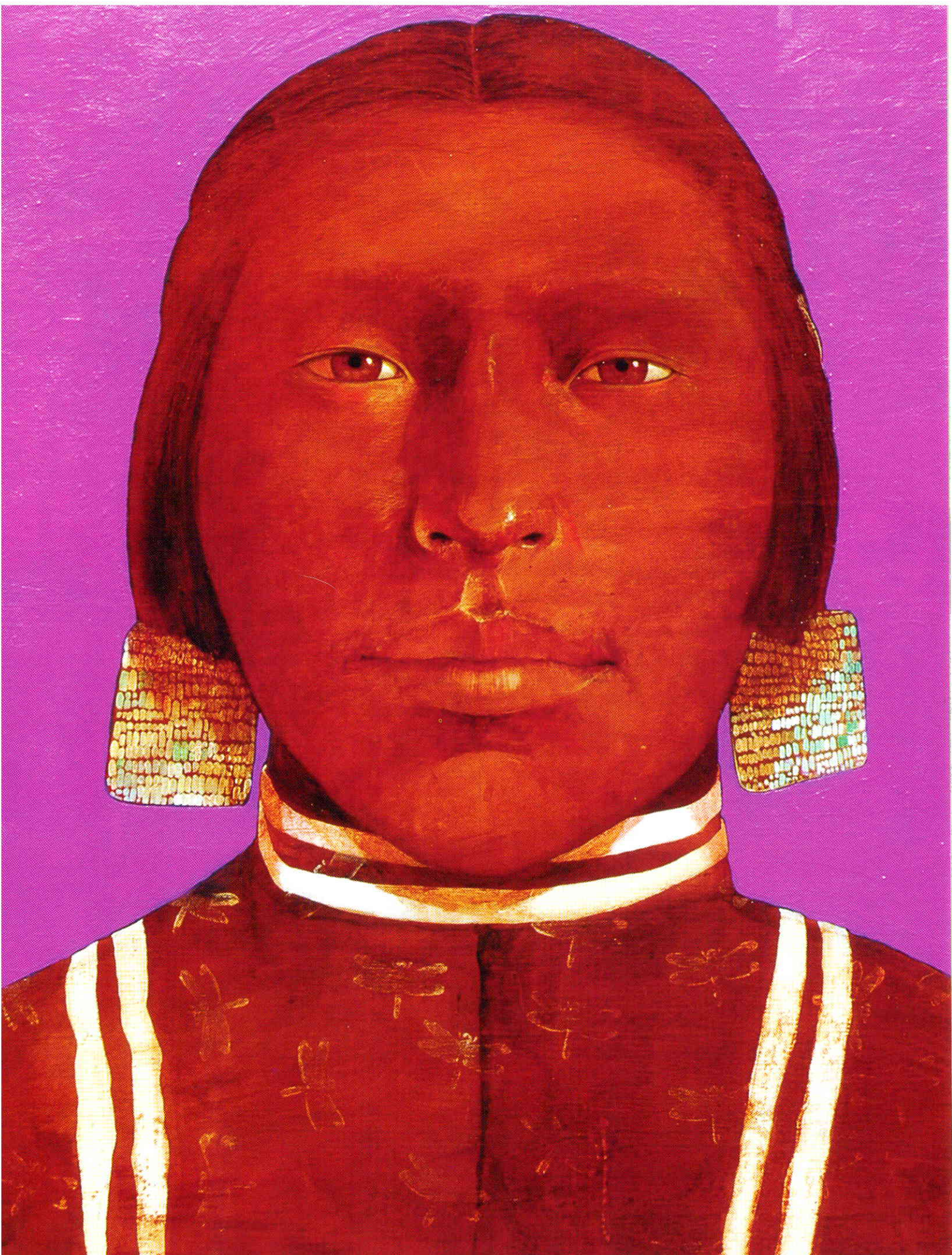
"The need to be more painterly, more expressive, is what drove me down that path. When you're working really tight you lose expression – it becomes more technical, more illustrative. I loosened up. It was a simple thing. I went through a phase where I was learning to paint



as opposed to illustrate. It's part of the need to experiment – it's about growth and sometimes when you go down a particular tangent you learn.

"I started painting a long time ago, in my early 20s. I'd just doodled in my notebook in school – I was a jock. I went back to school in my early 20s and switched from history to art. I found some talent. I did one of those 'draw the pirate' or 'draw Bambi' type of things and realized I had an ability. I got a BA from the University of California at Santa Barbara and went to San Francisco to knock around in illustration. I was up there for a couple of years, trying to get into the old boy's school. I thought shoot, why don't I just try painting. I took those illustrative techniques and put them on canvas. It was natives and cowboys even back then.

"I had studied Western expansion and wondered, What the heck happened to these people, to the Natives? It was amazing once I started researching – it was genocide. I'm part Cherokee. When I thought about painting Natives I realized it could last a lifetime, especially when you involve the spiritual nature of the people. I got into galleries right away and showed with some big names. Willie Nelson, Emmylou Harris, Peter Brown and Connie Stevens all bought my work. Life brought me to Sedona [laughs]. I moved from California to Texas





where I lived for a long time and I've been here for about ten years now. I've never taken a break from painting.

"I paint male figures but there's not a reason for that, aside from the fact that females are very difficult to paint. I've done a few but the kinship for me is more with the warrior. In the beginning I painted primarily history paintings. Now it's the universal man. I've pulled features from different photos of Asian men and black men but most of the faces are interpreted by me. It's the idea that we're all one race. I start with an impression, which used to come to me primarily after a sweat lodge. It was a feeling or sensation and I'd follow that tangent. It's definitely more interpretive than painting from a photograph. And I don't show up with a clear idea. I paint every day – we are up at 5 a.m. and we start working after we get the kids off to school until they come home around 5:30 p.m. I used to keep track of how many I painted but now I just make art. I'm not necessarily always inspired but I still have to show up. It's cyclical. There's always something I can do that's not necessarily interpretive. I only work on one piece at a time and they've always been large. I think it's more expressive. It's just as difficult to do an 8-by-10.

"I use found objects and torn wood to get some of my texture. I'll attach papers. I have under-laid crosses that were made from old rulers. I basically only use wood to paint, occasionally I'll use canvas. I attach objects to the wood and paint over them. Wood is easier to ship. Climate affects canvas. For example, a couple in Florida purchased a piece in Santa Fe and the canvas warped because of the difference in humidity.

"We've started inviting people out to our studio to see our work and purchase it. It was Marcela's idea to be more independent. We wanted to provide a space outside of a gallery to broaden our audience. It gives us more freedom with designers and decorators. We aren't trying to compete with galleries but all we do is art and we want to show our studio. Quite a few people come by. The idea is to create more opportunities. It's more manageable – we have more control over our work. We enjoy meeting with people who collect our work, though Marcela is better verbally than me [laughs]. We wind up doing a lot of commissions, too. Marcela and I work together and every piece is a collaboration, but we're not doing as many



actual collaborations as we did a few years ago. I think it was confusing for collectors. We like to do them but we're both so much into our individual work. Sometimes we decide we want to do something together and I think it makes it more unique.

"I'm starting to go back to where I was before I went the impressionistic route but I'm incorporating the gestural and textural – my work now is a combination of the older pieces and the impressionistic pieces. The old becomes the new. I hope people take away beauty from my work. All the pieces have a spiritual base, which is reflective of my teachings and philosophies. What's really spiritual is what the viewer sees and what the viewer is drawn to. They are spiritual as I create each one. Spirituality is innate in all of us, we just have to acknowledge it. I'm talking about non-religious, non-denominational spirituality. Religion just confuses things.

"We see beauty all around us everyday in Sedona. We are so grateful, so thankful to live here. I love it. It's an inspiration. I see murals everywhere I look. Being part Cherokee has also influenced my work but you don't necessarily have to be Indian to feel the spirituality of a place. I think there are more pink Indians around here than anything [laughs]. So many people identify with Native American beliefs. Like I mentioned, sweat lodges are an influence. You learn to endure in a sweat lodge. We used to do lodges every Saturday but now we only do it a few times a year. We've opened it to others, too. Whether you are in or out you're still influenced. Whether you're going in or not it's still with you. We go in the lodge all the time to relax, not just to sweat.

"I'll continue to watch the evolution of my work – it's like being on two levels. You step back to see where it's going. You have to be your own critic and reevaluate to see what works and whether you need a change in direction – that's almost day-by-day. I can't say what I'll be doing in a month – it's spontaneous. I didn't set my mind on making my pieces more impressionistic, it just happened and that's the way it should be. It's always a surprise. That's what keeps the whole process interesting – you're not locked into a specific way of doing your work.

"You can see some artists that don't change – it would be boring. Artists get locked into a certain way of working because of success. They are afraid to change and rock the boat – they get identified with iconic imagery that people buy. Do you evolve and change or do what the collectors want? It's painful because I know they want to change – you can see them try and they back off because it's not what the collectors want. You lose the spirit because you become a replicator. Still, it's a tough call. Some of us just aren't set up to work that way." •

