

How the West *was* Won



Museum maestro Mike Fox was looking for a hand to get the long-planned Scottsdale's Museum of the West into the saddle. He found one in the mysterious "Mr. C."

By Leah LeMoine † Original Photography by Jim David

Visalia Stock Saddle Company spurs (circa 1890s), hand-tooled leather saddle pockets (circa 1930s), Colt Model 1877 double-action revolver with ivory grips and blue finish. Opposite: Revolvers and playing cards. All from the collection of Abe Hays.





David E. Walker leather saddle, circa 1880. From the collection of Abe Hays.

THIRTY YEARS AGO, then-mayor of Scottsdale Herb Drinkwater would take Michael J. Fox – no, not *that* Michael J. Fox – out in his Jeep to look at property to the north of downtown Scottsdale, “which, to the north then, was like Shea Boulevard,” Fox remembers. As director of the Heard Museum, and a guy who’d launched art institutions in Berkeley and in Flagstaff, Fox was known as a development whiz. Meanwhile, Drinkwater was enamored with the idea of developing a museum dedicated to the art and history of the American West, and wanted to share his vision with Fox.

The two talked about art, economics and infrastructure as they scouted potential locations in the dusty, undeveloped desert for Drinkwater’s dream museum, which he envisioned as a bastion of Scottsdale’s thriving arts scene and a major economic draw for the growing city. He’d already lured the Princess resort and the Mayo Clinic to the “West’s Most Western Town,” and wanted to complete his civic hat trick with an institution that would honor Scottsdale’s origins and the legacy of the West.

Back in Scottsdale proper, a coterie of council members, gallery owners and art collectors banded together to support Drinkwater’s museum designs. But for one reason or another, the trigger was never pulled, and the project languished in development limbo for decades. Drinkwater died in 1997, 10 years before the spark was reignited by Fox and a reenergized board of trustees. They were poised to realize Drinkwater’s dream, but then the recession hit in 2008.

In 2013, things once again picked up momentum. Fox had amassed an impressive group of West-based collectors willing to loan their collections to the museum, which had expanded its scope beyond Arizona and the Southwest to include all 19 Western states. After years of struggling for support, the museum – to be called Scottsdale’s Museum of the West – earned unanimous approval from the Scottsdale City Council in February 2013, and a partnership between the city and Scottsdale Museum of the West, the 501(c)(3) nonprofit behind the museum, was formalized. The city agreed to finance the construction of the museum (a \$13.6 million undertaking) with revenue from the tourism-generated city bed tax. Fox was finally sitting pretty, but he was still itching for a grand-slam collection to round out the museum’s stable of collections and lend it even more national legitimacy.

One day, he received a phone call from a Boston area code. The caller, a “gentleman to the East,” as Fox coyly describes him, had been informed of Fox’s mission by Brad Richardson, owner of Scottsdale’s Legacy Gallery and a mutual art-world friend. The caller was cagey about identifying himself, but said he was open to discussing the possibility of sharing his art collection with the museum.

Thousands of miles away from the wide-open skies of the West, in the thick forests and deep blue lakes of Minnesota, little Tim Peterson is a modern-day Huck Finn – hunting, fishing and canoeing with his dad, brother and friends. He idolizes explorers Lewis and Clark and the mountain men and fur traders he reads about in history books and watches in Jeremiah Johnson. He gobbles up historical fiction and biographies and watches his favorite Western movies – anything with Robert Redford, John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. When he’s 8 years old, his father takes him to an art gallery, where he purchases his first piece of art: a print of Paul Calle’s “Something for the Pot,” depicting a fur-clad mountain man with a rifle slung over one shoulder and a string of dangling fowl on the other, headed back to his cabin to prepare



Scottsdale's Museum of the West chairman Jim Bruner and CEO Mike Fox flank Scottsdale Mayor Jim Lane at SMoW's construction site.

Arizona West Galleries owner and art collector Abe Hays displays an original "Wanted" poster for notorious crime couple Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow.



his haul. Looking at his print, Peterson sees his fascination with the woods, the mountains and the idea of the West distilled into visual art. A passion is kindled.

Due to open this December, Scottsdale's Museum of the West (SMoW) is under construction in the historic Loloma Arts District in Old Town Scottsdale. Western materials – redwood, mesquite, Douglas fir, local concrete aggregates, naturally-weathering copper – are being used to erect the museum complex, which will span 43,000 square feet and include an education center, art studio, experience zones, five galleries and an outdoor sculpture garden, amphitheater and ramadas. The city of Scottsdale will match the museum's revenue up to \$400,000 for the first five years. The nonprofit will manage the building and operations when SMoW opens.

"We emphasize stories," Fox, now SMoW's director and CEO, says over chicken salad at his regular table at Cafe Forte, a stone's throw from the museum site on gallery-lined Main Street. "In the space we have, how do you tell the whole story of the West?" chimes in Ned O'Hearn, a founding trustee of the museum board who now serves as SMoW's marketing and communications consultant. "Well, you don't tell the whole story of the West. You can't cover every story, can't cover every personality, can't cover every event, can't cover every artist – but you have to make a good attempt at that."

Boy, have they. Pooling their resources and making calls to friends in Scottsdale's legendary arts community and beyond, Fox, the board and curator Tricia Loscher have amassed a remarkably comprehensive and diverse assemblage of Western art – everything from cowboy paintings to Native American artifacts. Abe Hays, co-owner with son Gregory of Arizona West Galleries in Scottsdale and a major Western art collector since age 6, will loan his immense collection of Western art and artifacts to the museum, including paintings, sheriffs' badges from the 1890s, an ivory-gripped Colt Model 1877 double-action revolver, gunslinger ephemera and a collection of 120 pairs of spurs. Local collectors Howie and Frankie Alper will share their stunning stock of legendary Western artist John Coleman's sculptures based on the series of paintings of Native Americans done by historians/painters Karl Bodmer and George Catlin in the 1830s. The Alpers purchased the first casting of each of the 10 pieces in the series. The rest of the artists on the loan list reads like an encyclopedia of Western art: Alfred Jacob Miller, Maynard Dixon, Ernest L. Blumenschein, Mary Colter, Carl Oscar Borg, Peter Rindisbacher, James Bama, Charlie Dye, Rainy Naha.

Fox, O'Hearn and Loscher want SMoW to anchor the art community in Old Town Scottsdale, working symbiotically with the galleries and local artists and fitting seamlessly into the area's weekly ArtWalks.

"We want the art and the artifacts to help tell the story... to get people to better understand and respect and enjoy," Fox says. "More accessible, more interactive, more engaging, more immersive." To that end, they'll emphasize frequent rotation of collections to keep things fresh for locals as well as tourists. SMoW also aims to hook millennials with techie exhibits, a state-of-the-art website and an app to help visitors tap into the museum's theme: "Finding Yourself in the West."



Pearl chips for Faro, a popular card game in the Old West, circa 1880s (top). Below, a bawdy enamel bottle opener, circa 1890s.

"Trappers Following the Trail: At Fault" (1851) by Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait (1819-1905). Oil on canvas, 36 x 50 inches.



"It gives us a lot of opportunities to work with many communities," Loscher says. "[We want them to] feel like they have a real stake in the museum and feel like they have ownership. This will be a place where you can come or you can download your app and transport yourself and provide feedback and commentary, and engage and think about things in a new and challenging way."

Tourists are one community they're targeting. Each year, Scottsdale draws roughly 8 million tourists, according to the Scottsdale Convention and Visitors Bureau. Drinkwater surmised, astutely, that many visitors come as a result of a fascination with the West.

"His comment was that people from different parts of the country want to come out to see the West," says Jim Bruner, former Scottsdale city councilman and chairman of the museum board, as he shades his eyes from the sun beating down on the building site. "They probably expect to see cowboys and Indians go up and down Scottsdale Road and that's not likely to happen. There was a feeling that Scottsdale needed something that would define and illustrate and show the West, whatever that might be."

Bruner moved to Scottsdale from Iowa 45 years ago and got involved in the museum effort when he was on the city council with Drinkwater. O'Hearn, another city councilman contemporary and Arizona immigrant (from Boston, with stints in other states) "grew up with Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, the Range Rider. Growing up back east in Massachusetts, everybody was a Western fanatic then because it was so foreign to what was going on there," O'Hearn says.

O'Hearn recounts the organization's ups and downs over the past three decades. Originally the plan was for a stand-alone museum, but when property wasn't procured, they explored taking over

other museum spaces, like the Fleischer Museum of California and Russian Impressionism in Scottsdale, or combining their idea with existing museums, like the Buffalo Bill Center of the West (formerly the Buffalo Bill Historical Center) complex of museums in Wyoming.

After multiple plans fell through, the board had to assess where it stood. "Was that the dead end? Or were we going to be the phoenix and rise from the ashes?" O'Hearn, wide-eyed, remembers wondering. Bruner and their cohorts knew they had the zeal and perseverance to keep the museum project going, but after several failed attempts to get it off the ground, they were at a crossroads.

"Most museums have a benefactor. We don't have that. Can we create something out of the concept and the passion that we have?" O'Hearn wondered. "Yeah, let's do that," O'Hearn and his colleagues told the board. "But we need a leader. We need someone who, frankly, knows what he's talking about and can help us not only with the concept but with leadership, and lend this credibility to move forward within the art world. And the ideal candidate was Mike Fox."

Fox had left Arizona for a leadership role at the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Ky., but was enticed back by the promise of the venture, which he sees as continuing the legacy of Drinkwater and the artists and communities of the West, particularly the historic artist enclave in Old Town Scottsdale. He returned in 2007.

"This is a really special opportunity for all of us to be part of a startup and just be creative," Fox remembers thinking. "So much [appealed] about this region back in the '50s with the artists literally in this neighborhood... in their studios, doing their art and developing this whole Fifth Avenue place for being able to share their art with the public. It really became a very important civic and

"Sioux Camp" (circa 1852) by
Alfred Jacob Miller (1810-1874).
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches.



Badges, 1890s. The Texas Ranger
badges were made with pesos.

heritage kind of environment. In a sense it's sort of like closing the circle for the city to now have such a museum that is in a sense honoring those who came before us."

Fox and company were riding the high of the city council approval and concomitant funds when he received the mysterious phone call. His itch for a capping collection was about to be scratched. The trigger was finally pulled.

Peterson eventually leaves Minnesota for Massachusetts and joins the modern equivalent of the California Gold Rush: the wild money markets of the 1980s and 1990s. He launches his own hedge fund and runs it successfully and quietly for years, keeping a low profile and embodying a quote from one of his boyhood heroes, John Wayne: "Talk low, talk slow and don't say too much."



Peterson focuses on his stressful job during the week, but on weekends he unwinds with his passion – his Western art collection, which grows and grows until he's befriending and commissioning artists he admired as a boy, including Paul Calle of the mountain man print and Charles Fritz, whom Peterson collaborated with on a series of 100 paintings depicting the Lewis and Clark expedition. He tours some of his pieces, but rebuffs the advances of many museums seeking to borrow his collection for longer stretches of time. He doesn't want to draw attention to himself, and he's too busy with work anyway.

But then the wind changes. He decides to step down at work and transition into a less active role in his company. Around the same time, he decides to call an art guy in Scottsdale, someone his old friend Brad Richardson recommended he speak with: Mike Fox.

Thus a platonic artmance is born, with the two native Midwesterners chatting for weeks over the phone about the possibility of Peterson lending his colossal collection of Western art – numbering more than 1,000 pieces and with an estimated value in the millions – to SMoW. When Peterson comes to Scottsdale to visit his brother, his covert courtship with Fox progresses over leisurely meals at Fox's table at Cafe Forte and walks to the museum site. They discuss Peterson's collection, which is staggering for its scope and depth, and primarily dedicated to two segments of Western history – the Lewis and Clark expedition and the mountain man/fur trader era, with "flat" art (paintings), sculpture and artifacts. After months of sizing each other up and speaking in hypotheticals, Peterson agrees to loan his collection to the museum. His one condition: his identity be kept secret, even from the board of trustees, until he completes his work transition. Fox, a kindred spirit in unassuming humility and limelight-aversion, gives his word, and the mysterious "Mr. C" – for "Collaborator" – is brought into the fold.

Despite their trust in Fox, the board ripples with intrigue at the concealed identity of Mr. C. "For the longest time, we had no earthly idea who this person was," O'Hearn says. "It created quite the curiosity amongst the board members because Mike was talking about this person who *might, might, might* be a significant factor in our advancement, and he's from back east and he's known as Mr. C. [We thought] wait a minute, are we in the *Twilight Zone*? It had to be that way because a lot of people were soliciting his interest and we were kind of the newcomer – small, unestablished... [but] there was this nice fit because he's a storyteller, we're storytellers."

In April, Mr. C's identity was finally revealed when he was introduced to the board in person, along with the other major Western art collectors who will be loaning their collections to SMoW – Abe Hays, Howie and Frankie Alper, Christine Mollring and more.

"I think a big part of [the draw] was the fact that it was new and kind of exciting, and about vibrant and interesting ways to display Western art and tell the story," Peterson says. "The timing also seemed very appropriate. As I transitioned out of my work life, I was interested in a place that was also transitioning... [to] start fresh and start new and really grow together."

Peterson's collection of Fritz paintings will be the opening show in December.

"We thought the Lewis and Clark exhibit for the opening was very fitting," Peterson says. "Because when you think about Lewis and Clark, it's like the opening of the West."

"The Mountain Man"
(circa 1916-1918)
by Frederic Remington
(1861-1909).
#31 cast by Roman
Bronze Works.
Bronze, 29 x 21 x 12
inches.



PM