Above: Two Ropers, 1957, oil on board.
Right: Peake sketching at Rancho Jabali in the 1950s.
Performance

A tribute to legendary Santa Barbara artist Channing Peake on the 100th anniversary of his birth.

By Karen Telleen-Lawton

Historic images courtesy of Channing Peake Estate
Clockwise from above: Peake (left) and fellow artist Howard Warshaw at a three-man show for Peake, Warshaw and Rico Lebrun in San Francisco’s de Young Museum, 1959. Peake poses in 1985 with his fiesta mural, commissioned for El Paseo Restaurant. After years in storage, it is being restored and installed in the new Santa Barbara Airport wing, slated for completion in 2011. Peake (left) and Pablo Picasso in Vallauris, France, late 1950s.
Everyone wants to understand art. Why don't we try to understand the song of a bird? Why do we love the night, the flowers, everything around us, without trying to understand them? But in the case of a painting, people think they have to understand.

CHANNING PEAKE SYMPATHIZED with this quote by his friend and artistic hero, Pablo Picasso. The 20th-century Santa Barbara rancher-artist wanted people simply to enjoy his art.

In Peake's compositions, scattered around town and around the world, we're transported to the midday quiet of a hot arroyo, the chaos of a round-up or the sideways glance of a dazzling beauty in a red dancing dress. His work reveals rural Santa Barbara County and glimpses of his own colorful life.

The Peake family moved to California from Colorado in 1915 when Channing was five. He turned down USC football for an art scholarship surreptitiously garnered by his art teacher. After two years at California College of Arts and Crafts, he arrived at Santa Barbara School of Fine Arts in 1928. Soon, he won one of the commissions for El Paseo Restaurant. (This mural, under renovation, will be on display again next year in Santa Barbara Airport's new wing.)

During the Great Depression, Peake painted murals at Casa del Herrero in the Spanish colonial revival style and assisted on W.P.A. Art Projects at Harvard University and Penn Station, New York. He spent an influential year among the Navajo, collecting rugs and perfecting his eye for color.
"He was definitely a colorist. It's something you're born with," says his widow Cherie Peake. "You can develop it, but it's an innate gift. Channing said Van Gogh, Gauguin and Bonnard were true colorists."

Peake traveled to Mexico to work with José Clemente Orozco, but Orozco had come to California. Instead, Peake completed a fresco mural with Diego Rivera in Mexico City's National Palace. "We went to see the palace mural in 1989, a few months before Channing died," Cherie remembers. "I pointed out my favorite part. His face lit up, and he said, 'That was the part I painted!'"

Returning to Santa Barbara from Mexico in 1938, Peake opened an art studio downtown in the current location of Alhecama Arts Complex. He and his first wife Katy Schott Peake purchased Rancho Jabali, next to the Isaacson ranch near Buellton.

"As a young boy, I first knew Peake as another local rancher, one whose cattle might occasionally stray through the fence or one who would be telling tall tales and jokes around the branding fire," Robert Isaacson wrote in a catalog essay on Peake. "He looked the part, with a short-brimmed Stetson and a handsome, rugged face."

Peake shared in the cooperative life of harvesting, fence mending, calving and cattle roping. "He was a great heeler—the cowboy who ropes a calf's heels—at the same time he was an artist," Cherie says. "Picasso liked to trade drawings with him because Channing knew the anatomy of ranch animals."

Fellow artists Rico Lebrun and Howard Warshaw were frequent visitors. "What happened on Rancho Jabali...was a rare and unique combination of artists and events," wrote Isaacson.

"Three world-class artists painted and drew on a 1,600-acre ranch, using animals, broken-down machinery and commonplace observations to capture that time and that place in stunningly original contemporary art."

Peake traveled frequently to Europe to practice his drawing technique with like-minded artists. "Drawing is the basis of good painting, like learning scales before songs on the piano," Cherie says. "He and Picasso would challenge each other to draw the best bull or horse."

On one excursion in the 1950s, Peake was invited to a bullfight in Spain along with Ernest Hemingway. Peake presented Hemingway with a cowboy hat, which Cherie says forever connected them in spirit. 

Peake's murals were drawn freehand rather than from scale drawings, creating active figures. He was

Top: Peake (right) and Rico Lebrun relax at Peake's ranch. Ranching was a key component of Peake's life and informed his artistic vision. Right: Untitled, circa 1980s, oil and marble dust on canvas.
painting at the Santa Barbara Biltmore Hotel in 1978 when Cherie met him. “My family came for lunch because my younger sisters heard that a movie was being filmed there.

“Channing was wearing a tweed jacket with a bandana tied around his neck. My sisters thought he was the director,” she laughs. “He enjoyed our family interaction, and came over to talk. Later on he invited us to come for Fiesta. We ended up staying several days.”

Cherie, Peake’s fourth wife, was an enthusiastic partner for his senior years. “Every artist needs someone, whether agent or child or significant other, to see that his work gets out, to protect his legacy. Cherie does that,” says Rita Ferri, visual arts coordinator and curator of collections for Santa Barbara County Arts Commission.

Many of his later paintings evolved into the abstract, expressing his belief in a theory of universal “life shapes.” Isaacsone explains, “These ‘biomorphic’ patterns, dynamic, archetypal life shapes, keep turning up in Peake’s work...A grain combine, skeletal and collapsing, spreads out over space, like the scattered bleached bones of a dead cow discovered after the vultures and coyotes have picked them clean.” In one painting, a combine morphs into an airplane, perhaps alluding to the new farming technique of crop dusting.

Biomorphosis may be the theme of Peake’s mural in the board hearing room at the County Administration Building. Standing before Arroyo, one notices his legendary color palette—ocher, gold, hyacinth blue and lavender—and can imagine oneself in a canyon of red Sespe sandstone, peering through fall-foliage willows into a cloudless sky.

Gazing at the painting, it seems to transform. A humpback whale breaches in the lower left canvas. Another humpback, shimmering gold with archetypal long flippers, creates a splash overhead. Among curves like wind-tossed waves one imagines a seal eyeing you. The splattered surface evokes ocean spray. Why wouldn’t Peake’s vision of Santa Barbara backcountry morph into the sea?

In his later years, Peake was a dedicated supporter of aspiring artists in Santa Barbara. He was a founding member of the Museum of Art and helped to create The Arts Fund’s Individual Artist Award program. The county’s Channing Peake Gallery is a further tribute to his lasting influence, along with a wealth of interesting Peakes all over town.

Karen Telleen-Lawson writes about the environment, justice and history among other topics. She is the author of Canyon Voices—the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon, and a frequent contributor to Santa Barbara Seasons.