

WHY THE COTTONWOOD LEAF?

As the newly birthed Wild Hearts Gallery searched for a symbol of its existence, we visited images of many of our wild neighbors in Placitas – the corvids, the raptors, the big cats, the bears. And while we coexist with all these creatures and marvel when they enter our space, they live their lives apart from us. But the cottonwood tree, untamed as it is, possesses qualities not unlike art itself and provides the inspiration to create.

There is something symbolic in the tree's heart-shaped leaves that appealed to us. But there is a lot more to this towering tree, which shares its ancestry with willows, poplars and aspen. It is a tree of generosity, storing water where there is little and giving shade, shelter, medicine, fuel and food in return. A tiny cutting from the branch of a cottonwood contains a perfect five-point star, which is the source of many legends. In the Southwest, its branches and trunks are used in making ceremonial drums, prayer sticks and Hopi Katsinas. Its long-stemmed leaves flutter in the slightest breeze – reflecting sunlight and creating a delicate sound like running water. In spring the female tree casts its future to the winds with little puffs of cotton, each containing a single seed. In fall, you will find them dressed in brilliant gold, the subject of many a painting.

And so, the cottonwood tree feeds the natural and spirit world around it. The whispering leaves are like music, providing inspiration for our work. Next time you see a cottonwood tree, stop and listen. Some of you may be inspired to greater heights of artistic accomplishment; others will find the gift of peace that comes from listening to the wind in the shade of this majestic tree