

JOHN LOUIS CLARKE (1881–1970)

CUTAPUIS — “THE MAN WHO TALKS NOT”

“In whatever he did, John Clarke’s intensity belied the odds that faced him throughout his life.”

— Author Dale A. Burk, 1982

blackfoot tribesman John Clarke quietly earned an international reputation for his sensitively executed, vibrant wood carvings of bears, mountain goats, and other wild animals of the Glacier National Park area. His successes were particularly remarkable because—at the age of two—scarlet fever left him permanently deaf and mute, earning him his Blackfoot name, *Cutapuis*—“the man who talks not.”

Born in Highwood in 1881, John was the grandson of noted Montana fur man Malcolm Clarke and the son of Blackfoot tribesman Horace Clarke. He was educated at the Fort Shaw Indian School and at institutions for the deaf in North Dakota, Montana, and Wisconsin. Throughout his life, he patiently communicated by writing notes, or by using sign language, or by creating art.



John’s artistic abilities emerged at a very early age. In 1913 he returned to East Glacier where he opened a studio from which he operated until his death in 1970. John Clarke quickly became a widely acclaimed, greatly respected member of the reservation community. In 1918 John married Mary “Mamie” Simon. Until her death in 1947, Mamie served as John’s invaluable business partner—handling his scheduling, contracts, promotion, and sales. The couple adopted a daughter, Joyce (Mrs. Irvin Turvey), in 1931.

John Clarke is usually considered self-taught, although he attended the Chicago Art Institute for a short time. John became a most prolific artist who worked in oils, watercolors, clays, charcoals, and even crayons. But his real fame developed from his reputation as a wood carver, particularly using cottonwood. At his height, John was “generally considered the best portrayer of Western wildlife in the world.”

Clarke’s works were exhibited in Paris, London, Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and throughout Montana. His patrons included John D. Rockefeller, President Warren G. Harding, Louis W. Hill, and Charlie Russell. Some of his more famous pieces include flanking panels at the Museum of the Plains Indian in Browning, a massive bas-relief at the Montana Historical Society in Helena, and the Philippine-mahogany entrance panels at the Blackfoot Indian Hospital in Browning. The John L. Clarke Western Art Gallery and Memorial Museum opened in East Glacier in 1977.

John Clarke was a patient, kind, determined man with a strong sense of humor. Facing odds that would have deterred lesser men, he crafted a career as a renowned Blackfoot artist. His legacy survives as a worthy inspiration to all Montanans.

