

# PABLITA AT 100

## THE LEGACY OF TSE TSAN

BY ERIN JOYCE | FINE ARTS CURATOR

Puebloan artist Tse Tsan (Pablita Velarde, 1918-2006) was a pivotal figure in the Native American Fine Arts Movement of the 20th century, and one of the first Indigenous women to defy gender roles and pursue a career as an artist. Velarde was born on Santa Clara Pueblo, September 19, 1918 to Herman and Marianita Velarde. She was just two years old when her mother passed away. This prompted her father to send her, and her two sisters, to St. Catherine's Catholic School in Santa Fe as they each came of age. By the seventh grade, Velarde and her sisters transferred to Santa Fe Indian School, where she stayed until she graduated in 1936. This was a seminal moment, as it set the foundation for her interest in art. Studying under Dorothy Dunn, Pablita and her sister Rosita, were the first girls to be admitted to Dunn's art class at Santa Fe Indian School. Being outnumbered by her male counterparts, Velarde developed a tough exterior, often getting into fights with the boys in her class for catcalling or unwanted physical contact. Her willingness to stand up for herself and claim her own agency as a woman saw itself reflected in her approach to her artistic production.

At the time Pablita was growing up, painting in the Pueblos was not seen as women's work. Instead, women were active makers in mediums such as weaving, embroidery, textile production, and pottery. Painting was often reserved for ceremonial or spiritual purposes, and therefore limited to men. The notion of a woman being a painter within the context of Puebloan culture was radical. Under the tutelage of Dunn, as well as mentorship from San Ildefonso painter Tonita Peña, Velarde developed a style of art that was unique. Velarde borrowed from a Puebloan vocabulary, but created a framework for representation of not only her culture, but of her experience as a woman, as a woman of color, and as a woman who eschewed the pigeonholed gender roles that were forced upon her. Despite pushback from the men in her community, including her father, Velarde would not yield to the pressures of societal norms.



Portrait of Pablita Velarde (Santa Clara Pueblo) painting by Herbert Lotz.  
Billie Jane Baguley Library and Archives

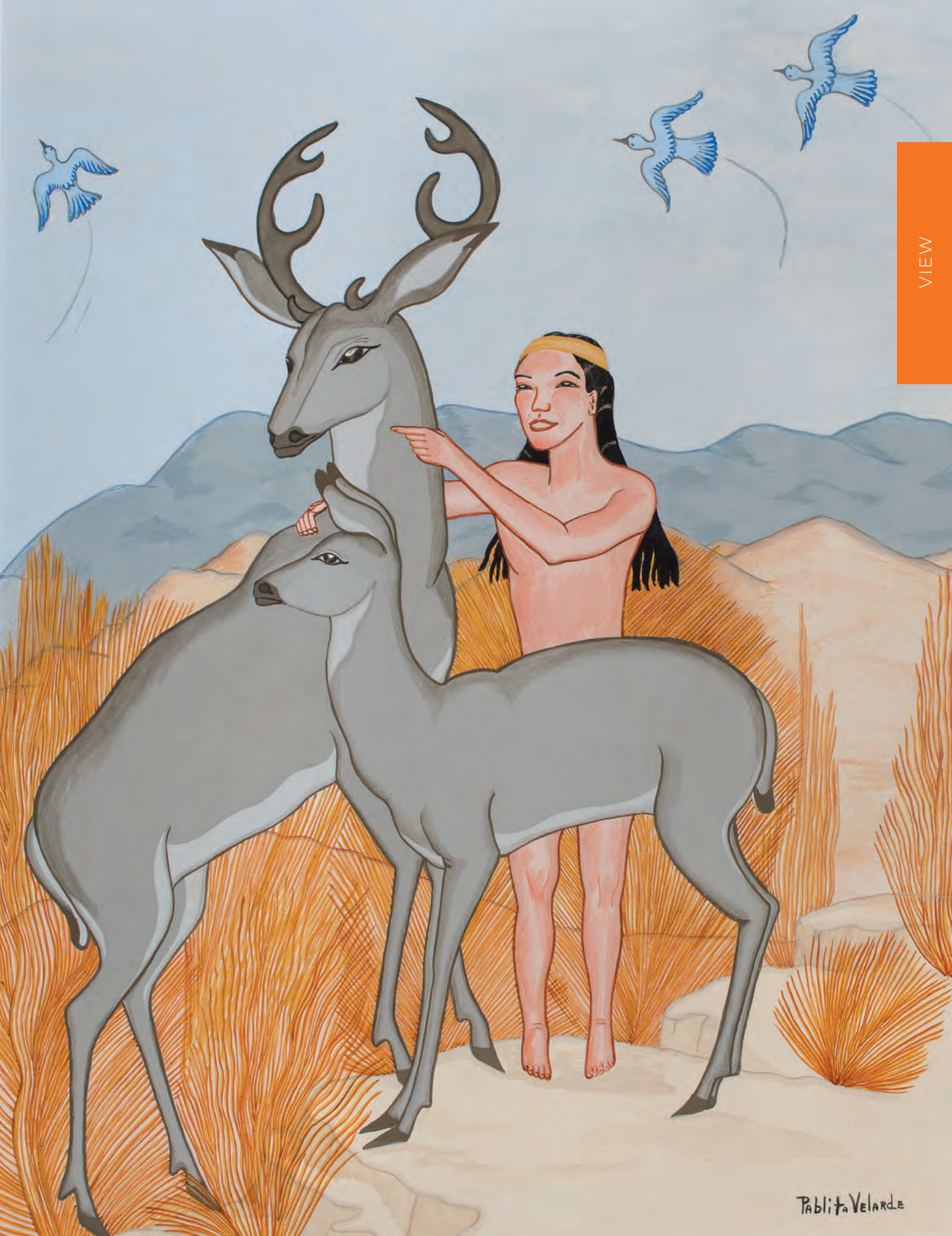
"Art was life. There was no escaping art," said Helen Tindel, Velarde's great-granddaughter. "That's all she talked about, 'not now, I'm painting' was what I always heard," remarked Tindel. Pablita rejected the perspectival systems of classical European painting and favored a flattened plane, layering the pigments of highly saturated hues upon the canvas or board she was using.

In 1942, Velarde married Herbert Hardin, with whom she had two children, Herbert Jr. and the Helen Hardin, who would become a noted artist in her own right. The marriage ended in divorce in 1959. "Herb Hardin... never took her seriously," said Tindel. "She [talked] to me about the struggles of being taken seriously as an Indigenous woman painter. I was always amazed how endless the struggles seemed to be," remarked Tindel. Velarde packed up paintings in her car and would drive from her home in New Mexico to Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, and California, selling her work to galleries. Velarde helped form a market appetite for Indigenous fine art before there really was one, on her own terms, telling the stories she wanted to tell, and how she wanted to tell them. "She wanted to tell an Indian

Right: *Sad Eyes*, from *Old Father Story Teller*. Casein on board, 1959

Heard Collection. Gift of Dan McGuinness, and Forrest and Helen Tindel.









story through an Indian voice... culture that was so precious to her," shared Tindel. Velarde was the recipient of numerous awards, including an honorary doctorate from the University of New Mexico and the Palmes d'Academie. Her pioneering efforts in the field of fine art paved the way for many Indigenous artists, and especially for Indigenous women, many of whom still face gender-based discrimination, with the majority of solo exhibitions in museums still going to men as of 2018.

Velarde lived to be 88 and passed away in 2006. In 2012, the Pablita Velarde Museum of Indian Women in the Arts opened in Santa Fe, showcasing the work of Velarde, her daughter Helen Hardin (who died at the age of 41 from breast cancer), and her granddaughter Margarete Bagshaw (who died from a brain tumor in 2015 at the age of 50), as well as the work of other Indigenous women artists working across a wide range of mediums. Following the closure of the Velarde Museum in 2015, the family archive was generously given to the Heard Museum. The Velarde archives include more than 40 linear feet of material, including drawings and sketchbooks, family photographs and scrapbooks, news

clippings, ephemera and awards, as well as a selection of original artworks by Velarde, Hardin, and Bagshaw. In addition to the holdings maintained in the archive, *The Velarde Studio*, an ongoing exhibition, is a faithful recreation of the artist's studio. Complete with the actual television she watched soap operas on as she painted, her sewing machine she used to produce her dolls, her grinding stone where she made her pigments, and reproductions of some of her works, this re-creation gives the viewer insight into what her daily environment was like. The archive and studio are a significant resource for the Heard, documenting the work of a remarkable artist and woman like Pablita Velarde.

As we enter the 100th year of her birth, we honor the legacy of Velarde, her impact, her work, and her life.

**Happy Birthday Pablita!**

Above: *Turkey Girl*, from *Old Father Story Teller*: Casein on board, 1959. Heard Collection Gift of Dan McGuinness, and Forrest and Helen Tindel.