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BOOKS

Books: Four Western artists who continue to inspire

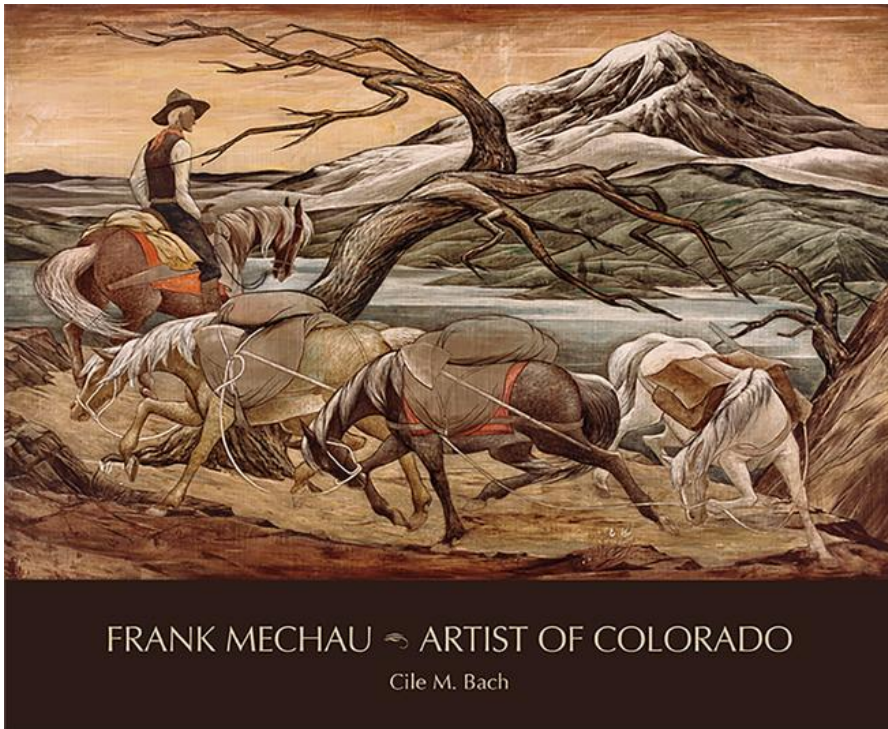
By Sandra Dallas

Special to The Denver Post

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Frank Mechau: Artist of Colorado

By Cile M. Bach (University Press of Colorado)

Frank Mechau (<http://www.frankmechau.com/>) "can well be considered the most important regionalist Colorado artist," writes Hugh Grant, Kirkland Museum founder. Mechau just might be the most beloved, too. Who can't be swept up in his murals of wild horses and longhorn cattle or his romantic scenes of the West?

The tragedy was that Mechau, who died at 42, painted for only 20 years.

Written by the late Cile M. Bach, whose husband headed the Denver Art Museum for 30 years, "Frank Mechau: Artist of Colorado" originally was published in 1981. This edition has been updated with additional drawings and color plates. The book is important, because it is the only full-length treatment of Mechau.

Born in Kansas but raised in western Colorado, Mechau studied in Europe. But he turned his back on the Old World, Bach wrote, because "he had discovered his roots in the sustaining tradition and beauty of the West." He returned to Colorado, settling in Redstone with his wife and four

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children.

Like many Depression-era artists, Mechau divided his professional time among painting, teaching, and producing murals for government buildings, including the Denver Public Library and the post office in Glenwood Springs. "Dangers of the Mail," a Mechau mural in the Washington, D.C., post office building, was covered up when the Environmental Protection Agency moved in, a sop to political correctness. The mural features Indians attacking white women.

Herndon Davis: Painting Colorado History 1901-1962

By Craig W. Leavitt and Thomas J. Noel (University Press of Colorado)

Herndon Davis is best known as the man who painted the Face on the Barroom Floor at the Teller House in Central City. Davis had been hired to decorate the Hotel and Opera House prior to its 1936 reopening. On his last night in Central City, he sneaked into the hotel and painted a woman's face on the floor of the barroom. The model for Colorado's most famous portrait was Davis' wife, a fact that was mostly kept secret until her death.

Davis made a name for himself as an East Coast military and newspaper artist before coming to Denver in the 1930s. His specialty was portraits. And dozens of them, from Gov. Ralph Carr to actress Katharine Hepburn, are reproduced in "Herndon Davis: Painting Colorado History 1901-1962."

In addition to his portraits, which are not really outstanding art by today's standards, are paintings of santos that were owned by historian Nolie Mumey. What really makes "Herndon Davis" special, however, is the series of paintings of local landmarks. Most of the watercolors, accompanied by text by Joe Emerson Smith, were published in the Rocky Mountain News in the 1940s. They pictures not only record the landmarks but they picture them in all their shabby glory years after they were built.

The Arcade Saloon, a once-elegant gambling hall in the 1600 block of Larimer, is shown as a tattered building housing a junk shop and a bar and grill. Charpiot's Hotel, once Denver's finest restaurant, which dubbed itself the Delmonico of the West, is pictured as a shabby apartment building with seedy storefronts with old cars lined up in front of it. Davis painted Ed Chase's and William Byers' homes, the Palace Variety Theater, the Cable Car Garage and the Coburn Stables (now part of Denver's antiques row.) There is Eugene Field Alley (16th Street between Arapahoe and Lawrence) with Grayson's store. Like Grayson's and the Arcade, many of the buildings are long gone, the victims of progress and urban renewal.

The watercolors are not only a wonderful piece of nostalgia but they are among the few records of Denver landmarks in their declining years.

A Place in the Sun: The Southwest Paintings of Walter Ufer and E. Martin Hennings

Edited by Thomas Brent Smith (Univ. of Oklahoma)

You saw the show. Now read the book. "A Place in the Sun" accompanies the Denver Art Museum show of paintings by two of the Southwest's most accomplished artists, Walter Ufer and E. Martin Hennings. Illustrated with some 150 photographs and full-color reproductions of the artists' sun-splashed work, the book is the next best thing to seeing the paintings themselves.

Ufer and Hennings began as traditional painters, trained in art academies in Chicago and Munich. They fell in love with the Southwest, moved there and became members of the Taos Society of Artists. Ufer was a great self-promoter whose finest work was done over a period of just 10 years, before alcohol sent him and his art into a downward spiral. The more modest Hennings was lesser-known but was Ufer's equal as a painter. Both artists straddled a line between traditional and modern painting, portraying Indians not as romantic figures but as they appeared in the early half of the 20th century.

Besides stunning reproductions of the artists' paintings, "A Place in the Sun" includes biographies of each artist along with a critiques of their works and essays on their places in modern art and in the Taos school of painting.

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