

# Paul Laune Competition Inspires Students

by John Faubion

For almost four decades, the Plains Indians and Pioneers Museum (PIPM) in Woodward, Oklahoma, has been inspiring youth with its Annual Paul Laune Memorial Art Competition For High School Students. Paul Sidney Laune (pronounced “lawn”), was a prolific illustrator, widely known for his western-themed images. He was born in 1899 to early settlers of Woodward. His passion for encouraging art students is being honored there with this 38th annual event.

Laune was raised from infancy in the town of Woodward, itself newly born, where he found an abundant source of artistic inspiration. His father was among the swarms of pioneers who had raced to arrive at the former Indian Territory on September 16, 1893, the day the United States government opened it for non-Native settlement. Since 1876, the area’s fertile grasslands, inhabited by the Cherokees and referred to as “The Cherokee Strip,” had played an important role in nourishing cattle on the drive up the legendary Great Western Trail from Texas to the Kansas Railheads. Now, the ability to stake a claim to the land allowed Woodward’s settlers to raise their own cattle to supply the demand in the East. The attendant cowboys, horses, ranchers, farmers, and all that was required to support them, fueled the growth of the town and were an everyday part of Laune’s childhood experiences. He referenced these experiences for the artwork he produced throughout his career.

Formal education and art training propelled Laune far beyond Woodward. He studied at the University of Oklahoma; the University of Nebraska; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Art Student’s League in New York, and the Grand Central School of Art in New York. He was still in his twenties when he became head of the art department of the New York Sun. The Sun (1833-1950), was one of the most influential newspapers in America. Laune’s success with this job, or his frustration with it, inspired him, after three years, to work for himself as a freelance artist. Commissions followed for hundreds of illustrations for scores of books and magazines, many having western themes.

Perhaps it was success as a freelance artist that afforded Laune the opportunity to travel and study abroad. Robin Hohweiler, Assistant Curator of the PIPM, told me: “In 1930, Laune spent a year studying in Europe and North Africa – in Italy, France, Spain, Andorra, Morocco, Belgium, Holland, and England.” This included the study of copperplate etching and drawing, for twelve weeks, in the Italian studio of Carlo Alberto Petrucci (1881-1963).

Among the numerous commissions for western illustrations Laune later received, are frontispieces for several of the popular X Bar X Boys books drawn in a style that Petrucci may have influenced. The books were a series about two adventurous teenaged brothers who, while growing up on a ranch somewhere in the West in the late 1920s and ‘30s, managed to outwit the shady western characters they encountered (the western equivalent of The Hardy Boys series which Laune also illustrated). Laune produced the colorful dust jackets and the frontispieces for volumes sixteen (1937), through twenty-one (1942). David Baumann, an enthusiast of series books, told me The X Bar X Boys is the first western series he collected. His extensive writing about the series includes this observation: “Laune did not use watercolor wash in his frontispieces, as his predecessors did, but rather pen and ink line drawings.” These drawings show skilled use of the traditional printmakers’ technique of “hatching,” (see detail), which Petrucci, who was once considered “the undisputed authority of printmaking in Italy,” was a master of.



Paul Laune, Book Jacket, 1938



Paul Laune, Pen and Ink Line drawing, Frontispiece,  
Hunting the Prize Mustangs, 1937

Drawings and prints are among the many forms of art that may be entered in the Laune competition. High school students within a 200-mile radius of Woodward are encouraged to participate. In 2009, and 2010, a student at Turpin High School, Brenton Kirkhart, won Best of Show with his entries, both of which were works on paper. He credits the competition with inspiring him, as a teenager, to continue to pursue art as a profession. He is now inspiring

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