Climate for Western Works on Paper Heating Up in Arizona

Bob Boze Bell, "Wyatt Earp Horse Thief?" Gouache on paper

by John Faubion

As frigid cold and record snowfall gripped most of the country, fortunate aficionados of Western Americana found more to like in Arizona this winter than clear blue skies and temperatures in the eighties. In late January, a small piece of paper with a mix of art and Western history sold for six figures at auction in Mesa, Arizona, and an innovative new Western museum in Scottsdale opened that is destined to heat up scholarly interest in Western works on paper and the stories behind them.

Auction Update

My early January article in The Journal of the Print World previewed Brian Lebel's High Noon Auction, held January 24th in Mesa, and highlighted one of its top offerings: a diminutive letter that was expected to be the object of frenzied bidding by serious collectors. The 10"x6.5" 1921 letter, illustrated with a colored drawing by artist Charles Russell and written to movie star Harry Carey, performed as predicted.

The evening began with a standing-room only crowd of approximately 400 with an additional few hundred phone bidders participating from all parts of the globe. From under a choppy sea of cowboy hats, hands shot up for several hours with bids that pushed total auction sales beyond $1.8 million. The Russell-Carey letter brought the second highest price of the auction, fetching $126,500 which exceeded its high estimate of $115,000.

Museum Opening

The new museum aims to do more than perpetuate the legends that have become the stock in trade for many Western museums. It recognizes that there are stories outside the walls of traditional museums that are waiting to be discovered, or rediscovered, and brought to light. **Western Spirit: Scottsdale's Museum of the West**, opened on January 15th with a concept that bucks the norm by placing less emphasis on amassing its own permanent collection than on borrowing and learning from individuals, corporations, and institutions, with Western collections and archives to lend. A bottom-line advantage for museum-goers is exposure to a greater variety of exhibition material than they would normally find elsewhere. This includes work by the best known Western artists as well as pieces that may have rarely, if ever, been previously displayed.

Alan DiPerna, the museum's marketing and communications manager, attributes its operational concept to director Michael J. Fox (no relation to the actor). "The museum was a longtime dream of Mike and former Scottsdale mayor Herb Drinkwater. But it was Mike's deep experience in museum administration and start-ups that really put it over the plate." To advance his concept, which might best be characterized by the motto: Cultivation trumps Acquisition, Fox procured the expertise of rising curatorial star Tricia Loscher. Board member Betsy Fahlman, Ph.D, has high praise for her: "Tricia is a document magnet who has been able to share some great stories about under-appreciated artists and explain to enthusiastic audiences why they are important. She has a knack for finding original material."

Fahlman knows of which she speaks. Her research of Lon Megargee, "Dean of Arizona's cowboy artists," led to her book **The Cowboy's Dream: The Mythic Life** and **Art of Lon Megargee,** which reveals previously unpublished information. Megargee is known for his Western block prints and lithographs and for his 1913-1914 murals at the Arizona state capitol. Fahlman has been involved with the Southwest Art History Conference (SWAHC) since 1993, and has served as Secretary since 2002. With the SWAHC board, she coordinates the annual conference which is held in Taos in the fall and is now in its 27th year. As Secretary, she organizes the call for abstracts, cultivates potential speakers, and with the board, selects the papers to be presented. (SWAHC has emerged as an important forum for scholarship on the Southwest and the American West generally, and has attracted many of the leading scholars in the field.) Fahlman is also a longtime professor of art history at Arizona State University's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts. She appreciates that the museum, through art and artifacts, is telling the stories of the American West, and writes: "Prints and other works on paper of course are an important part of telling these stories."

The facts behind some of the more celebrated stories of the West can be difficult, if not impossible, to pin down. Perhaps nobody knows this better than Bob Boze Bell, accomplished artist, historian, contributor to Western Spirit, and publisher of True West magazine. In print since 1953, True West has been an important chronicler of the history and legends of the American West. Bell bought the magazine in 1999 and has added considerably to its scholarship and circulation. He published and illustrated ground breaking books on Billy the Kid, Doc Holliday, and Wyatt Earp. His artwork has appeared in well-known publications and been used in a number of televised PBS productions. The museum has capitalized on Bell's artistic talent and his knowledge of the more obscure trivia of the American West by combining both in a series of interactive museum displays.

With so much emphasis on bringing the untold, and under-told, stories of the American West to light, an important part of the museum's mission is the sharing and preservation of the resulting discoveries. The museum's learning center, a separate building just steps from the museum entrance, will be its scholarly repository. It currently houses a classroom/conference room, the Abe Hays Reference Library, and the True West Publishers Library.

At 43,000 square feet, Western Spirit is not a big museum. But by continuously cultivating material from the public, it is already making a contribution to Western scholarship that is far larger than its physical footprint. **This approach will make the museum one VERY hot commodity, and Arizona an even hotter destination . . . (but, it's a dry heat)!**

John Faubion has researched, written, and lectured about Lawrence Tenney Stevens since 1995. He was award-winning co-curator of a major 1996 Stevens retrospective exhibition at the Tempe Historical Museum in Arizona. His discoveries in the Stevens archives contributed to the preservation efforts of the 1936 Dallas Centennial Fair site, and led to the recreation of three of Stevens's monumental sculptures there.

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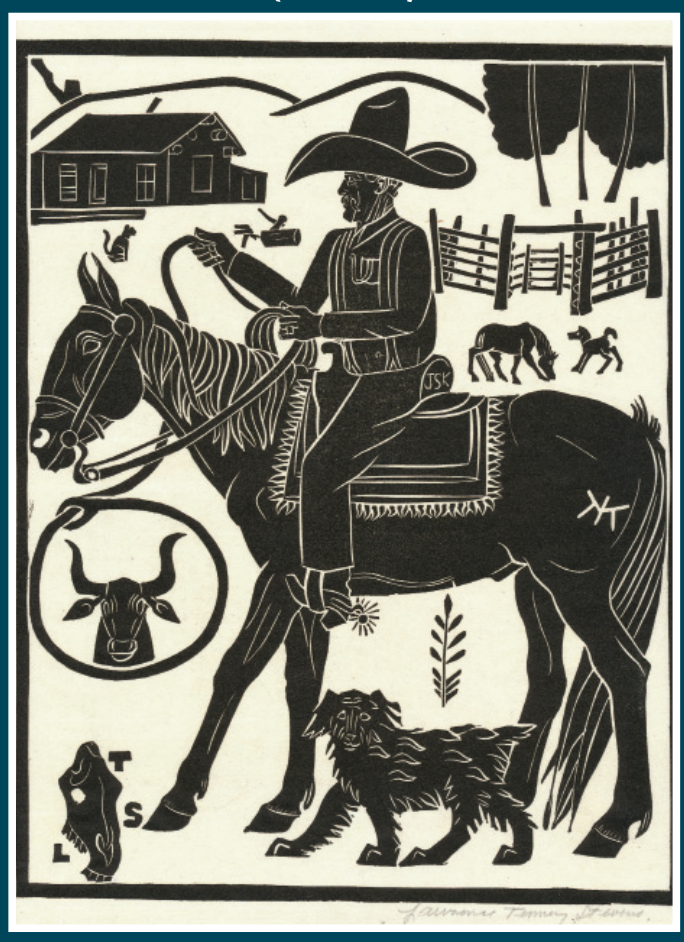
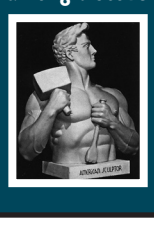
LAWRENCE TENNEY STEVENS
(1896-1972)



Historic "Old John" with horse, Monty, and dog, boy.
Linocut, c. 1935. Copyright LTS Trust 2014

From a series of rare linocut prints pulled from his own press by American sculptor Lawrence Tenney Stevens beginning in the spring of 1935. These are among discoveries in the Stevens archives that have compelled scholars to conclude that Stevens was "an undeniable progenitor of Cowboy High Style."



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