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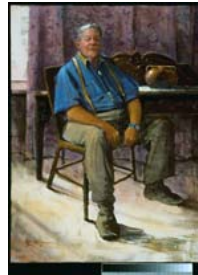
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Mike Larsen's paints portraits of tribal elders to preserve Chickasaw culture

With a title echoed by each of its subjects, "I am Very Proud to Be Chickasaw," currently showing at the Gaylord-Pickens Oklahoma Heritage Museum, demonstrates the spirit of the Chickasaw Nation through the lives of its elders.



**POSTAGE STAMP
 SHORT BIOGRAPHY**

"I think it conveys history in a snapshot," said Karlee Chill, director of museum exhibitions. "They've lived it and they've been through it, and as elders, they pass these stories along. This is a way to tell the story of Chickasaw culture: through the faces of the elders."

The 24 portraits by artist Mike Larsen are the second series to be commissioned by the Chickasaw Nation. The first series, "They Know Who They Are," was unveiled at the Oklahoma History Center in 2007.

"The exhibit up at the Heritage Museum is a continuation of those first 24 efforts and it is basically a history book," Larsen said. "I have for quite some time painted history; it's pretty much what I do. All the people in my paintings are involved in history in one way or another."

POSTAGE STAMP

The Chickasaw artist's adeptness at capturing the presence of people through brushstrokes rich with color and light make his work a familiar sight in Oklahoma. His painting of a sunset was used on the Oklahoma Centennial postage stamp and he has large-scale murals at the state Capitol, the Oklahoma Arts Institute at the Quartz Mountain Lodge, and the University of Oklahoma. His ability to give movement and depth to two-dimensional work also animates his portraits of the Chickasaw elders.

"I would not call my paintings photorealistic," Larsen said. "I rely on photography to capture the likeness, but I also do sketches and it is from my sketches that I'm more often able to capture whatever vitality these people might have from a certain look or gesture that you just can't capture in a photograph."

Some of the elders are depicted sitting in their homes, objects that hint at their long life around them, while others pose against softly colored backdrops. All of the oil paintings bring out the emotions of the subjects, along with their physical characteristics.

"A couple of people came off as being transparent," Larsen said. "Both of these women died not too long after they sat for us. You were able to, by being with them, see they were ready to move on. That feeling is something that a photograph can't capture, a painting can."

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Larsen worked with his wife, Martha, to interview, photograph and sketch the elders in Oklahoma, Texas, California and Washington, D.C.. Each of the exhibited portraits is accompanied by a short biography condensed from those interviews.

"All of these people have a particular history. They all suffered through the Depression and some of them really had hard times, but they all came through it and they all raised their kids to respect and cherish their heritage," Larsen said.

The titles of the works reflect national history, as with "She Served Her Country," a portrait of World War II veteran Beaulah Shavney, and "Mr. Ambassador" of Charles Blackwell, the Chickasaw Nation Ambassador to the United States. Others show the significant involvement of the Chickasaws in Oklahoma, including "The Fiddle Player" of Colbert Hackler, a longtime contributor to music education in the state; "Patron Saint of

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Children" of Glenda Galvan, a caretaker for foster children; and "Our Oldest Citizen" of Dana Blackbird, age 106.

"Some of the subjects of these paintings, they have stories about being code talkers in World War II," Chill said. "I know others who talked about the history they lived through and the things they've done throughout our lives and they're so intertwined with the history of Oklahoma."

All 48 portraits will be permanently installed at the soon-to-be-opened Chickasaw Cultural Center in Sulphur, along with the audio and photographs from his interviews with the elders.

I Am Very Proud to Be Chickasaw displays at through March 26, 2010 at Tulsa World Gallery, Gaylord-Pickens Oklahoma Heritage Museum, 1400 N. Classen.

—Allison Meier

Rating: Not Yet Rated

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