SCOTTSDALE, ARIZ. — Scottsdale has long been a nexus of Western history, lore and art. In the beginning, there was Troy Murray, who hung his first Olaf Wieghorst canvas and turned his saddle shop into a gallery. Steve Rose opened the Biltmore and stocked it with scenes of the Grand Canyon, Taos and Canyon De Chelly. And Abe Hays, who plied his trade among the impediments of the Old West — bits and bridles, saddles and spurs, and more than a few Maynard Dixon paintings. There was also the woman who billed herself as Pancho Villa’s widow. She sold — once or twice a year, and strictly on the q.t. — the great Mexican revolutionary’s “authentic” skull to a gullible tourist. Legend says Villa popped up here, there and everywhere at the same time, but who knew he was cloned?

Centuries ago, in what would become Scottsdale, the Hohokam people tamed the Salt River, constructing a complex irrigation system that allowed them to farm the desert. Their descendants, the Pima and Maricopa, expert weavers and potters, reside here. To the south loom the Superstition Mountains, home of the Apache Thunder God. In the 1870s, Apache widows wept there after a fierce battle with the US Cavalry. Their tears fell as black obsidian stones: the Apache Tears you find, along with the story, in the great old rock shops. General Miles chased Geronimo through the Superstitions. General Pershing chased Villa there, as well. And it was there that the lost Peralta gold mine was found by the “Dutchman” Jacob Waltz in the 1890s. But the

Western Spirit: Scottsdale’s Museum of the West

HERITAGE FINDS A NEW HOME IN THE SOUTHWEST’S NEWEST VENUE FOR THE ARTS.
Dutchman died the night before he said he would reveal the location. Treasure hunters still seek his mine. Every year, some quester vanishes in the labyrinthine rocks, adding to the mystery.

These stories resonate and circulate in the atmosphere of Scottsdale’s Old Town, in the galleries during the Art Walk on Thursday evenings, in the music that drifts out of the Harley roar and Mustang rumble on Scottsdale Road. Two auctions, the Scottsdale Art Auction and Altermann’s, add to the action, offering fresh opportunities for collectors to acquire Western art and become part of the story themselves. Painters and sculptors; artists who work in clay, silver, fiber or leather; writers, dancers, composers and filmmakers all call Scottsdale home, or home away from home. Like the West itself, Scottsdale is continually adding new layers to its slogan: “The West’s Most Western Town.”

There are several Scottsdales. The Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art represents the urban, cosmopolitan New West. The Scottsdale Artists’ School brings exceptional artists and talented students together to pass on the area’s artistic heritage. At the edge of town, Frank Lloyd Wright’s Taliesin West affirms the Phoenix suburb’s place in the Modernist movement. Missing until now was a crucial piece of the cultural puzzle — a museum devoted to the American West, one that would show and tell the story of westward expansion, of powerful cultures on a collision course, a story of conflict and cooperation, a story that spins and renews itself for each generation.

Western Spirit: Scottsdale’s Museum of the West opened this past January. It is precisely what the city needed. Housed in the renovated Loloma Transit Station, the museum sits between the heart of the Main Street gallery scene and the Scottsdale Artists’ School.

Director and CEO Michael Fox touts the location: “We are proud to be the new, western anchor to the historic downtown arts district. We support the city’s identity by providing a major Western heritage destination attraction that offers outstanding art and artifacts of the West. Because we’re in a pedestrian-friendly area surrounded by numerous art galleries and restaurants, we see a synergy with the neighborhood businesses, which makes the area a more attractive destination for residents and visitors.”

But the museum is not a new idea. “Over 30 years ago,” Fox says, “former Scottsdale mayor, the late Herb Drinkwater, established a small group of community members to keep the dream alive. Many of the original visionaries, under the leadership of our board chair, Jim Bruner, helped bring the dream to reality. In 2013, a partnership was formed with the City of Scottsdale and a 501(c)(3) organization named Scottsdale Museum of the West. With city bed tax funds and private sector support, the nonprofit organization built the museum, now managed by the nonprofit organization, Scottsdale Museum of the West.”

Conceived by the Phoenix-based architectural firm Studio Ma, the 43,000-square-foot museum boasts a state-of-the-art LEED Gold Standard for green construction and sustainability. Many of the materials are recycled and even the condensation from the air conditioners is collected and sent to the gorgeous sculpture gardens in the center and on the perimeter of the building. With steel that has a weathered feel, railings like hitching posts and wooden beams and decorative wheels that recall flatboats, boom towns, wagon trains, blacksmith shops and log and clapboard cabins, the design blurs the distinction between inside and outside, reminding visitors that the primary protagonist in the story of American West was — and remains — the environment in all its exquisitely beautiful and, at times, brutally challenging aspects.

“The Lost Greenhorn” by Alfred Jacob Miller, circa 1865. Chromolitograph. Tim Peterson Family Collection.

Western Spirit: Scottsdale’s Museum Of The West

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Western Spirit’s space is magnificent, but the mission and ambition the space contains are even more so. Chief curator Tricia Loscher outlines some of the many exhibitions currently on view for those who have a week, or only an hour, to spend in the museum. She says, “Seeing original artworks by Charles Russell and Frederic Remington from the Tim Peterson Family Collection may be one person’s ‘must do.’ Another visitor may be excited and inspired by experiencing the American West through the eyes of the artists, as in the exhibition ‘Process and Materiality’ from the collection of Howard and Frankie Alper, where renowned sculptor John Coleman explains the stories conveyed by his bronzes through the descriptive labels that accompany his artwork. Most visitors can’t resist getting their picture taken in artist Douglas Roose’s interactive 3D painting, where you literally stand on a painting that is an image of the Old West and have your photograph taken to send to friends and family around the world.”

In addition, A.P. Hays’s comprehensive ‘Spirit of the West’ collection of badges, boots, quirts, reatas and other Western gear will thrill the would-be range rider and bronc buster.

Noted collector Tim Peterson, who specializes in art from and about the fur trade and mountain man era, has loaned a number of works to the museum, including, among others, exquisite paintings by Alfred Jacob Miller and A.F. Tait, early painters who chronicled the lives of trappers, traders and explorers and the Native Americans they encountered. In fact, three of the museum’s current exhibits draw on his collection. “I liked Michael Fox immediately,” Peterson says, “and I saw that Western Spirit would be open-minded and creative, that they were coming at this without preconceived notions. That this was a start-up intrigued me. That it was in Scottsdale, one of the centers of Western art, intrigued me. I saw that they were creating a nice venue and felt that they would be good stewards of collections. And they were willing to showcase each of the three areas of interest in my collection: the historical pieces, the Lewis and Clark series and the works of contemporaries like Howard Terpning. Viewers would see the evolution of Western art.

Drawn from the Peterson collection, “Inspirational Journey: The Story of Lewis & Clark” is one of the most ambitious of the new installations. The display showcases contemporary painter Charles Fritz’s ten-year, 100 paintings project, commissioned by Peterson to commemorate the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804–06. Fritz did a great deal of painting on location, creating paintings that are faithful to their sources in the explorers’ journals and historically accurate. Peterson feels strongly that the Lewis and Clark story is one that needs to be remembered. “Growing up in Minnesota, canoeing and camping, hiking and rafting, my imagination drew me to stories of the early explorers of the West. But Lewis and Clark fascinated me. They walked for two years and encountered many different native cultures. Yet none of those meetings erupted into violence. I wonder, could that happen today? Anywhere? So there are lessons here about diversity, about how we meet and deal with those who aren’t like us. And there are lessons about hardship, commitment and friendship that I think we can learn from today.”

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