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## Tom Lea paintings will be on exhibit in new Museum of the Big Bend annex

El Paso native Tom Lea's series of 11 paintings, "Western Beef Cattle," will be on display when the new Emmett and Miriam McCoy Building at the Museum of the Big Bend opens to the public on Saturday, March 11.

The museum is located on the Sul Ross State University campus in Alpine.

Commissioned by *Life* magazine after World War II, the paintings depict the origins of the beef cattle industry in North America. Lea conducted first-hand research, traveling to Mexico to spend time on haciendas and on to Illinois as he followed the life cycle of beef cattle. He spent a year studying cattle and painting what he saw, according to the catalog from the exhibition "Tom Lea: Paintings/Western Beef Cattle," October 7, 1950–January 14, 1951, at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts for the State Fair of Texas. The full pamphlet can be found at <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph183353/>.

The detailed artwork portrays events such as how the first cattle in North America made the overseas journey from Spain in the 16th century and the logistics of getting them from ship to shore. Lea's brush examines how Mexicans moved herds each day from pasture to an enclosure and illustrates the tools, clothing and other trappings of the vaquero. He follows the progress of selective breeding as other European cattle, primarily from Great Britain, are bred with Spanish cattle to provide beef for the North American palate.

Viewers will notice a marked difference in the appearance of the cattle as the bloodlines of Spanish and Mexican cattle become diluted when modern European breeds are introduced. Lea completes the collection with representations of the life cycle of a beef steer from weanling to fat and ready for harvest. The realistic details of each painting beckon the viewer to participate while cattle industry insiders will appreciate a truthful and thoughtful depiction of their business.

The Western Beef Cattle collection is only one of the many series and types of art Lea created. He may be best known for his work during World War II, when he worked as an artist correspondent, also for *Life* magazine. During his time in the South Pacific, he observed and recorded the action beside troops under fire, putting himself in danger so he could later create art to accurately reflect what soldiers experienced.

The prolific artist used his talent to paint murals for public spaces such as the R. E. Thomason Federal Building and Courthouse in El Paso, U.S. Post Office buildings including Seymour and Odessa in Texas, and the Benjamin Franklin Post Office in Washington D.C. He collaborated with friend and prominent Texas writer J. Frank Dobie, providing illustrations for three of his books. Lea also penned four novels and illustrated all of them himself, earning an Owen Wister Award for Lifetime Achievement in Western Literature.

Lea considered himself an eyewitness. Through his art, he strived to record and communicate the feelings of others using visual media. According to Adair Margo, founder and president of the Tom Lea Institute in El Paso, "Tom wanted to communicate what other people felt about things, not bring himself into it. It's not a style of art; he could not care less about style. He used the style his subject demanded."

Adair recorded Lea's life history and wrote a book about him published in 1993. The pieces he created as a war correspondent have been displayed in the Smithsonian and other museums as well as the White House.

While attending the 2007 Texas Book Festival in Austin, Adair met Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Robert Caro who said to her, "Tom Lea was an unsung genius of our time, and he made it purely on the quality of his work." Thus began her work to educate the public about Tom Lea and his contributions to the world through his art, writing and research.

"Tom never lived in the art world. He lived in the whole world. He devoted himself to experiencing what he communicated. Whether it was living with soldiers on the battlefield or interviewing vaqueros, he remained a classicist because he didn't get wrapped up in style. Tom Lea exemplifies the highest calling of a true artist—to express a sense of comradeship with others while communicating the wonder of life," she said.

For more information, call the museum at 432-837-8730 or email Director Mary Bones at [maryb@sulross.edu](mailto:maryb@sulross.edu).

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