Thoughts pad across my mind with the gentle compression of a moccasined footstep. The impressionist painting in front of me features a group of Native Americans, and the scene nudges me into a pondering state. At first my contemplating mind strolls slowly, meandering back to missionary days in Canada when I spent time among the native people of that country. The First Nation families—or natives, as many there called them—experienced love for one another, akin to countless families. In a disconcerting proportion of these First Nation families however, alcoholism had left broken children in its wake. I watched as parents, in their addictions, often left young ones to the care of others.

I became acquainted with a First Nation grandmother at the time she received long-sought guardianship of her nine-year-old grandson, a boy who never met his father and whose mother suffered from various addictions. The boy came home with his grandmother the night she took custody of him. She disclosed to me that he rested his head on the kitchen table and began to weep. Relief? Trauma?

“I just want to know who I am,” he told her.

Minerva Teichert would have answered his appeal. An artist who internalized her Mormon faith, Teichert believed in Book of Mormon accounts of an ancient people called Lamanites, whom she viewed as ancestors of current Native Americans or First Nation People (Book of Mormon introduction). The Book of Mormon describes the ancestral Lamanites as a chosen but self-destructive group. Teichert’s paintings echo both ends of that dichotomy as she similarly depicts contemporary Native Americans; she portrays them in her pageant scene *Weavers* as an elect yet ill-fated people.

*Weavers* illustrates the elect portion of Native American culture through granting evidence of industry, family, and faith. First, the painting shows industry in a group of women who gather for company while the work of harvesting and weaving take place. Initially the eye moves through the pleasant balance of form and color that Teichert uses, all of which contribute to a notion that these women feel pleased in their labors. Rita Wright, docent of Brigham Young University’s Museum of Art, points out that Teichert places one woman on each side of the scene as classic sentinels in
the Beaux Arts manner. In order to add to the balance of the composition, Teichert dresses the women in matching attire. She places their arms mutually raised in various acts of effort, with a container apiece at their feet. This harmony among subjects in her painting not only shows serenity while toiling but also indicates the connected nature of the Native American family. Moreover, horizontal lines contribute to a sense of peace in the work setting. Teichert creates these horizontal lines through accenting the waist of each woman with a scarlet sash, making lines connect to each other from one sash to another.

Teichert uses red hues to direct attention to the horizontal sashes, but she also uses a design of the same striking color in order to focus attention on the wool weaving centered between the painting’s other subjects. Study of Navajo art reveals that the design Teichert uses in the weaving is an expression of spirituality in native culture; its quadrant form represents the Four Sacred Mountains. She shows the faith of this group by the fact that they surround themselves with the sacred. Traditional Navajo believe that the loom connects them with the sacred mountains because the loom represents a microcosm of the earth itself. Furthermore, Navajo belief is that only by dwelling within the sacred mountains can a person live a life of safety and harmony (Roessel 1-45).

Despite the harmony in this scene, the realist in me pleads for historical accuracy—and feels bothered by the New England glen in the background of Weavers. Navajo would never live in these mild hills, so far from their sacred desert mountains. But I give Minerva Teichert the same forgiveness I offer to all theatrical presentations; a stage must utilize stereotypes, and after all, this is a pageant scene. Many of Teichert’s paintings depicted imagined stage sets, reflecting a popular art form in American culture during the period she attended art school in the early 1900s (“Minerva Teichert”). Although pageantry proved prime entertainment for this artist and her family, entertainment alone could not have been her end goal in the subject matter of her work.

Teichert knew personally those issues that affected the native people who posed in her art. She lived on ranches and near reservations most of her life in the American West (“Minerva Teichert”). She became familiar with Native American culture at a time when it underwent government sanctioned assault. The entire nation witnessed rape of tradition, for example, through forced removal of native children from their reservation homes to placement in boarding schools. At the time of this painting’s creation in 1935, residential schools all over North America assimilated native people into their surrounding white culture (“Grand Jean”).

In contrast to the struggle that existed in her day, Teichert makes Weavers have a high level of soft harmony in form, brush-stroke and color, giving the impression that this group is still a chosen people, living an abundant life. She
attempts a snapshot of a golden age, glamorizing the condition of her subjects. However, the focal point of the painting is a youth. His coloring has less golden a hue than his surroundings, his skin even a grayish quality that makes me shudder. His pensive expression reminds me of native children I knew who had the sadness of premature adulthood in their eyes. He holds a weapon, yet stands among women to indicate that he feels awkward in his emerging manhood. Where does he fit in his surroundings? He seems to wonder. It is the question native children still ask today.

And then I notice a grown man in the shadows of the forest. Perhaps he is there to answer the boy’s unspoken query. Many viewers will hope so. They might even suppose that Teichert meant the grown figure to represent the chief this stripling warrior will become someday. But again, the realist in me cries for justice and I realize with some measure of sadness that Native American men exist for the most part in days gone by. The children today lack fathers to answer their questions, and these mothers that Teichert portrays are busy with the tasks of life. These women cannot fill both roles. The final masculine figure in the piece, a moose, watches the boy from the forest. This beast the artist has let remain a sketch, unfinished and shadowy, like the life of her painting’s small hero.

Only as I turn to depart from my wandering in this impressionist forest do I realize that the border of the canvas holds woodland creatures busily laying up stores for wintry weather. And then the moccasins in my mind start jogging, racing to realize with a chill that every bit of this painting holds scraps of Autumn: here a gourd, there turkeys, and the yellowing leaves on trees…! This ‘Indian summer’ and plentiful harvest has come to an end, has given way to the season of fall. Ultimately Teichert witnessed a fall first-hand--the destruction of a whole society--and whether intentional or not, Weavers foreshadows the winter to come.
Works Cited


Roessel, Monty. Songs from the Loom: A Navajo Girl Learns to Weave (We are Still Here: Native Americans Today). Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1995.