SCENES FROM SPIRO LIFE

Art Works By

Donald R. Johnson

Funded by THE OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES COMMITTEE,
THE OKLAHOMA ARCHEOLOGICAL SURVEY,
and EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

"SCENES FROM SPIRO LIFE"

An Art Exhibit

Of Spiro Prehistory

As Interpreted By

Donald R. Johnson

Written By

Mary Ann Holmes

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Shortly before the Arkansas River leaves Le Flore County, Oklahoma, bound for the Mississippi, it meanders through a fertile valley wedged between the Ouachita Mountains to the south and the Ozark foothills to the north. Arkansas' forests give way to Oklahoma's tall grass prairies here, and a profusion of plant and animal life results from the meeting. Hundreds of years ago, these abundant natural resources attracted native Americans to an area of uplands and terraces near a gentle river bend. Now known as the Spiro Mounds site, it is one of the most important archeological discoveries in North America.

The first frequent visitors came around the birth of Christ. One stop in a seasonal migration between hunting and gathering camps, the Spiro area sheltered deer, opossums, squirrels, rabbits, and turkeys. Shallow waters in the river's oxbow lakes held easily-caught fish. Pecan trees, grapes, and berries grew in the rich soil annually deposited by the Arkansas.

The people who passed through Spiro at this time hunted with spears tipped with bone or chipped stone

points. They wore pendant necklaces of bone, stone, and shell, and slender bone pins ornamented their hair. When group members died, their legs and arms were drawn up to the chest, and they were covered with soil.

Using spears, early Spiro hunters pursue a fleeing white tailed deer. The deer will provide meat and leather, and its bone will be used for tools and ornaments.

Over time, the lives of these hunter-gatherers changed. In addition to harvesting wild foods, they began planting seeds obtained in trade from horticultural peoples in other parts of the country. After the planting, the group moved on following game

and returned later to harvest their crops of corn, beans, and squash.

Sometime before 800 A.D., these people became full-fledged farmers while still maintaining some traditional hunting-gathering pursuits. Descendents of the hunter-gatherers (perhaps 50 to 100 at a time) lived at Spiro year round. They chopped down large trees and burned the underbrush to clear fields. Their four-sided houses were built of vertically placed logs and cane covered over with clay; four interior cedar posts supported steeply slanted, thatched roofs. Similar villages up and down the river and on feeder streams soon formed a community of successful farmers.

By 850 A.D., however, the Spiro Mounds site had taken on a unique character. While continuing the business of raising food, other area villages recognized certain Spiro residents as political and/or religious leaders.

These Spiro chiefs became powerful figures. They controlled trade between the vast reaches of the Plains and the steamy, verdant southeast Woodlands. They directed everyday farmers in the building of

around a plaza in which religious ceremonies could be held.

The religious ritualism at Spiro, as at a group of sites scattered throughout the Southeast, centered on the care and disposal of the honored dead. Spiro lay at the western limit of this religious practice, now known as Southern Cult, in which the ruling class depended on local farmers for food and labor.

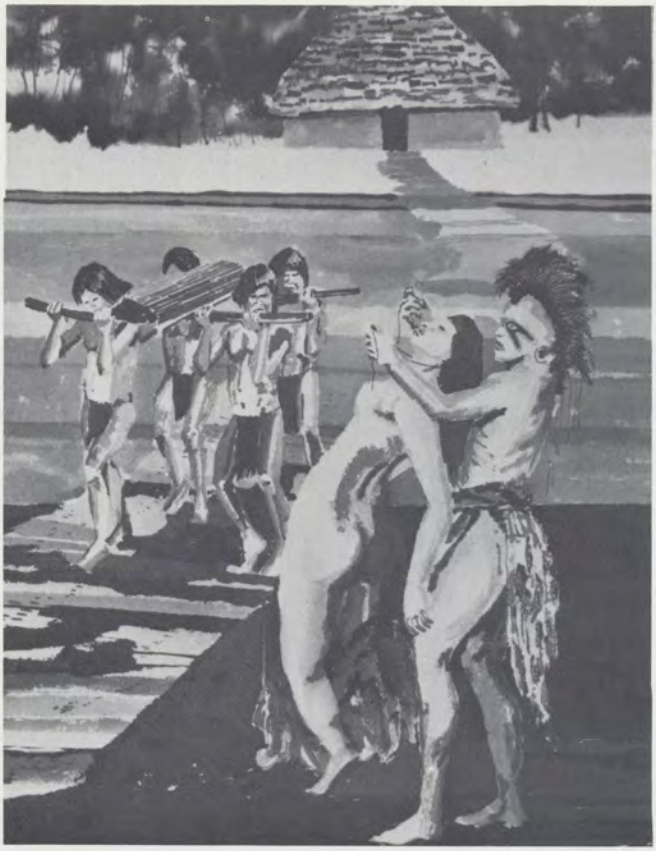
By 1250 A.D., Southern Cult ideas dominated the lives of Spiro area people. To increase their control over the farmers, the Spiro chiefs had moved into nearby villages, leaving the mound site vacant. On ceremonial occasions, though, the chiefs and their followers returned to honor ancestral leaders and to bring the bodies of those whose status entitled them to burial at Spiro.

An imposing mortuary house, some 9 m x 15 m, stood on the river terrace. The highest-ranking dead lay on cedar litters which had been carried in procession to the site by as many as ten men. Around them lay a wealth of ornamental grave goods, most intentionally crushed and broken. Warclubs, engraved conch shells, fresh-water pearls, feather robes, and

copper headdress plates bore witness to the position and power of these leaders. The remains of less prestigious chiefs rested in woven, lidded baskets.

Over the next 150 years, mound building continued in only two areas of the site. A flat-topped mound in the upland mounds ringing the plaza reached a height of 5 m. The other mound began when the mortuary house on the river terrace was dismantled and buried under soil. In stages, this mound grew to 6 m and covered pits holding skeletal remains and burial goods transferred from surrounding mortuary houses.

By 1450 A.D., the Spiro people had deserted the mound site. Native Americans continued farming in the area but, for reasons which are not clearly understood, they abandoned the ritual and pageantry of Southern Cult practices. Some of today's Wichita are probably the descendents of the Spiro Mounds people who had moved west to hunt buffalo.



The death of a Southern Cult chief, whose body is being borne to the mortuary house, is marked by the slaying of his wife. His slaves and other relatives may also be killed to accompany him in the afterlife.

Traders from the Southeast negotiate with Spiro leaders. A pungent mixture of tobacco weed and other herbs are smoked in the pipe shaped from stone.

Neighboring villagers look on as Spiro priests and leaders perform the corn dance, celebrating a successful harvest.

A Spiro man lashes willow boughs to cedar posts in the building of a house. The house roof will be thatched with prairie and swamp grasses and its walls plastered with clay. The chief's power is indicated by the size of his house; at his death this building may become his mortuary.

Spiro women weed a garden plot of squash and corn. The women's hoes have been fashioned from flint blades hafted to hardwood saplings.

A mother and child at play following the collapse of Southern Cult influence. Small, independent farming villages have replaced those which paid allegiance to Spiro leaders.

The Artist

Donald R. Johnson, a graduate of Northeastern State University at Tahlequah and the University of Oklahoma, is currently an Assistant Professor of Art at Emporia State University at Emporia, Kansas. In addition to his present exhibition on Spiro life, Don has worked on past grants dealing with the Santa Fe Trail and Great Plains. The technique used on the "Scenes from Spiro Life" exhibit is Ink-Wash.

The Writer

Mary Ann Holmes is a 1974 graduate of the University of Oklahoma. With a degree in English and a minor in History, Mary Ann has written several popular publications on Oklahoma Prehistory, including "The Spiro Site" a popular rendering of the Spiro Mounds.

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About the Cover

Professor Johnson has based his artist conceptions of "Spiro Life" on archeological findings made at the Spiro site. These findings originate from the WPA sponsored scientific excavations of 1936 to 1941 (depicted in the bottom view) and the Oklahoma Tourism-Recreation Department and Oklahoma Archeological Survey sponsored scientific field work from 1979 to the present (depicted in the top view).