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Painter of dreams

Late artist's work celebrated at Prescott museum

JENNIFER GOLDBERG
Special Sections Editor
[E-MAIL](#)



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SINGLES

The faces on the walls of The Phippen Museum in Prescott are a testament to the diversity of the West. Gamblers, rodeo cowboys, children, mountain men, cowgirls, Indian warriors - they impress the viewer not only with their strength and beauty, but also the talent of the artist responsible for all of them.

The exhibition, "Portraits of the West: The Kenneth M. Freeman Legacy," celebrates the long career and large body of work of Freeman, the Scottsdale-based artist who died in 2008 at the age of 73. Freeman's efforts, from his early pieces as a commercial illustrator to his celebrity portraits and many depictions of life in the West, is now curated by his widow, Bonnie Adams-Freeman.

Jewish cowboy

Freeman, a self-described "Jewish cowboy from Chicago," knew exactly what he wanted



Kenneth M. Freeman's work exemplifies the spirit of the West. Shown: "Impending Decision"
Image courtesy of The Kenneth M. Freeman Legacy



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out of life at a young age, Adams-Freeman says.

"When he was a little boy, he said, 'I'm going to be a great artist, and I'm going to be a cowboy.' And there was absolutely no doubt in his mind that that's what he was going to be," she says.

His parents supported him in his quest; beginning at age 8, Freeman's mother took him to weekly art lessons at the Chicago Institute of Art, then to the movie theater to spend the day watching the movies he loved. In high school, Freeman won a number of art competitions that earned him a scholarship to the American Academy of Art. After college, he began a career in commercial illustration, working for renowned illustrator Haddon Sundblom (creator of the iconic Coca-Cola Santa Claus).

While in Chicago, Freeman married his first wife, Alice, and had two daughters, Dori and Tracy. In the early 1960s, Freeman ran a teen nightclub in Chicago called the Pink Fink, where acts like The Turtles and Janis Joplin performed.

Out to Arizona

Even in Chicago, Freeman's passion for the West found an outlet. He made a number of visits to Scottsdale in the 1970s and 1980s, taking photographs and making connections to facilitate his art.

His religious identity was not always welcomed in the Western art community, though.

"Even today, there are a lot of doors that are closed because you're Jewish," Adams-Freeman says. "He came across some of those, and it would infuriate him because it stopped his growth as an artist. I'm not going to point fingers, but I will tell you that he came up against those challenges."

Freeman retired from commercial illustration and made the move to Scottsdale in the 1980s, where he continued to paint. He produced paintings for rodeo posters (including five for Scottsdale's Parada del Sol rodeo); did portraits of celebrities, including musician Waylon Jennings and actor John Wayne; illustrated book covers; and continued to depict his favorite subject, the people and spirit of the West. Earlier this year, Freeman was posthumously given the Cowboy Spirit Award at the National Festival of the West, the only artist to ever receive the honor.

For the love of the West

Adams-Freeman believes that Freeman's work resonates with the public because of its photographlike accuracy (Freeman painted from photographs), their bold color and the love for the West that comes through in his work.

She says viewers of Freeman's work "always feel the spirit. He was able to paint (each subject's) passion for what they were doing, and Ken's passion was being able to do that."

"Ken painted pride, honor, tradition, beauty, happiness," says Adams-Freeman. "He painted dreams."

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Details

- What: "Portraits of the West: The Kenneth M. Freeman Legacy"
- When: Through Oct. 24
- Where: The Phippen Museum, 4701 Highway 89N, Prescott
- Cost: \$5
- Contact: (928) 778-7385 or phippenartmuseum.org

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