

PRISON



Leonard Peltier.

Through Art

Leonard Peltier (Anishinaabe/Dakota/Lakota) seeks clemency from imprisonment but finds peace and hope through art.

BY TATÉ WALKER (MNICONJOU LAKOTA)

ON FAN AND SUPPORT SITES ACROSS THE INTERNET, a timer is ever in motion. Visitors can watch as it counts the years, days, hours, minutes and seconds that Leonard Peltier has been imprisoned.

Those numbers, like others in Peltier's life, grow bigger and bigger: 2016 marks 40 years since Peltier was arrested in connection with, and later convicted of—in what many consider to be controversial court proceedings—the deaths of two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in 1975. The 71-year-old Native rights activist, who has spent more than half his life as federal prisoner No. 89637-132, has always maintained his innocence.

The number of supporters across the globe seems to have swelled, as well, and include many high profile celebrities. They've worked hard toward Peltier's freedom for decades, and, given the man's age and health, a sense of urgency surrounds recent efforts, especially as a president who's lent a seemingly sympathetic ear to Native issues prepares to leave office.

For a primer on Leonard Peltier and the events surrounding the shootout with FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation on June 26, 1975, watch the Robert Redford-produced documentary *Incident at Oglala* here: www.freepeltiernow.org/incident.html

"I'm not sure I have much time left," Peltier writes in a recent *CounterPunch* column. A diabetic, Peltier was recently diagnosed with an abdominal aortic aneurysm, which, if it bursts, could cause paralysis or death.

His next parole hearing—in 2024—is too far off for comfort. For many, one last hope remains: In the half-year President Obama has left

in the Oval Office, he could grant executive clemency for the man who Amnesty International and other organizations consider a political prisoner. Obama has commuted the sentences of dozens of other federal prisoners during his time in office.

Though clemency is the ultimate goal, Peltier keeps hope in other places. Art, he says, offers him a sense of freedom that no bars or corrupt justice systems can deny him. Though he's cut off from the very cultures and experiences he paints, such as powwows and traditional ceremonial items, the Native American portraits and scenes that Peltier donates to family are turned into valuable investments that help, in part, to fund his defense and clemency campaigns.

More important, painting takes his mind off the ceaseless countdown toward an uncertain future. He is "in the moment," he says.

"[Painting] helps me keep my sanity and [offers] moments of getting away from here," writes Peltier, who answered questions for this story via email from his Florida prison. While he's a fan of oils, Peltier's art is limited by what's allowed in prison. He says he sometimes has access to acrylics, pastels, colored pencils and watercolors.

He says he and others began recognizing his creativity as far back as first grade. "But even before I started school, I would be drawing and craving to make my own toys," writes Peltier, who grew up living on North Dakota's Spirit Lake and Turtle Mountain reservations. "Art has always been my first love, as it was with a lot of Native youth of my generation. That's all we did and [we] tried our damndest to outdo one another. We'd draw/create a piece of art by carving on wood pieces, rocks, leather—anything that we could make look pleasant to our eye."

Buying Peltier's art from the International Leonard Peltier Defense Committee (ILPDC), which sells his originals for anywhere from \$1,200

COURTESY OF THE INTERNATIONAL LEONARD PELTIER DEFENSE COMMITTEE

to \$9,000 (and copies of those pieces for much more affordable prices), is one of the best ways to support Peltier's legal costs and the broader movement he stands for with regard to social justice in Indian Country, says Kari Ann Boushee (Ojibwe), ILPDC co-director and one of Peltier's art agents. She is also Peltier's niece and issues a reminder that her uncle donates his art to ILPDC and earns no income from the sale of that art.

"Leonard's art can bring you to the beauty of the Native people. With looking at his artwork, this can also bring people to a better understanding of the Native culture," says Boushee. "When Leonard paints, he has stated that this gives him a time out of his prison block ... a time to remember when he was free. I am thankful that he has this outlet to give him freedom of the mind. And when a collector purchases a painting, it does get the word out [as to] who Leonard is and his story."

Peltier's art has been shown and sold at galleries and markets across the globe. His work has even gone on the powwow trail, Boushee says.

"One of the most recent paintings that Leonard has created is called

'Archer,' a Dakota elder and sundancer who is also a hunter," she says.

"The painting shows how he has sacrificed and been a warrior and provider his whole life."

While Peltier is an icon in his own right, Boushee says Peltier's freedom would represent not just a win for a

To purchase art by Leonard Peltier in support of his clemency campaign, visit <http://peltierart.com>.

Donations can be made on Leonard Peltier's behalf to the International Leonard Peltier Defense Committee. For more information, visit www.whoisleonardpeltier.info.

wrongfully convicted elder, but also a win for the rights of Indigenous people and justice reform worldwide. Among his many accolades, Peltier was recently honored with the Frantz Fanon Award, given annually at a multicultural event in Paris that addresses racism. The award pays tribute to "revolutionary thinkers and their service to mankind."

Working to free Peltier is never-ending work, Boushee says.

"We work with all people and organizations to help spread the story of his wrongful incarceration and accept support from others so that it will get to the correct person to grant his clemency: Obama," Boushee says. "Obama says, 'Show me the support for Leonard,' and with that thousands of people and organizations are demanding [Peltier's] freedom."

The ILPDC website, www.whoisleonardpeltier.info, has a host of resources, including links to and copies of resolutions passed by tribal governments and international organizations in support of Peltier.

"Most of [Peltier's] supporters have unbiased opinions," Boushee says. "They read the facts and are very upset this has happened to a citizen of the USA—not only a citizen, but a true human with deep, deep roots to this land."

While legions of supporters attempt to make what may be their last opportunity to get Peltier released, the artist himself waits. Despite—or perhaps because of—his health concerns, Peltier has pushed himself to create dozens of new and original paintings to assist in funding the clemency campaign, as well as to connect with the culture and natural world denied him these last 40 years.

On canvas, he writes, he is free.

"I try to paint something every day and I have gotten very fast; once I have an idea in my head, I can paint it in a few hours or days. It depends on how much time we have without any lockdowns," Peltier writes. "I'm



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always thinking about what to paint next. I always do one painting at a time, start to finish.

"Here in prison I use my art time to paint/record our history and whatever I feel like, as I can now paint almost anything," he continues. "It also helps me get away from this prison environment and get lost in whatever I'm creating."

Editor's note: Taté Walker fully supports clemency for Leonard Peltier. This does not necessarily reflect the view of Native Peoples magazine, its staff or affiliates.