



NATIVE SON

Perkins artist Mike Larsen is a household name in the Oklahoma art world and beyond. His favorite subjects include Indians in contemporary and historic settings, painted in Larsen's distinctive style.

With These Hands

CHICKASAW ARTIST MIKE LARSEN PAINTS A PICTURE OF OKLAHOMA THROUGH SOULFUL PORTRAITS AND INSPIRING LANDSCAPES, A BODY OF WORK BEFITTING THE 2006 OKLAHOMAN OF THE YEAR.

Mike Larsen OKLAHOMAN OF THE YEAR

By Brooke Adcox

ACCORDING TO LEGEND, Native Americans refused to be photographed out of a belief that the image could steal their souls. Chickasaw artist Mike Larsen, then, is in the business of painting souls. Using canvas and oil paint rather than celluloid and flashbulbs, Larsen has spent the majority of his life capturing the essence of his subjects one brush stroke at a time.

His works feature thoughtful eyes; strong facial features; compelling body positions; dramatic backgrounds; brilliant colors; and expressive, oversized hands—all of which combine to make each painting and sculpture come alive to tell its story. Through subjects like Oklahoma's Native American ballerinas, Indian shamans, the legendary Pistol Pete, and the elders of his own Chickasaw tribe, Larsen paints a picture of Oklahoma that is respectful, historically accurate, expressive, imaginative, powerful, and most important, honorable.

"Mike Larsen has an amazing ability to understand and bring to the canvas the true personality and character of the people he paints," says Chickasaw Governor Bill Anoatubby. "Each of his paintings tells a unique story. He establishes a respectful relationship with his subject that is expressed in his final work."

Often discussed in the company of famous Oklahoma Native American artists Woody Crumbo, Acee Blue Eagle, and Jerome Tiger, this soft-spoken, humble man would sooner talk about his gratitude to be a working artist than the magnitude and effect his work has on the Native American and Oklahoma art communities.

"We are losing a lot of our master artists," says Betty Price, executive director of the Oklahoma Arts Council. "Mike is a bridge into this century in terms of Native American artists who

are here and have made such great contributions to our state."

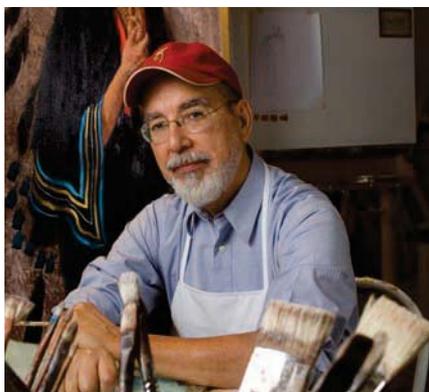
In 2006, Larsen had a record year of giving back to his home state. He was recognized as the Red Earth Honored One in June, saw one of his paintings selected to adorn the Centennial stamp in September, completed twenty-four portraits of Chickasaw elders the same month, and worked on two larger-than-life Centennial sculptures for the Oklahoma City Civic Center through October. "It seems like all of a sudden, but not all of a sudden, we are astoundingly busy," he says.

But 2006 isn't Larsen's first big splash onto the art scene; this sixty-two-year-old has steadily been developing his craft as a professional artist in Oklahoma for more than thirty-five years. A self-described working-class Oklahoman—who wears blue jeans, collared shirts, and broken-in cowboy boots—Larsen drives a GMC Yukon to and from his downtown Perkins studio six days

a week and often tells his best friend and fellow artist Harvey Pratt that he is "Paintin' pictures. That's what I do, paint pictures."

Modesty aside, Larsen thoroughly researches the smallest details of every painting or sculpture. With so many of his subjects historical and Native American figures, he spends an exhaustive amount of time with his nose in books. But even more important, Larsen continually seeks to express what he values as the most important element of art, emotion.

"I paint people in an action before or after an event: That's where the emotion is," says Larsen. "If you are playing a game, you are totally involved in it. But afterward, you are tired if you lost or elated that you won. It's the emotion before or after the event I try to capture."



Mike Larsen in his Perkins studio with his most recently completed painting, *Sings to God*

OBSTACLE COURSE

Born in Dallas in 1944, Larsen spent several years living on the Wynnewood family farm with his maternal grandparents, Otto and Lela Carter. Otto, a spitfire sharecropper just over five-and-a-half-feet tall, taught Mike the true meaning of hard work. But even his larger-than-life grandfather—who'd slug the family mule, Son of a Bitch, before every day of plowing—couldn't protect three-year-old Mike from contracting a debilitating strain of polio in 1947.

"When he was in isolation in Dallas, they wouldn't let me go in to see him, but they let me stand back and look at him through a glass," says Mike's eighty-nine-year-old mother, Ruth Larsen, also of Perkins. "They would slap wet chamois right on him that were fresh out of boiling water. And he would lie there with tears rolling down his face, but he wouldn't have a crying spell. There's just so much about Mike that doesn't show."

What few people know about Larsen's accomplished career is that the artist, born right-handed, paints with his left hand, a side effect of the polio that damaged his body but not his creativity or imagination.

"I can't say the polio had anything necessarily to do with my vocation, but it may have helped me paint abstractly," says Mike. "You have to combine the abstract with the real to be an artist. There must be balance there."

For the rest of his adolescence, Larsen moved between Wynnewood and Amarillo, Texas, where he took a high school art class that excited him enough to pursue the subject in college. Larsen attended Amarillo Junior College, the University of Houston, and West Texas A&M University, where his art counselor told him, "Mike, you need to think about another major. You're just no damn good." Despite five years of college, Larsen never completed his degree; he decided to get to work instead.

"We lived in Oklahoma City, and at that time, Mike had a little studio down in our basement," says Ruth Larsen. "He'd get up in the morning, make breakfast, and at 8 a.m., he would go down and start to work. At 11:30 a.m., he'd come up for lunch, and at 1 p.m., he'd go back down there and work until 5 p.m. He never strayed from that, no matter where we lived. He just kept on keeping on."

In fact, the last time Larsen worked away from his studio was in the late 1960s, when he was a short-order cook for about a year. For the next seventeen years, Larsen spent every Monday through Friday working in his studio while traveling weekends to street festivals and art shows throughout the United States.

"I think in one year I went to forty weekend street shows," says Larsen. "They give you the opportunity to make a living, sell your paintings, and get them out of your house so you don't have them all over the place. Those shows keep you continually producing. If you are watchful, you learn a little bit, and something can happen over the years."

Something did happen. Larsen's painting *Search for the Mystery* was the grand-prize winner at the first Red Earth Festival in 1987, and his participation in the Oklahoma arts community gained attention from key people like then-governor David Boren and Betty Price.

Two years earlier, Larsen met his wife of sixteen years, Martha, at the Festival of the Arts in Oklahoma City through a mutual friend. Martha worked as a picture framer and eventually began framing Mike's paintings. Their collaboration soon became a partnership that changed the course of Larsen's career and created a support system that included their three children from previous marriages: Randall, Jeffrey, and Kate.

"I would say we had a hell of a first six months of marriage," says Martha. "We got married in June 1990, Mike was diagnosed with testicular cancer in October, and just as he was finishing up his radiation treatment, Olga Pellow [a friend and neighbor], called on January 5, 1991, and said, 'Martha, your studio is on fire.'"

The fire, started by faulty wiring from a fluorescent light fixture, ravaged Larsen's studio above the Jesus Is Lord Pawn Shop in Oklahoma City, destroying all of Larsen's paintings, books, and supplies and leaving the couple with nothing but \$60,000

of uninsured losses. To top it off, Larsen had just finished his proposal for a new project at the Oklahoma State Capitol, a mural of Oklahoma's five Native American ballerinas. It burned.

"The fire was on a Saturday night, and on Sunday, we called Betty Price," says Mike. "The mural proposals were due on Tuesday, and the Oklahoma Arts Council let us submit our proposal on Wednesday. I had one extra day, and we got it done." Adds Martha, "The fire changed Mike's palette; it got rid of the dull colors."

Above, a young Mike on school picture day in the early 1950s, when he lived in Wynnewood. Top right, Mike and Martha Larsen relax on the porch of their Perkins home. 'This is our honeymoon,' says Martha of the couple's sixteen-year marriage. Bottom right, Mike's mother, Ruth, and his grandfather, 'Papa' Otto Carter, were two of the artist's biggest influences during his early years. Bottom left, river rafting with the family just outside Buena Vista, Colorado



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Oklahoman of the Year



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ON POINTE

In 1991, Larsen was commissioned to paint *Flight of Spirit*, an eleven-by-twenty-two-foot mural of the five world-renowned Native American ballerinas from Oklahoma—Yvonne Chouteau, Rosella Hightower, Moscelyne Larkin, and Maria and Marjorie Tallchief—for the fourth-floor rotunda at the Oklahoma State Capitol, a project that gave the Larsens the time and financial support to find a new direction.

“Up to that point, we were satisfied with what we were doing, spiritually,” says Mike. “I was not taking any risks, pretty much doing the same thing over and over again. I painted with a lot of raw umber, which is an earth color, and a lot of dark colors that were easy sells. Martha and I determined that we were making a change, and I bought brighter colors.”

The dedication ceremony of *Flight of Spirit* brought all five ballerinas together for the first time, and national media coverage by CNN and the Associated Press heralded Larsen’s mural as a poignant tribute to the ballerinas, the arts, and Native American culture.

“It just takes your breath away that so many people have been able to be influenced by this exquisite work of art,” says Yvonne Chouteau. “I have always envisioned the art of the ballet, and what always impresses me is the beauty of long white tutus. I thought that it was very appropriate that Mike used white tutus in the mural. White is the color of purity.”

Shortly after the mural’s completion, the Larsens decided to give up the street show circuit and focus on gallery work, meaning more money and greater opportunities to develop more meaningful projects. Larsen’s signature style soon began to emerge in a string of powerful series, including *Shamans of the Nations*, *Great Native American Leaders*, *First Contact*, and *Ten Days to Big Horn*. His blend of historical accuracy and romantic spirit ensured placement in some of the best galleries in Arizona, New Mexico, and Oklahoma while attracting an international clientele and fame in his home state.

Left, Pauline Walker of Ada is depicted in one of the twenty-four paintings of living Chickasaw elders in Mike Larsen’s series called *They Know Who They Are*. ‘She best exemplified the respect we hold for those people,’ he says. Top right, *Martha’s Still Life* is the first painting Mike ever gave his wife. Mike says *The Visitors*, bottom right, is one of his best attempts of ‘placing into a painting the feeling of the unknown.’



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“The hardest thing an artist does in his career is consistently create a body of work over a period of years that is fresh, new, and captivating, but still very much them. Mike has done that and continues to do that,” says Joy Reed Belt, owner of JRB Art at the Elms in Oklahoma City, one of many studios where Larsen’s art is sold. “His work is recognizable.”

A SIMPLE LIFE

The greatest highlight of his career could be a project even closer to Larsen’s heart, a series of twenty-four portraits documenting Chickasaw living elders called *They Know Who They Are*, set to be displayed at the Chickasaw Cultural Center near Sulphur in fall 2007. Mike and Martha spent an emotional time interviewing each of the elders, inspiring a collection of some of Mike’s most moving paintings to date.

“It was incredible, especially for Mike being Chickasaw and getting a family touch that he never had as a kid,” say Martha. “It’s like they have been sitting there waiting for us to come down there, to come to our senses and be part of the Chickasaw Nation.”

A return to roots seems to be a theme for the Larsens since they left Oklahoma City in 2003 in search of a simpler life. After looking for property in Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming, the couple realized the Sooner State was the only place they could call home. They soon fell in love with the rolling hills, familiar farmlands, and welcoming community of Perkins, where they established a quaint downtown studio and a home situated on forty acres.

On beautiful days, Mike is no longer chained to his studio’s easel but is more likely outside mowing the grass or enjoying time with Martha and their dogs, Bluebonnet and Sugar. The change of pace is a welcome respite from the hectic early

days of his career, despite his ever-growing commissions and projects. In this setting, it seems the sense of clarity gained from watching the watercolor sunrises from his front porch might be Larsen’s ultimate secret to success.

“My paintings are becoming more simple than they were even ten years ago,” he says. “I’m able to say more with less. And that’s all right with me.”

Mike Larsen’s artwork is available at the Legacy Gallery in Scottsdale, Arizona; Sanders Galleries in Tucson, Arizona; Pierson Gallery in Tulsa; JRB Art at the Elms in Oklahoma City; and Larsen Studio at 132 South Main Street in Perkins. (405) 210-4945 or larsenstudio.com.