

SUE KRZYSTON

# 'Light is Everything'

*By Vicki Stavig*

S. Krzyston



*A Sense of Culture, oil, 16" by 20"*

*"The soft folds and rich colors of this blanket help to accentuate the colorful beadwork of these carefully beaded moccasins."*

**W**hen Sue Krzyston and her husband Mike moved into their new house in Phoenix, Arizona, the bare walls were begging to be filled. Having taken

*(Left) A Richness of Culture, oil, 30" by 24"*

*"In this painting, I tried to instill a calm, peaceful feeling. I draped the blanket in soft folds and added an array of chili peppers in the golden, glowing pottery to draw the eye to the beautiful, beaded moccasins and lone pepper perched on the edge."*

a six-month painting class, and at Mike's suggestion that she replace the starkness of those walls with her own paintings, Krzyston got to work. Soon their new home was filled with colorful creations.

And so it began. Those paintings led to a passionate pursuit of painting, of creating vibrant still lifes that, combined with her love of Native American artifacts, have become a driving force in Krzyston's life. Her paintings quickly attracted the attention and admiration of collectors who were—and continue to be—captivated by her vibrant works.

Krzyston has been collecting Indian artifacts for 40 years and has

accumulated so many of them that friends refer to her home as her "private museum." Something in those artifacts, she says, "just speaks to me—the designs or the craftsmanship—and I know I want to incorporate them into my art. I am inspired by the beauty and intricacy of the Native American artifacts that I select for my compositions. By using light and shadow to guide the eye through my painting, I try to properly showcase each artifact and their wonderful textures."

Krzyston's compositions don't come easily. When planning a new painting, she walks through the house and her studio and studies her



*An Enduring Heritage, oil, 36" by 24"*

*"I have recently started a series of 'shadowbox' paintings. In this commissioned painting, I used dramatic light and shadow to create the illusion of depth and dimension and to really showcase these wonderful artifacts."*

artifacts. "I'll take about a week setting up different arrangements," she says. "I'll put in new things, change the lighting, and keep photographing them. Then I put the photos on my computer and can see what will be the best as far as composition and lighting."

As she paints, Krzyston has the live composition in front of her and the photograph of it on her computer screen. Why both? "In case the chili peppers start to shrivel, I have the image on my computer," she says. She also might combine elements of several images because she pre-



fers the tilt of one pot or the lighting on another. Whatever she does, it works—and it works well.

"I try to convey my respect for the artisans who created each piece and my admiration for the artistry in each artifact," Krzyston says. "I try to capture my feelings on canvas and hope to have viewers relate to them."

Today she is an award-winning artist and a member of the National Oil and Acrylic Painters Society, American Women Artists, and the Mountain Oyster Club. The latter came about in 2018. "It was very exciting," Krzyston says. "Every year a committee decides on an honorary member to induct. I had been participating in the club's annual juried show for about 15 years. It was a very big honor that just blew me away."

She is also proud of a commission she completed several years ago for a fruit and vegetable importer. "They commissioned me to do a painting for Arizona congressmen and senators for their offices in Washington, D. C.," she says. "I did nine of them; it was a real thrill. They flew me to D. C. when the first three were installed in the offices."

Those paintings, which included a broad array of fruits and vegetables with an Arizona theme, provided Krzyston with an education in the nuances of her subjects. "Who knew that a zucchini and a cucumber would look so different?" she



*Butterflies and Beads, oil, 30" by 24"*

*"Why did I select Butterflies and Beads for the title? The beadwork on this sash is obvious at first glance, but to find the butterfly pattern woven into the basket needs a closer look!"*

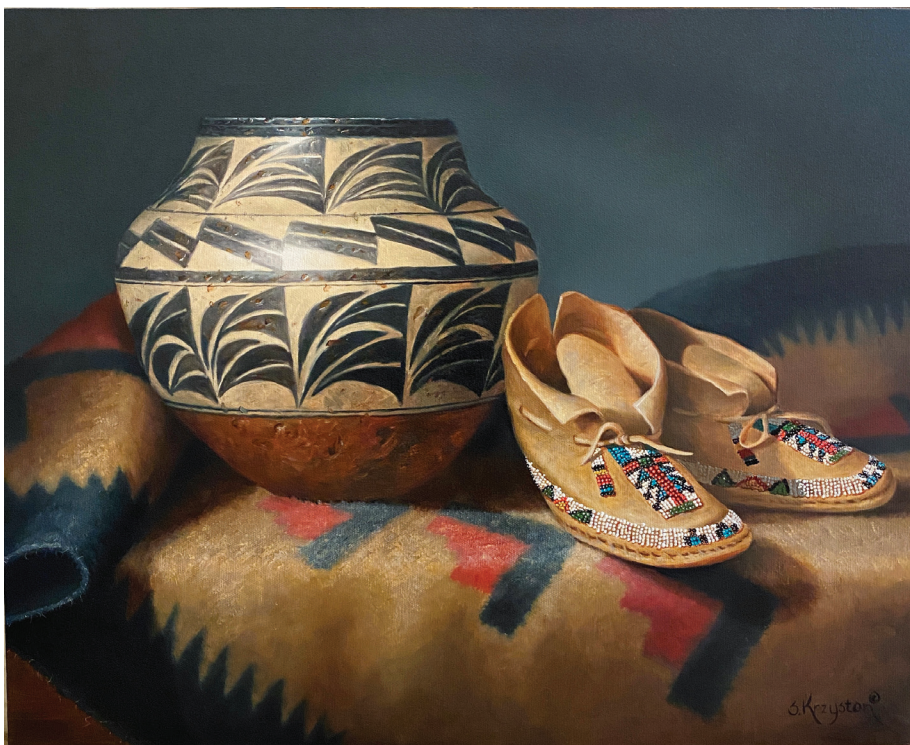


(Top left) *Collective Artistry*, oil, 30" by 24"

"The artistry of the Native Americans is so awe inspiring to me. In this painting, I tried to capture the intricacy and detail of these beautifully beaded pieces and the carefully woven basket."

(Bottom left) *An Intimate Look*, oil, 16" by 20"

"I love the age and character of this wonderful old pot. I wanted to highlight the nicks and rub marks and beauty of the usage it has seen, so I surrounded it with the soft textures and tones of the folded blanket, leather moccasins and slightly illuminated background."



says. "I did everything from grapes and watermelons to eggplants and onions and everything in between. That project took almost two years to complete."

Although most of her paintings focus on Native American artifacts, Krzyston occasionally includes cobalt vases, flowers, and cowboy hats. "I've also added more beadwork on belts, bags, and moccasins," she says. "To me, it's all about texture and painting light on different surfaces and textures to make them come alive with glistening beads versus the softness of a blanket. Light is everything; it's what makes a painting come alive. I have five or six layers of paint on every bead so it's all built up and has a three-dimensional look. It's labor intensive. I use a lot of layers and glazes to get a luminous look; the light bounces through the painting."

Krzyston's use of colors combines with her use of light to bring life to her paintings. "For the most part, my colors are true [to what I'm portraying] but I do play around with them, depending on the effect I want to get. Sometimes, for example, I'll make a red more vibrant to add more impact. I also might change the tone of the patterns in an artifact to correspond with other artifacts in the composition."

What she doesn't change, however, is the essence of an artifact. In a 1992 article in this publication,

Krzyston shared an anecdote that is worth repeating here. A couple was interested in one of her paintings that included an old, cracked pot as the centerpiece. The man thought that, for the price of the painting, Krzyston should mend the pot. She graciously explained the history of the artifact—and the painting sold.

Raised in Wisconsin, Krzyston met and married Mike 53 years ago. They moved to Phoenix in 1972 where Mike was a successful insurance agent and Krzyston worked in furniture sales for 10 years before retiring. In need of a hobby, she began taking art classes, including workshops with award-winning still life artists David Leffel and Gregg Kreutz at the Scottsdale Artists School, while also visiting museums and galleries and studying art books.

Leffel instilled in her the importance of the placement of light in a painting. “He told me that objects couldn’t look light unless the surface it was on also looked light; you have to balance it,” Krzyston says. “Shining light gives depth and dimension to a painting. You lead the eye through it by where you place the light and the shadows.”

Soon after, Krzyston entered the Phippen Museum Show in Prescott, and sold several paintings. “I said to myself, ‘I think I can do this!’” she says. “Then I did outdoor art shows and festivals, and soon galleries came calling. I had always been artsy and crafty, but it had never occurred to me that I could be an artist.”

Now retired, Mike helps Krzyston with her career, framing her paintings and handling all the shipping chores. “He has an excellent artistic eye,” she says. “If I’m having trouble with something, he can see where I can correct or enhance things.”

Painting with oils on canvas, Krzyston says she has never even considered using another medium. She does, however, hope to see other changes in her work as she captures in three-dimensional realism the images that represent the souls of the people who create them. “I hope to keep challenging myself and




*Infused With Light, oil, 30" by 24"*

*“In this painting, I wanted to focus on the beauty of the Santa Clara Pottery and the turquoise moccasins, so I kept the composition simple and surrounded them with the wonderful patterns and rich colors of the Navajo rugs.”*

continuing to grow in technique as I continue to paint,” she says.

A few months ago, Krzyston was working on a painting that is a little larger than she normally does—a 24” by 36” piece—of Indian artifacts that included rugs and baskets. She also was preparing for the Mountain Oyster Club’s annual show in November and a gallery show the same month, followed by the Settlers West Miniature Show in February.

There’s more to Krzyston than art, however. Three months ago,

she and Mike were excited to be preparing for a cruise to Alaska. Unfortunately, they had to cancel at the last minute when both of them tested positive for COVID. “We love to travel,” she says. “We’ve traveled all over the world. I don’t bring my paints; it’s time to relax and absorb art in the rest of the world.” 

*Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.*