

## IN MEMORIAM: Joe Beeler

He was a true man of the West, helping to spur today's Western Art movement by creating the Cowboy Artists of America. This month, the show goes on, but without its original cowboy.

**T**he Cowboy Artists of America will ride into town for their annual show this month, but without Joe Beeler. In late April, the Sedona artist suffered a heart attack while roping and branding calves. His friends call it a textbook ending for a man who devoted his life to the West. He was 74.

Beeler was the last remaining founder of the CA. By starting the organization in the 1960s, Beeler helped spur the nascent contemporary Western Art movement. Phoenix Art Museum Director Jim Ballinger says Beeler's contribution is almost without parallel among his peers.

"For 40 years, he continued to promote things for the good of his colleagues," he says. "That's a rare artist. The fact that he was roping and in the saddle at his age, that's a giant message about someone who lived life to its fullest."

The organization Beeler founded became an art phenomenon with 22 active members, including some of the genre's brightest stars. The show and sale, which takes place this year on October 20 at Phoenix Art Museum, generates more than \$2 million in sales and attracts collectors from around the world.

Beeler was born on Christmas Day, 1931, in Joplin, Missouri. He received his bachelor of fine arts degree from Kansas State College in Pittsburg, Kansas, and later studied at the Art Center School in Los Angeles. Ballinger says Beeler had a superb eye and an adept hand at an early age. His early drawings were quick, fresh and vital. "He knew exactly what he was trying to capture," Ballinger says.

Beeler worked in every medium: oils, pencil, pen and ink, pastels, watercolor and sculpture. A one-man show in 1960 at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa launched his reputation as a premier contemporary Western artist. He moved to Sedona the following year, and stayed there for the rest of his life.

When the town of Paradise Valley wanted to memorialize former resident and senator Barry Goldwater, officials tapped Beeler to sculpt a 9-foot bronze sculpture of the revered Arizonan. (Beeler was friends with Goldwater, who had supported the fledgling CA organization and became an honorary member.)

Beeler, John Hampton and Charlie Dye

dreamed up the idea for the CA while on a roundup in Mexico. They envisioned a group of artists who would follow the trail blazed by artists like Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell. They partnered with Prescott artist George Phippen at the Oak Creek Tavern in Sedona (now the Cowboy Bar), and made it official on June 23, 1965.

By all accounts, Beeler lived up to his ideals in both his art and his life.

"What Joe sculpted with his hands, he cast with his heart," says grocery magnate

Eddie Basha, a longtime friend, avid Western art collector and a partner in Trailside Gallery, where Beeler showed his work since 1977. "His work is a window to the soul of a man who lived the best of the values that have been attributed to those days."

Beeler's wife, Sharon, died from cancer in 2004. His daughter Tracy, son Jody, daughter-in-law Monica, grandson John and brother Ted survive him.

So does the group he founded. Also, the Arizona Historic League named him an "Arizona History Maker," and his bronze likeness stands as a reminder, gazing out onto Route 89A near the old Oak Creek Tavern.

*The Cowboy Artists of America sale will be held at Phoenix Art Museum October 20, and kicks off a monthlong exhibit. For information, call 602-252-1222 or visit [phxart.org](http://phxart.org).*

— Kathy Montgomery



COURTESY HAMBONE (2)

### ARTIST OF THE MONTH

## Hambone

**L**ike a zealous fiction writer, folk artist Hambone can turn memories into vivid stories. Instead of pen and paper, however, this Louisiana native uses brush and canvas to tell his tales, delivering flavors of the Deep South and sharing episodes inspired by his multicultural upbringing.

"I paint about the culture in the South," says Hambone, who won't share his real first or last names. "Since I am of Creole descent, my paintings are about the culture I know and grew up with."

Hambone, half-Mississippi Choctaw and half-Creole, is a self-taught artist who moved to Arizona eight years ago. He started painting late in life, at age 46, without any prior experience or training. "I didn't draw or doodle anything... never," Hambone says. "I was a professional auctioneer all my life."

Hambone's colorful images go straight from his brain to blank canvas – without a sketch or storyboard. "When I sit down and paint, I paint from memory," he explains. "My work just came out as a unique, naïve style."

From family barbecues or enjoying a hot summer day on the river, to a simple depiction of a woman ironing, Hambone's paintings are joyous, with an emphasis on vibrant colors and small details.

"My childhood was the happiest time of my life, despite us being poor," Hambone adds. "I am glad when people find their own childhood memories in my paintings."

*Hambone's work is on display at the Tree of Life Gallery, 4775 N. 20th Street, Phoenix, 602-955-4228. For information, visit [hamboneart.com](http://hamboneart.com).*

— Ljiljana Ciric