



"Ten Together," oil, 30" × 40"

## THE ARTS

# ROMANCING THE WEST

*Powerful images receive elegant treatment  
in the oils of Paul Van Ginkel.*

*By Charlotte Berney*

Paul Van Ginkel's exquisite use of contrasts summons up an intellectual as well as an aesthetic response in the viewer.

Consider these interesting contrasts in his work: In his figurative oil paintings of Native Americans, he combines archival images with contemporary styles. Instead of the blazing color one might imagine, he uses somber, darkly beautiful shades that create a meditative feeling. His occasional background grids of gold leaf, not a medium you would expect to find in a western painting, make these images come forward as though in a dream.

Then there are his paintings of ranch

horses, bunched in masses, full of life and movement and presence. These large-scale compositions are like time machines connecting present-day life in the west with its romantic past.

"I feel it's important to understand what this land was like before our time," Van Ginkel says, "and to know about the people who lived here." For that reason, this Canadian painter has chosen the people of the First Nations—as they are called in Canada—and the ranching life of western North America as his subject matter.

For the Native images, he researches archival photographs in Calgary, Alberta,

and portrays members of tribes including the Blackfeet, Stoney, Cree, and Blood as they existed up to the 1930s.

"Because the photographs are archival," the artist comments, "my paintings are portraits of specific individuals—men like Many Shots, Bear Shield, and Sitting Eagle—and I convey the clothing and details authentically. The people in these old photographs have a sense of presence. I want to make a simple, clear statement about them and show their power and quiet dignity."

The faces Van Ginkel portrays express a wide range of human character and emo-



*"Bear Shield," oil and gold leaf, 60" x 40"*



*"War Dance," oil, 48" × 72"*

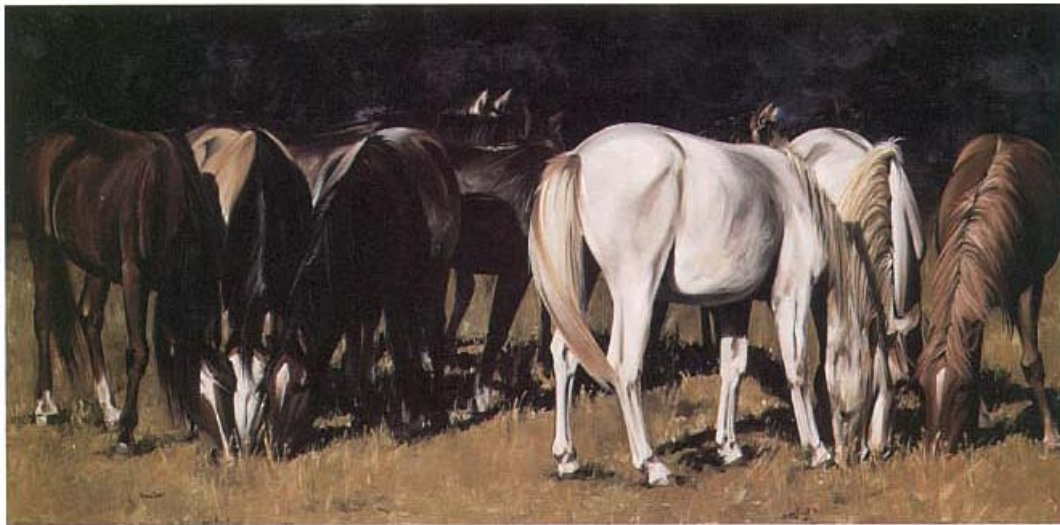
tion—from strength and courage and defiance to wistfulness and familial pride, as when a warrior holds his small child. "I often choose images," says the artist, "of people I would like to have known." He adds that he has always been drawn to Native peoples' approach to life—their non-materialism and their respect for all of nature. Paintings such as "Prayer" and "Trade" re-create historical scenes of everyday life in Native America.

Spending time on ranches in Alberta's

cowboy country as well as in Idaho, Oregon, and Wyoming gives Van Ginkel a feeling for the everyday life of working cowboys. He takes the time to observe the details and the rhythms of the "horse culture." He has painted various herds of horses, including Spanish mustangs, and finds horses "a tremendous challenge to paint, from their muscle groups to their proud, romantic history. To me they represent freedom and passion."

Van Ginkel was born in St. Boniface,

Manitoba, and his family moved to Calgary in the early seventies. He loved drawing from an early age and knew that he wanted to be an artist. His first exposure to western cultures came as a youth during the annual Calgary Stampede, the famous western event that draws visitors from all over the world. Seeing the horses and visiting the Indian Village there inspired the young artist to learn more about these ways of life. He later traveled Canada's powwow circuit and also attended the Gathering of Nations



*"Time to Graze," oil, 36" × 72"*



*"Feather Stick," oil, 40" x 60"*

in Albuquerque "to experience the people and their dance, music, color, and energy."

Van Ginkel attended the Alberta College of Art in Calgary and then earned a Master of Fine Arts at Syracuse University in New York. Trained as an illustrator, he says of that career, "It was a thrill to see my work in print." After working as an illustrator for seven years, he fulfilled his lifelong ambition of becoming a full-time painter in 1990. After over 23 years in Calgary, the artist, who's now 40 years old, moved to Vancouver, a city he finds "aesthetically beautiful as well as exciting."

Working in oils using shades of brown, black, and white with gold leaf creates a striking and dramatic image for Van Ginkel. The gold leaf in his backgrounds is meant to "conjure up richness and history and to create a strong impression." Before applying gold leaf, he paints the backgrounds with a light wash, creating color that shows through in the final work. About his painting's backgrounds, he comments, "The gold leaf subtly picks up light from the environment, while the grids accentuate the central vignettes." Occasionally, a bit of prairie or pasture can be found in a painting's foreground.

Van Ginkel comments, "I work in full color, but I strive for a monochromatic effect." This gives the painting an aura of mystery, a seductive quality of light and shadow. Yet the figure remains central. It is no surprise that the artist admires both the elegant clarity of image that John Singer



Sargent achieved and the chiaroscuro effects of the seventeenth century painter Diego Velazquez.

Details in Van Ginkel's paintings, such as decoration on clothing, are designed to add to the whole without overwhelming the figures. "I don't like to be fussy about the details," observes the artist. "I enjoy painting aggressively—loose and free—always trying to say more with the least amount of strokes. That way the painting breathes and lives and evolves with the viewer."

Just as he enjoys the bold brushstroke, Van Ginkel likes to vary his style. He sometimes works in an impressionistic manner, while some of his canvases have an almost abstract feeling and are done primarily with a palette knife. "I try to capture a mood

in a way that feels right for the subject," he notes. "I like to experiment with different ways of applying the paint, with the consistent objective being to learn and grow."

Van Ginkel prefers his works unframed. He paints the sides of the canvas in order to achieve a contemporary, finished look and to give the work a feeling of expansiveness, remarking, "I don't want the image stopped by a frame."

Van Ginkel's style and subject matter reflect the whole picture of his life. "My art is an extension of who I am as a person, and that changes all the time. In the future, I might do landscapes, but for now, I love painting the figure. I love faces and regalia. There's so much detail and texture, and the images are ripe with possibilities. You explore what speaks to you. I find that when you paint what's on your mind, you always do your best work."

Paul Van Ginkel has absorbed the essence of the west and has filtered it through his unique outlook to present a viewpoint that has never been seen before. His elegant studies in contrasts bring new treatments to time-honored subject matter, revisiting the fascinating annals of the west for a new audience.

*Paul Van Ginkel's paintings are on view at McLarry Fine Art, located at 225 Canyon Road. Hours: 9:30-5:00 Monday-Saturday and 10:00-4:00 Sunday. (505) 988-1161 or 877-983-2123.*