
From the Selected Works of Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

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In Memoriam: Sam English

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

SAM ENGLISH

June 2, 1942–November 10, 2023

SAMUEL FRANCIS ENGLISH SR. (Turtle Mountain/Red Lake Chippewa) dedicated much of his life to the cause of healing. His artistic practice, community building, and political work sought to improve the everyday lives of Indigenous people and engagement with their culture. He was a respected teacher, friend, and supporter to many. Not without struggle, English doggedly persevered and achieved extraordinary things in his 81 years.

Born in 1942 in Phoenix, Arizona, to a Turtle Mountain Chippewa mother and a Red Lake Chippewa father, English grew up in Ignacio, Colorado. His father attended a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) boarding school and later worked for the agency. He believed that the BIA's assimilationist policies heavily affected his father, and thus he too was distanced from understanding his Anishinaabe heritage. Following high school, English studied architectural drafting at Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma, and business at the University of San Francisco, California. He worked for various Indigenous health and youth organizations. By the 1960s, he became involved with Indigenous political movements and the National Indian Youth Council, which allowed him to travel nationwide to advocate for civil rights and freedom.

Around this time, English's addiction to alcohol escalated and impaired his work and advocacy. He was candid about his failed attempts to quit alcohol at treatment facilities. Yet, at the age of 39, he quit for good, explaining, "On December 10th, 1981, I drove my lance [into the ground] and decided I was not going to drink anymore, that I was going to be a brave person and that's what I've done."¹ The experience of sobriety brought forth a spiritual renaissance, and he dedicated the remainder of his life to art and altruism.

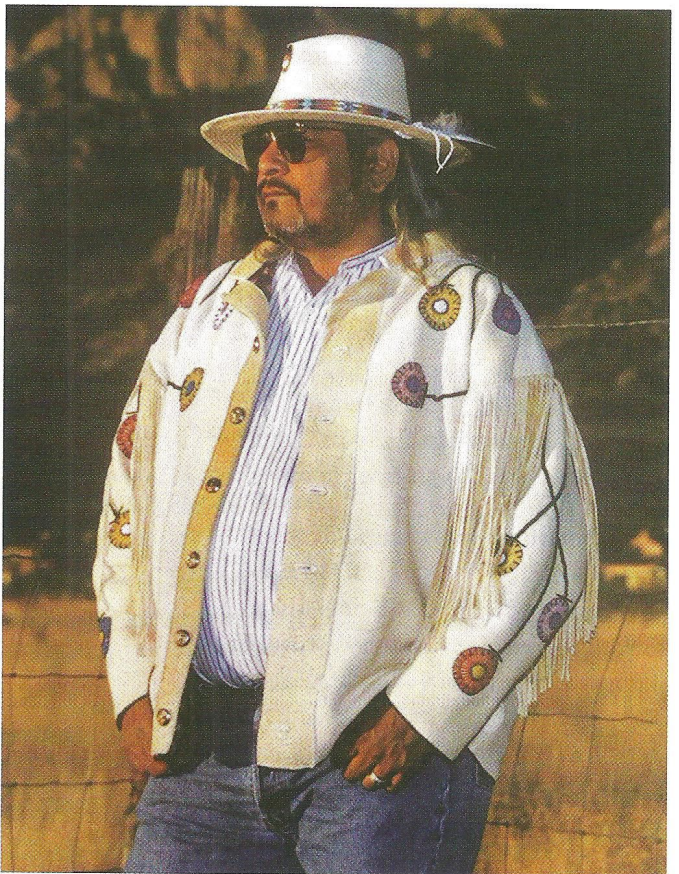
For English, painting wasn't merely an artistic activity or passion, it was also a means of survival. "If I hadn't continued to paint in my sobriety," he said, "I wouldn't be here painting. I wouldn't be here period."² Using a variety of media, from oils to pastels, his paintings and drawings from this period represent a life renewed—dancers, elders, and medicine men draped in luminous colors and pictured in electric movement—almost always standing tall and looking to the sky. By making art and reading the work of Indigenous writers such as Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Dakota, 1933–2005), he proudly shared images of his Chippewa heritage with others.

English had a vision of opening his own business, an art gallery. The Sam English Studio/Gallery opened in Old Town Albuquerque in 1982. It was a remarkable achievement, opening one year after the beginning of his sobriety journey. To assist others fighting alcohol addiction, he helped found an Alcoholics Anonymous program designed specifically for Native Americans.

It addressed historical, physical, and spiritual wounds. Ahead of his time, English saw art as synonymous with healing. He administered several popular Healing Through the Arts workshops. This early form of art therapy took place in several locations including Palm Springs and the San Francisco Bay Area.

English's ultimate goal was to build the National Native American Healing Center Through the Performing Arts, an unprecedented project space that included a drop-in center, café, greenhouse, workshops, studios, and more. While groundbreaking for the center did not occur during his lifetime, provisional planning for it deserves closer attention. What English and his team envisioned was a forerunner to the holistic approaches adopted by many of today's Indigenous galleries and museums.

Garnering many awards, his artwork appeared in numerous exhibitions and on several book covers. English traveled the world, published a coffee table book of his artwork, and was the subject of a television documentary. For his grassroots community work and political advocacy, he was recognized for his inexhaustible efforts and leadership. Through it all, he thanked the Creator for providing a wealth of spiritual gifts and guidance: "I think somebody saved my life to do this."³ —Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD



ABOVE Sam English, 1990s. Image courtesy of Haley Greenfeather (Turtle Mountain/Red Lake Chippewa).

1. Greg Bellanger, "Sam English Biography," *Northland Visions*, April 2, 2014, web.

2. Tom Kanthak, "The Previously Undiscovered Painted Treasures of Native Artist Sam English," *ICT News*, September 13, 2018, web.

3. Kanthak, "The Previously Undiscovered Painted Treasures."