

EPT
1/31/2001

Art, with a heart

Tom Lea symbolized the best of El Paso

Our city — and indeed the Lone Star State — has lost a unique treasure. The passing of internationally renowned artist and author Tom Lea leaves a void in the heart of El Paso's cultural history.

The native El Pasoan's death prompted President George W. Bush, who owns some of Lea's artwork, to remark that it is the "loss of a great Texan and a great American."

And we add, a great and very proud El Pasoan. Lea's love of his hometown (he was born on July 11, 1907) and its mixed cultural heritage never diminished. He was a wonderfully enthusiastic cultural ambassador for the city. As Mayor Carlos Ramirez aptly expressed: "He was so fond of El Paso; his love showed in his art and writing. He was a great representative of what El Paso is."

The 93-year-old native El Pasoan's family history is interwoven with the city's, and his life spanned the evolution of El Paso — and a revolution in Mexico. Lea's father was mayor of El Paso during the Mexican Revolution and the days of the infamous Pancho Villa.

Later, as a young man, and a war correspondent for Life Magazine, Lea was dispatched to paint Marines on the island of Peleliu (the work was highly acclaimed), a portrait of Chiang Kai-shek (former Nationalist

Chinese leader) and President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Some of Lea's work hangs in The Smithsonian Institution, as well as in many private galleries. He created a number of murals including "The Nesters" for the Benjamin Franklin Post Office in Washington, D.C., in the Hall of State in Dallas, the Pass of the North mural in El Paso's federal building, and works in other government buildings in San Antonio, St. Louis and other cities.

That Lea's talent wasn't confined to painting and illustrating is remarkable. Aside from his correspondent work for Life, he wrote more than seven books (and illustrated them) including two that were adapted to films, "The Brave Bulls" and the best-seller "The Wonderful Country."

"He influenced a whole generation of artists that developed in this area," said former El Pasoan and artist Luis Jimenez of Hondo, N.M.

Yet, Lea remained earnestly humble about his accomplishments, a quality that endeared him to both friends and fans. Lea's death indeed is a loss to the community, but there is consolation in his legacy. Through Lea's many paintings, murals and writings, his talent, vision and thoughts will continue to be shared, and appreciated, for years to come.