

**NARCISSA  
CHISHOLM  
OWEN**  
**1831-1911**



**MOTHER  
OF  
CHEROKEE  
PAINTING**

If Cecil Dick (1915-1992) is the “Father of Cherokee painting”, then Narcissa Chisholm Owen, who was born 84 years previous, would be the “Mother of Cherokee painting”. Owen won multiple awards for her naturalistic oil painting, and several works survive in museum collections today.

Narcissa was born in 1831 at Webbers Falls, Indian Territory. Her father, Thomas Chisholm, was a chief of the Old Settlers, the Cherokees who migrated west prior to the 1838 forced removal. He caught typhoid fever during a gathering at Tahlequah and died in 1834 when Narcissa was only three years old. This was shortly before eastern Cherokees moved through the area as part of the Trail of Tears.

Narcissa later wrote of witnessing a group of Army-supervised Cherokees camp on their mother’s farm in January 1839, noting the cruelty of herding human beings accustomed to warm winters through the cold and wind. She described how many refugees were sick and dozens died – buried in their family graveyard.

Narcissa majored in music and art at the College of Evansville in Indiana. While teaching in Tennessee, she met Virginia-born civil engineer Robert L. Owen, who was surveying a railroad route over the Appalachian Mountains from Lynchburg to Nashville. The couple eventually married and moved to Lynchburg, Virginia. The Civil War and its aftermath left the family in poverty. Robert died in 1873, leaving Narcissa with two sons. Her son Robert Jr. would later become Oklahoma’s first U. S. Senator.

In 1880, Narcissa moved back to Indian Territory – with the piano her husband had given her as a wedding present. She taught music at the Cherokee Female Seminary, near Tahlequah. In 1895, the 62-year old Narcissa Owen retired from teaching, devoting herself to art. She painted landscapes (as well as portraits and miniatures) using oil paint. Her self-portrait of 1896 indicates her Victorian-era respectability and wealth.

Both Narcissa’s father and grandfather had been friends with Thomas Jefferson. Her oil painting, “Thomas Jefferson and His Descendants”, won a medal at the Louisiana Purchase Expedition, as known as the St. Louis Exposition, in 1904. An additional painting won a diploma. Owen painted the best picture of Sequoyah, which she copied from Charles Bird King’s portrait. It shows Sequoyah smoking a long-stemmed pipe and holding in his hand a tablet bearing his alphabet. This picture is almost life size and was on exhibition in Muskogee during the Sequoyah Convention in the summer of 1905.

Owen died in 1911 in Guthrie, Oklahoma. Her body was returned to Lynchburg, Virginia for burial beside her husband Robert. Her painting “Thomas Jefferson and His Descendants” is now part of the Herman Collection of the University of Virginia Art Museum. Her painting of Sequoyah, 1904 Exposition medal, and her 1896 self-portrait belong to the Oklahoma Historical Society. Her painting of Sequoyah is displayed at the Oklahoma Judicial Center. Several of her other paintings are in the collection of the Oklahoma Museum of Art and Gilcrease Museum.