

# Mike Larsen: The Phoenix Original Style Materializes from Fire

**I**n little more than a glance, Chickasaw artist Mike Larsen realized that his Oklahoma City studio was a total loss. As he walked through the charred remains, he felt numb. Several paintings had been destroyed by the fire. Later, he would figure the loss was worth about \$110,000. But the piece he was thinking about most was the painting he had completed the day before, on January 6, 1991. It had been different from the others in one important aspect.

All of the others had been for sale. The painting of the dancing Indian ballerinas was his entry in a competition sponsored by the Oklahoma Arts Council. The winner would reproduce his or her work as a large mural in the rotunda of the state capitol in Oklahoma City and be paid \$50,000. The short- and long-term publicity value of winning this contest would be considerable, particularly if the mural captured public appeal.

That realization helped to snap Larsen out of his despondency. The contest deadline was Tuesday, two days hence. He was a fast painter, but this would be difficult, even for him. He called Arts Council director Betty Price, told her about the fire, and asked for an extension. He was given one additional day. Not sure he could do it in time, but at least not consciously weighed down with a traumatic crisis of confidence, he bought new materials and set to work. Larsen completed the painting on Wednesday afternoon, just ahead of the extended deadline; he was the sixth and last entrant. It turned out to be a case of hurry up and wait. Despite the deadline, judging would not take place for a couple of months.

He returned home to deal with his loss for the first time. After the adrenalin rush associated with finishing his entry on time, there was a letdown. He

had lost his inventory and studio, which had been located adjacent to the “Jesus Is Lord” Pawn Shop at Northwest 23<sup>rd</sup> and Villa. Larsen realized he could not afford the “luxury” of a lengthy funk. He and his wife, Martha, had three children to support. By Oklahoma standards, he was a successful artist, meaning he did not need a second job to pay the bills. But he could not afford significant downtime.

Nevertheless, Larsen was troubled that perhaps he had fallen into a creative rut. “I was painting for the market,” Larsen says. “I knew exactly what would sell, for how much, and where. They [*the paintings*] were okay, the customers were happy, but as an artist, I wasn’t satisfied. I hadn’t been aggressive, not painting the way I wanted to. But this probably wasn’t the time to change.”

Then again, maybe it was.



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Larsen’s painting of Chief Tishomingo led him to begin painting more Chickasaw subjects. His unofficial research assistant for the painting was Glenda Galvan, a tribal historian and storyteller (see page ).



**H**e was born Mike Lanham in Dallas in 1944. While Mike was still a baby, his father, Manlee Lanham, ran off with another woman, deserting his wife, Ruth, and two sons. Ruth moved her family into her parents' house.

Manlee paid a few sporadic, brief visits, mainly to see Mike's older brother, but he clearly was not welcomed by Ruth and her parents, and his visits stopped. Thus, Mike was cut off completely from the Chickasaw side of the family. Manlee's mother, Mary Jane Underwood, was a full blood. Her son was half Chickasaw, half white. As a child, Mike was aware he had Chickasaw blood, but knew little else about his tribe. He never met his grandmother. In 1951, Ruth married Knude Larsen, who adopted the boys and gave them his name. A few years later, they moved to Amarillo, TX.

Mike's talent as an artist was obvious during his high school years, but his decision to pursue art as a career was tempered by two obstacles. Except for his mother, the family did not support his decision. They thought an intelligent young man should enter one of the professions. And, while he knew he was gifted, he thought a few of his classmates painted just as well as he did and "one Chinese boy had incredible skills."

Since Manlee Lanham was not a taboo subject, Mike's mother provided some general information about him. He apparently had rejected Indian ways as a young man, while his brother, Jim, had embraced them. She had never known Manlee to be anything but a common unskilled laborer, though he was a talented wood craftsman when he put his mind to it and had produced some excellent furniture. Intrigued, a teenage Mike visited his father in Dallas. But Manlee Lanham was distant and nothing much came of it.

Mike enrolled as an art student at an Amarillo junior college and later at the University of Houston. But he became so impatient to get on with his career that he dropped out during his senior year. It turned out to be a good decision, for by then he was learning far more about art, particularly the business of art, at street shows.

His content and style both changed during his early years as a painter. "In the beginning, I went through my Andrew Wyeth period, painting houses and barns, then western landscapes, which became landscapes dotted with things like pueblos or horses. About 20 years ago, I started painting Plains Indians and Pueblo Indians very realistic looking in traditional dress and settings."

One thing that did not change during those years