

Persimmon Hill

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Oklahoma!



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM ARGO

Harold T. Holden's *Headin' To Market*, a 23-foot bronze on a 6-foot granite base, was commissioned in 2000 to celebrate the 90th anniversary of Oklahoma City's Stockyards.

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Persimmon Hill
CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

Oklahoma's Prix de West Artists

By Lynda Haller

The 2012 annual Prix de West Invitational Art Exhibition and Sale showcased 351 works of art by 114 artists from across the United States. Four Prix de West artists live in Oklahoma, but their art can be found nationally and internationally in homes, commercial businesses and on public outdoor sites. Each artist has a distinct style. All four are good friends. Each is proud to call Oklahoma home.

Shirley

Twenty-nine years ago, Shirley Thomson-Smith was asked to exhibit her work in the National Academy of Western Art show at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center. At the time, she was sculpting and working part time at a foundry in Norman, Oklahoma. "I was



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OKLAHOMA ARTS COUNCIL

According to Shirley Thomson-Smith this sculpture, *Spirit of Justice*, depicts a Cheyenne woman in a "smudging," or Indian prayer ceremony, which represents a blessing to purify, cleanse, give healing and energy for a long-lasting life.



PHOTOGRAPH BY WWW.OWNBEYPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

Shirley Thomson-Smith visits with Museum Board member Peter Hoffman at the 2009 Prix de West Invitational Art Exhibition and Sale.

divorced, trying to support and educate my children, and just trying to make ends meet," Smith said. "I had no idea how prestigious the show was until a coworker explained the honor to me."

Smith fell in love with sculpting when she took a college course in the medium. However, married at 21, she moved to Durango, Colorado, with her husband, started a family and put her art dreams on hold. While living in Durango, she became enamored with the Navajo women she met. "They would come into town, always walking behind their husbands, very subservient, as was I in my marriage," she said. "They wore long velvet skirts and turquoise jewelry. I was always captivated by the resilience and silent strength that came through in their faces."

When Smith eventually began a professional sculpting career, ethnic women became her primary subjects. One of her finest pieces is a nine-foot-high Cheyenne Indian woman, titled *Spirit of*

Justice, that resides inside the Oklahoma Attorney General's headquarters near Oklahoma's state capitol. Three of her large sculptures are located in downtown Edmond, Oklahoma.

"Oklahoma is my home and my heritage. I've always wanted to leave something behind with my name on it," she said.

While her female figures display a certain strength and sturdiness, they also feel regal. She does not use models because she feels the piece gets too tight and loses energy. "My figures are marked by flowing lines and simplified anatomy that suggest form and emotion without depending on detail." At times, Smith's style has been on the edge of Prix de West guidelines. She treats traditional subjects in a totally contemporary manner. "My figures often blend Native American, Hispanic and African features and sometimes Oriental," she said.

Although living in Oklahoma presents specific problems for sculptors, Smith

said moving has never been an option. She likes to be close to family and friends, but she said, "Oklahoma doesn't support its artists like some states. I used to go to a lot of shows in Colorado. Loveland, Colorado, has lots of sculptures by local artists. They really support their artists. I do my casting there."

Her studio is a two-car garage she calls The Pit. "I do all my work at home," she said. "I'm not a very good painter, but I'd like to paint some when I retire." Smith is 82-years-old and retirement has yet to appear on her schedule.

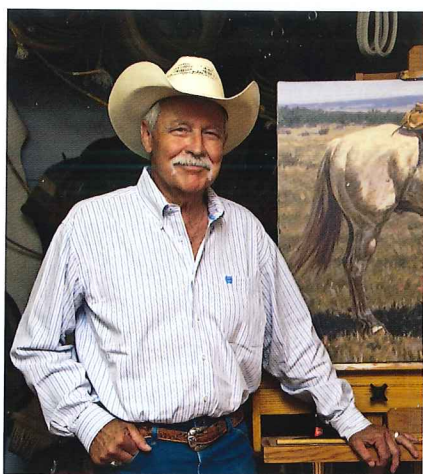
Harold

Harold T. Holden, "H" as he is known to many, has been sculpting and painting for more than 40 years. Because of the monuments he has done the last 20 years, sculptor comes quickly to mind for most who know his work, but Holden also is a respected fine art painter.

"When I come to Prix de West," he said, "I see all the great paintings and think I should stick to sculpting." His admirers and collectors think otherwise. Holden underwent a lung transplant two years ago and has to be careful about breathing toxins. "I am getting ready to do some painting again," he said. "I have found some oil paints that are nontoxic."

Holden lives about 90 miles northwest of Oklahoma City. "We live a couple of miles off the Chisholm Trail and in the middle of the Cherokee Strip, which was opened for settlement by the biggest land run in history," he said.

"The colorful characters that built this part of the West were larger than life and provide me with more subject matter for paintings and sculptures than I will ever be able to do. My grandfather George E. Failing was an early oil pioneer in Garber, Oklahoma, so my family history is here, and that is important to me."



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY HAROLD HOLDEN

Though most often noted for his sculptures, Holden paints, too. His largest painting, so far, is *Game Birds At Glass Mountain*, a 5' by 8' oil painting of western Oklahoma which hangs in the Oklahoma State Capitol.

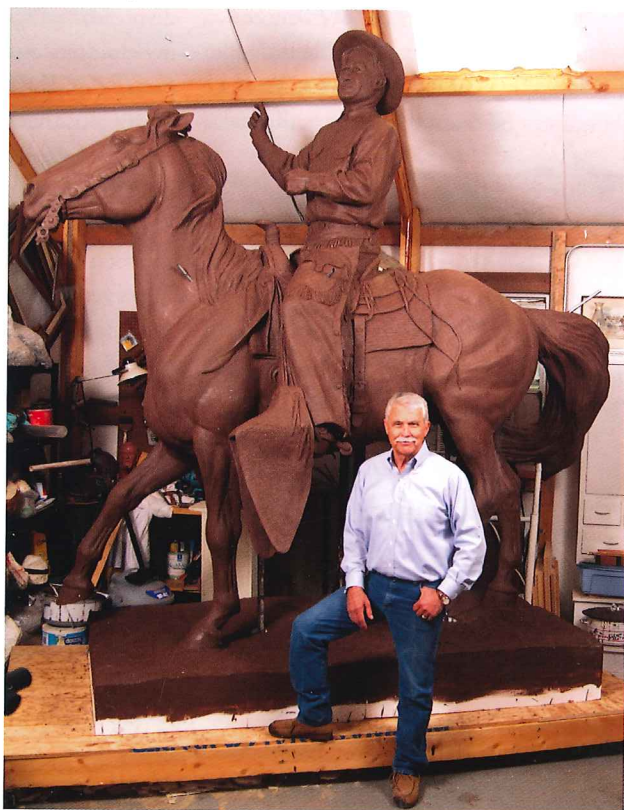
Oklahoma's topography also appeals to Holden. "Oklahoma has such diverse landscapes. If I need red cliffs, I can go a mile and a half south of my house or drive about 60 miles west to the Gloss Mountains. For wide-open vistas with slow rolling hills, I go to the Osage, and for wheat pasture images, I walk out my front door."

One of Holden's most emotional works was commissioned by Oklahoma State University. *We Will Remember*, a life-size bronze of a respectful cowboy kneeling with his memories, is a symbol of the university's loss and commitment to remember basketball players and staff who perished in a plane crash in 2001. His sculpture *Headin' to Market*, on this issue's back cover, welcomes visitors at the entrance to the Oklahoma City Stockyards. Both

sculptures were a way for Holden to work through his own personal loss of his first grandchild, who lived only four days.

Holden agrees that living in Oklahoma presents challenges. "The biggest challenge of living in a state not considered an art mecca is that many buyers think they have to buy Western art in Scottsdale or Santa Fe. There's always been sort of a stigma attached to purchasing cowboy art in Oklahoma. It is getting better because of shows like the Prix de West though," he said.

"In terms of sculpture, the distance from foundries, mold makers and other businesses essential to the process also is a problem," he added. "I use a foundry in Norman, Oklahoma, but I also use one in Colorado which is an 11-hour drive. The extra costs of shipping and time en route to the foundry are multiplied by having to do business out of state."



PHOTOGRAPH BY WWW.OWNBETPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

Harold T. Holden stands near his sculpture *Oklahoma's Native Son - Will Rogers*, which depicts the humorist on his horse *Teddy*. This life-and-a-quarter monument was unveiled at the Will Rogers World Airport in 2005.

For Holden, the pros outweigh the cons. "I have lived in Oklahoma virtually all of my life, so I am close to my home and my family, especially my grandkids," he said. "Edna Mae and I are able to live an affordable Western lifestyle. Also I like to be able to see the sunrises and sunsets. I can't think of a better place to do that than in Oklahoma."

Paul

Just 30 minutes south of Oklahoma City, sculptor Paul Moore creates his works in a 100-year-old building in downtown Norman. "My studio has 14' tall tin ceilings and brick-and-plaster walls. We have office space and two studios, one for small pieces and another for large monuments. We have a mold room and a large storage area for our molds and supplies."

Like other Oklahoma sculptors, Moore finds his Oklahoma base challenging when trying to find a good foundry to cast his work. "I have to travel six to nine hours depending on which foundry I use to cast my art," he said. "In addition, finding sculpting supplies locally has always been a problem."

Moore was born in Oklahoma City in 1957, but made numerous moves due to his father's work as a Southern Baptist minister. His last childhood home was in Duncan, Oklahoma, his dad's hometown. Moore is a citizen of the (Creek) Muskogee Nation, Sweet Potato Clan. His mother was Creek, but her father was white.

The spark to pursue sculpting came early. "When I was 13, I visited the Cowboy Hall of Fame. Because of my love for art, my mother gave me a camera and told me she had five shots left on the roll and I was to go through the Museum, pick out my five favorite pieces and photograph them. I still remember my five shots and where they were located. Two of them were plaster sculptures, James Earle



PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD MOORE

Paul Moore has sculpted more than 110 commissions for numerous municipal, corporate, private and international collections. For more than a decade he has been working on the *Oklahoma Centennial Land Run Monument* which commemorates the spirit and determination of the men and women who rode in Oklahoma's five land runs. It is installed in Oklahoma City.

Fraser's *The End of the Trail* and his seated version of Abe Lincoln. I started sculpting in high school, and I left a telephone engineering job in my early 20s to pursue a starving artist's life. That was 35 years ago.

"I grew up on stories of the West. My great-great-great-grandmother came to what is now Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears. My grandfather grew up next door to the last Comanche Chief, Quanah Parker. He used to show me the gifts Quanah gave him over the years, like a horsehair rope and a bearclaw necklace. Because of this influence, I fell in love with the history and folklore of the West. I'm known for commissioned

portraits and monumental work, but I get a special pleasure when I sculpt the West."

In 1997, he left his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and accepted the Artist in Residence position at the University of Oklahoma to revive and develop the Figurative Sculpture Program, which had been nonexistent since 1969.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD MOORE

Paul Moore helps keep his family history and heritage alive through his sculptures. His art retells stories of his great-great grandmother who walked the Trail of Tears, one great-grandfather who lived next door to Quanah Parker and another grandfather who rode the Chisholm Trail.

Moore said, "People constantly ask if I miss Santa Fe after living there for 13 years and my response is always the same: 'No, I love it here.'"

For the past 12 years, he has been working on the *Oklahoma Centennial Land Run Monument* which he estimates will take him another two years to finish. Installed south of Bricktown, a historic district in the heart of downtown Oklahoma City, the project upon completion will be one of the world's largest bronze sculptures, spanning a distance of 365 feet in length by 35 feet in width and more than 16 feet in height. It will consist of 38 life-and-a-half-sized bronze elements.

Mikel

For 28 years, fine art painter Mikel Donahue has called Broken Arrow home, a small town just to the southeast of Tulsa. He graduated from the University of Tulsa and spent the next 30 years in advertising and graphic design.

"Three years ago I retired and now I do what I want," he said. What he wants is to paint. His paintings, described as mixed media, are rendered in a blend of watercolor, colored pencils and pastels. Although his art fits into the Western genre, Donahue calls it contemporary in



Mikel Donahue begins many of his paintings by laying down a light watercolor wash. It is followed by work in colored pencil and he finishes with some pastels to add dimension.

the sense that it involves real people and real places.

"My idea of subject matter," he explains, "is not so much the activity, like branding or working calves, but the people and the places. I like to be on the ranch and shadow the people from daylight to dark to get into their character. One of the biggest compliments I can receive is for the cowboys to say I got it right."

The Donahues own a few acres where they work and raise racing American Quarter Horses.

"My involvement with the Quarter Horse industry provides me with a unique perspective to my art."

He has been painting professionally for about 12 years and in 2010 was honored with two major awards at the Buffalo Bill Art Show for his painting *Long Days* depicting a cowboy carrying his saddle at the end of the day.

Donahue's subject matter is influenced by childhood summers spent on his paternal grandfather's ranch in north-central Oklahoma. "At first, I found the ranching lifestyle romantic, but as I got older, I came to understand the reality of it," he said.

The art gene came from his mother's side of the family. "My maternal grandfather was a painter who exposed me to Western art at an early age. We took frequent trips to Tulsa's Gilcrease Museum and to the Cowboy Hall of Fame where I became aware of the giants of cowboy art like Charlie Russell and Frederic Remington."

Donahue became aware of the stories artists told through a variety of mediums. "I think a painter's medium is akin to a musician's instrument," he said. "An artist may use charcoal, oil, water colors and a musician may use a violin, piano or guitar. The medium is the instrument."



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTIE DONAHUE

Ranching is in Donahue's bloodline — with both his dad and grandfather raising cattle before he was born. Now with a ranch of his own, Donahue continues to find inspiration for his art in the day-to-day work people do.

Donahue says Oklahoma will probably always be home. "It's familiar and Christie and I have family here, but some day we might buy a second place closer to large ranches, better daily gallery exposure and other Western artists. There's not a big Western art audience in Oklahoma, so it's necessary to find galleries that market to that clientele in Texas, or places like Tucson, Scottsdale, Santa Fe and Jackson Hole. Marketing is getting easier with the development of websites. We can do a lot online and control it, but it's still important for an artist to have dealer representation."

One thing is for certain, Oklahoma has had an impact on all four artists, and all four artists are making an impact on the world of Western art. ■

Lynda Haller is a freelance writer living in Edmond, Oklahoma.