



# One Artist's Journey

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## Following the Footsteps of Virgil James

As a boy, Virgil James lived with his mother and his grandfather, a Methodist minister, in the church parsonage. His grandfather would take him into the woods and study the Bible while Virgil played. When Virgil was five-years-old, a visitor in his home took the time to show him how to draw a semi-trailer truck. He was enthralled with his newly found talent. As a preschooler, his enthusiasm and delight could not be bound. He drew on everything -- even the church walls. When his mother made him stop, he would lie on the floor underneath the church pews and draw on the underside of the wooden seats.

Virgil James, a full-blood Choctaw, was born and raised in southeastern Oklahoma. He spent much of his time outdoors fishing and hunting, but two incidents made him rethink his desire and reasons for hunting. The first happened while hunting behind his house one day. His rifle didn't seem to be working correctly. Usually a good shot, he aimed, but wasn't able to hit anything. He kept shooting toward a squirrel and kept missing. He sat down to check his rifle and the sight. While sitting under the tree, he saw the squirrel that he had been trying to shoot go to its nest. He then saw that it was bringing food to a nest full of baby squirrels. To his amazement nothing was wrong with his gun.

The second incident happened after he had grown to be a man. Virgil had taught his son never to shoot at a nest. One day he ignored his own rule. He saw a bushy tail over the side of a nest and thought it was a squirrel. He shot at the tail and wounded the animal -- a raccoon. Unfortunately, he wounded, but didn't kill, the animal. He had to shoot the animal again to end its misery. Virgil continues to take his gun on hikes to explore the woods, but he doesn't kill anything. He just enjoys the pleasure of being outdoors.

As a teenager Virgil attended vocational school in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. He considered himself to have a rebellious spirit because of the many times he would run away from school to return home, approximately 170 miles away. After hitchhiking all that way, his mother would send him back each time. She didn't punish him, but she would tell him the value of getting an education. After the second year of doing this, returning to

school became embarrassing to him and he realized that he was responsible for his own actions. If he were going to get an education, he would have to do it himself.

His high temper and rebellious spirit lengthened his stay in school. It took him five years to graduate simply because he would not complete his school work. He eventually began to study and finish his assignments. He graduated near the top of his class. It was during this time that his interest in drawing was revived. While taking a painting course, he entered a painting in a contest and was awarded "honorable mention."

After graduation, Virgil attended Haskell Indian Institute in Lawrence, Kansas, for five months to learn the trade of printing. He still had a desire to attend art school but wasn't able to afford it. The GI Bill offered financial assistance to attend school for people who joined the military service. Virgil enlisted in the Navy for four years. During those four years he gained valuable experience drawing illustrations and printing. After the service, he worked as a printer and lithographer while attending more art classes. He also worked as an airbrush and product illustrator for an advertising agency. Virgil's strong desire to become a free lance artist and run his own business kept him returning to school to further his education.

Virgil now has over 25 years experience as a commercial artist, with 18 of those years as a free lance artist. During his years as a free lance artist, he had the opportunity to work on advertisements that appeared in Look, Life, Ebony, National Geographic, and the Wall Street Journal.

Virgil feels commercial art is involved in everything. People are needed to design everything from food containers to lettering on boxes. Virgil uses a variety of methods to draw, design or illustrate objects or lettering used in advertising. Virgil likes to work in most art mediums. He enjoys water color, charcoal, pencil, and painting.

Only a few years ago after an eye examination, Virgil discovered that he is partially color blind. His blindness is especially pronounced when he works with grays and graduated shadings of some colors. He doesn't feel color blindness is a handicap. He doesn't let it bother him in any way and continues to draw and paint based on his perspective of reality.

When working on a project, many times Virgil worked with clay, making a mockup of an object, or simply reducing or enlarging a design. Virgil kept a time sheet to record the time he spent on his work projects. He got so experienced he could look at a job and determine almost exactly how much time it would take and how much it would cost to make.

Once again, he returned to school for more training in the fine arts. He went to the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

There he learned about painting, pottery making, and sculpting. In addition to art studio classes, he also took a variety of courses including history, English, and art appreciation.

While in Santa Fe attending the Art Institute, he was introduced to the art of traditional pottery making. Although he says that it's more painstaking and difficult, he respects the methods our ancestors used to make pottery and the beliefs and values of our oneness with nature. Pottery comes from the earth. It is made with clay, painted with minerals and plants, shaped with stones and gourds. As the Pueblo artists in Arizona and New Mexico take pieces of the land and make pottery, they feel this creates a bond. Traditional potters speak of including the whole universe—the earth, the sky, and human beings—into the design of the pottery. Pottery making is so ancient that archaeologists spend much time analyzing pottery fragments, or potsherds. The pottery remains offer a glimpse of the culture.

Virgil's voice is reverent when he speaks of pottery making. Clay is "picked" and is considered a gift from Mother Earth. Offerings of corn meal are given by some tribes, asking permission from Mother Earth to use her body for pottery to support themselves and their children. Much time is given to processing materials for potting. It may take twenty-four to thirty hours of work to mix one cubic foot of clay. Clay must be dried before it is soaked, sometimes ground and sieved clean. Water is changed several times to purify and dissolve stray minerals. Once saturated, the clay must be sieved to sift out the impurities of stones, branches, and roots.

Adding a temper of sand, finely ground rock, or potsherds helps the clay to dry more slowly and more evenly. There is an art to deciding the proportion of temper and clay. Next is shaping and scraping the clay to rough out the form of the object. There are many methods and techniques to pottery making. But potters, including Virgil, believe the forms and designs are a part of you. Your story or feelings or how you view your world will be evident in your pottery.

Virgil enjoys life and feels everyone should enjoy whatever they do, that one shouldn't hold back emotions, talents or feelings but be aware of one's self and one's feelings. He feels one should always be honest with one's self and others. He also believes in respecting others with the same respect he would like. He believes his feelings, emotions and attitudes cannot be hidden from painting or molding clay. As far as his work is concerned, he doesn't settle for less than his best.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What kind of person do you think Virgil James is? Justify your comments based on the profile information.
2. How can you tell Virgil enjoyed drawing as a young child?
3. What thoughts do you feel Virgil had after the two hunting incidents that made him change his mind about hunting to kill animals?
4. What caused Virgil to remain in vocational school an extra year?
5. Virgil's mother did not punish him when he ran away from school, she just talked to him and sent him back. What were other ways she could have handled this? Name at least two, and tell what you think the outcome would have been regarding Virgil's life and attitude.
6. Why did Virgil finally decide to stay in school and work hard?
7. What was Virgil's reason to enlist in the military service?

### **Career Inventory:**

Virgil had to make many decisions about his career. How would you respond to these questions?

1. Do I want an indoor or outdoor job?
2. Do I want to work with people or by myself?
3. Am I willing to go to school after graduating from high school?
4. Do I want a job that is year-round or seasonal?
5. What hours of the day would I prefer to work?
6. Where do I want to live? in the city or country? near my present home or somewhere else?

7. Am I willing to travel with my job?
8. How high do I want to advance? is advancement possible in my job?
9. What type of salary will I need to fulfill my lifestyle?
10. Could the job I choose be eliminated in the near future because of advancements in technology?
11. What type of equipment or tools will I be using?
12. What type of clothing will be required?
13. Will health insurance be provided? a retirement plan?



Illustration on page 1: Petroglyphs (carvings on rock) from locations in the Southwest. These marks were made by ancient peoples.

# Social Studies

## Living History

Virgil James is perpetuating interest in and a love and appreciation for art by sharing with others the things he knows and teaching techniques of his skill to others. The parent or grandparent who shows the child or grandchild how to cook, quilt, or weave rugs, and so forth, is doing the same thing. If no one teaches, the skill is lost.

### Objectives:

Students will become aware that Native American craftspeople, and all others who share any skill, are keeping history alive; they are the links to the past and preservers of our culture.

Students will understand and appreciate their cultural history through its art.

Students will develop a respect for the contributions of the craftspeople in their area.

Students will develop pride in their heritage.

### Materials:

If possible, gather Native American art and crafts to add a greater depth to this lesson. Items such as pottery, paintings, jewelry, rugs, baskets, quilts, and so forth, will help make the lesson more meaningful.

### Exploration:

Display items. Allow students to respectfully touch the art objects. Encourage use of more than one sense (sight, touch, and so forth).

### Seminar:

Ask students what they can tell you about the people who made these items.

How did these people learn the skills?

Is the craft a new idea on the market?  
How far do they think they can go back into history and find evidence of this skill?  
What can we tell by the patterns?  
Can we tell anything by the colors or materials used?

### **Invention:**

After discussion and some conclusions by the class, ask them to name anyone in their family or someone they know who does art or crafts. This could be any type of needlework, woodwork, or other craft.

Put the names of the people on the board along with their type of craft. Ask the same questions as above for the people they've listed. Students may have arrived at the conclusion that many of the skills date back for centuries. Someone had to teach others or write instructions. Crafts-people of today learned from someone and that person learned from someone before them. Materials used were found in their habitat. Designs or drawings may have evolved because of the things they saw daily or were a part of their religion or belief system.

### **Application:**

Have students select an item or process to research. The item or process may be from inside or outside the home. Ceremonies, songs, dances, and so forth, could all be included as a research project. Research may include interviews, photographs, charts, or drawings. Students may use a camera, tape recorder, video recorder, or paper and pencil to record what they find out. Research should include differences and similarities of the art, now and in the past, and also information regarding any symbolism in the designs.

### **Additional Applications:**

1. Take a field trip to a museum.
2. Display books with old photographs of the crafts being done.
3. Have students discuss items at home that may be a link to someone in the past.
4. Have students condense their reports into a newsletter or booklet.

5. Have students write a biographical sketch on a craftsperson in their community.
6. Allow students to make a bulletin board on some aspect of their culture or some art form in order to depict the past and present and their linkages.
7. Invite a guest speaker to engage students in learning a craft or a process like cooking, singing, or playing a game.