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Freeman exhibition brings the West alive at Phippen



By Bruce Colbert
The Daily Courier

To world-famous artist Kenneth M. Freeman, his work was all about making portraits.

"Ken always said he did portraits, not landscapes, so that's why Bonnie (Freeman's wife) called the show, 'Portraits of the West,'" said Deb Bentlage, Phippen Museum curator and collections manager.

"Portraits of the West" opened Saturday, and is on display through Oct. 24. Ken Freeman, who was born in 1935, died in 2008.

"Ken had two dreams - to be a great artist and a cowboy," Bonnie Adams-Freeman said. "And he did both."

Ken painted cowboys, cowgirls, Native Americans, cattle and horses, and Buffalo Soldiers. The Phippen's Buffalo Soldier exhibition brought the Freemans and Bentlage together, which led to the current exhibition. Bentlage and the Freemans developed a friendship, and Bentlage helped Bonnie select the pieces for the traveling exhibition.

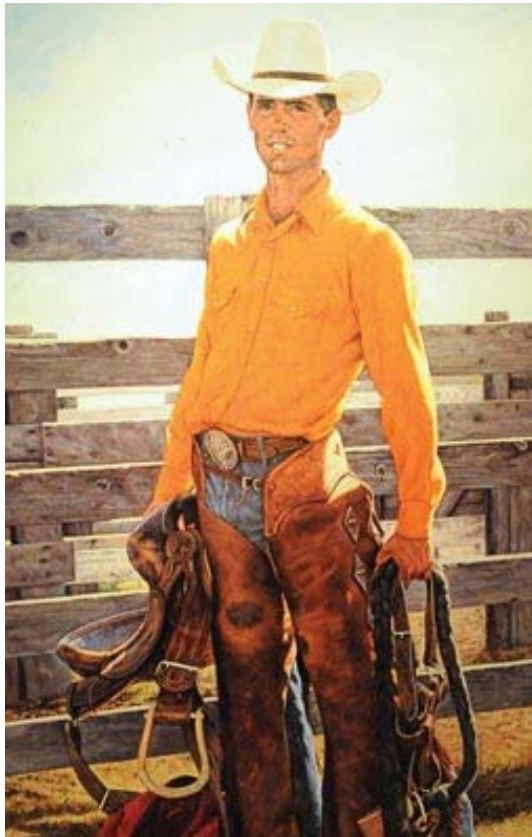
In the 1980s, Ken re-located his studio from his native Chicago to Scottsdale. He hired Bonnie, a professional photographer already living in Scottsdale, to make photographic records of his work.

"I knew he was a famous artist when I met him," Bonnie said Friday during a preview tour of the exhibition. "I messed up the photos and had to go back. I was so embarrassed. I think I messed up because he was flirting with me."

Ken would photograph his subjects, whether it was Indian children or cattle drives, and take the photos to his tiny studio and



Courtesy photo
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Brett Soldwedel/The Daily Courier
Kenneth M. Freeman painted this cowboy for the 1988 Prescott Centennial

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use the photographs as his guide.

Frontier Days Rodeo poster, and it currently hangs in the Phippen Museum. Freeman did not record the name of his subject. The Daily Courier is asking anyone who knows the man in the painting, to call 445-3333 ext. 1128, or e-mail bcolbert@prescottaz.com.

"For his rodeo paintings, he would go back (behind the chutes) to where the riders were getting ready for their rides and talk to them and understood what they were thinking before they went out," Bonnie said. "He knew the riders knew they could get hurt or killed."

A striking painting, "Psychin' Up," shows a cowboy in a meditative state psyching himself for his ride.

"He understood the passion of cowboys and the hearts they had for riding," Bonnie said of the painting.

Ken worked on ranches and learned first-hand about being a cowboy, how fickle horses could be, and that cows had individual personalities and faces.

"He painted the Herefords as individuals, I've never seen that before," said Dee Isham, who spent 21 years in the cattle business. "That's the first thing I noticed about his paintings - his cattle are not rubber-stamped like so many other artists do."

Ken started his career as an illustrator. He apprenticed under the famous illustrator, Haddon Sunblom, who made the red-cheeked Santa Claus portrait for Coca-Cola that the company still uses on its merchandise.

Ken called himself a "Jewish cowboy," and journalists dubbed him "The Rembrandt of the Rodeo." Ken studied art at the American Academy of Art because "he wanted a solid background in how the masters painted," Bonnie explained.

He did not just paint portraits of Westerners. Famous people commissioned him for their portraits. One was John Wayne, whose portrait hangs in the Phippen show.

"John Wayne said it is the most beautiful painting of him that he ever saw, and he had thousands of paintings made of him," Bonnie said.

In addition to the paintings, sculptures and illustrations, Bonnie and museum staff recreated Ken's small studio, complete with the easel he worked on and the painting he was nearly finished with when he died - an Indian warrior.

"His entire painting career is in this one painting," Bonnie said of the unfinished work. "He was at the highlight of his career."

Ken also was a huge fan of the 1960s rock-n-roll scene, and got involved with groups such as The Beatles and Janis Joplin. A vintage Beatles pennant hangs in the studio display.

"He had a joy and love of life and a happiness in his art," Bentlage said.

"You can feel his spirit here in the museum," Bonnie said.

The Phippen Museum is located at 4701 N. Highway 89, north of Prescott. For more information, call 778-1385. The museum is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, and 1-4 p.m. Sundays.

To read more about Ken Freeman and to view his art on-line, visit www.kennethmfreeman.com.

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