

TRAIL TALK

story by Lynn P. Kirst

Ken Riley's Lifetime of Artistic Achievement

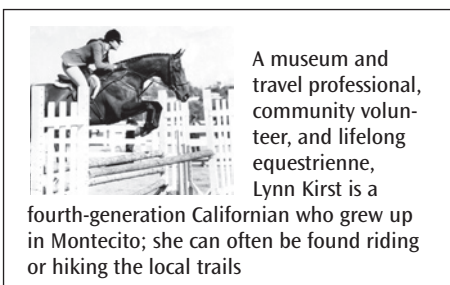


Ken Riley and his wife, Maria, in the artist's studio, decorated with books, sculpture and Native American artifacts. On the easel are three stages of a work-in-progress: a colorful tiny sketch, a larger pencil drawing, and the largest piece that will be the finished work (photo by Lynn P. Kirst)

Throughout its history, Montecito has attracted a "Who's Who" of distinguished residents from the creative world, including architects, actors, artists, comedians, composers, designers, directors, musicians, singers, writers and more. Some relish a public presence in the community; others live reclusively behind gated walls. Others lead quiet, productive lives, going about their daily routine with the vast majority of people with whom they come into casual contact never knowing how esteemed, revered or famous they are within their particular field of endeavor. **Ken Riley** is one of those.

One of America's most famous artists working in the Western genre, Ken lives with his vivacious wife, **Maria Riley**, in what is arguably one of the most charming cottages in Montecito. Everything about Ken and Maria is utterly unpretentious, yet overflowing with taste and a sense of quality bordering on perfection. One of Ken's proudest possessions is a crystal statue that he received on August 21, the latest in a series of awards, honors and medals that Ken has been collecting regularly for nearly thirty years. This one is the Booth Museum Lifetime Achievement Award, bestowed upon Ken by the Booth Western Art Museum in Georgia.

So what did Ken Riley do to deserve a Lifetime Achievement Award? Space here allows for only the most cursory overview of a fascinating artistic life, with several equally-deserving-of-attention phases. But the story begins in the Midwest; Ken was born in Missouri and grew up in the small railroad town of Parsons, Kansas, "Where you could take your sled in winter and tow it behind a car," remembers Ken. He joined the Boy Scouts, visited grandparents on their farm, and



A museum and travel professional, community volunteer, and lifelong equestrienne, Lynn Kirst is a fourth-generation Californian who grew up in Montecito; she can often be found riding or hiking the local trails



Ken Riley in his studio with Degas, his bichon frise. The photographs on the wall date from November, 1963, when Riley presented his painting "Bunker Hill" to John F. Kennedy at the White House, just two weeks before the president's assassination (photo by Lynn P. Kirst).

watched his father spend his entire career working at the General Motors plant in Parsons, eventually becoming head of the parts department. His parents never dreamed young Ken would become a nationally acclaimed artist.

"My mother had taken oil painting lessons and encouraged my artistic interest," Ken recounts. "But when it came to being an artist as a profession, they thought I was out of my mind!"

Luckily Ken had a mentor in his high school art teacher, a woman who



Ken Riley (right) receives the Booth Museum Lifetime Achievement Award from Seth Hopkins, Executive Director of the Booth Western Art Museum in Georgia. On the screen in the background is a pastel portrait of Riley painted by Harley Brown in 1992 (photo courtesy of the Booth Museum).

Honored artist Ken Riley sits in front of three of his paintings on view in the American West Gallery of the Booth Western Art Museum. Open since 2003, the Booth Museum is an Affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution. The second largest art museum in the state of Georgia with 120,000 square feet, the Booth Museum claims to house the largest permanent exhibition space for Western art in the United States (photo courtesy of the Booth Museum).

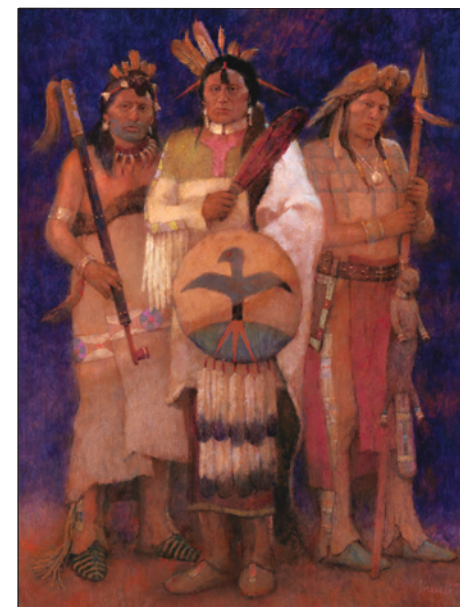


believed in his talent. On weekends she took Ken around to college art competitions and encouraged him to enter juried art shows. Riley's skeptical parents couldn't say no when the teacher offered to pay for Ken's first semester at art school, which enabled him to enter the prestigious Kansas City Art Institute. It was there that Riley's artistic career really got serious, as he was able to study drawing for a year with Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975).

Famous illustrators such as John Falter (1910-1982) and Robert Harris (1911-2007) came from New York to lecture at the Kansas City Art Institute. Falter painted many covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*, and Harris established a compound in Westport, Connecticut that became a weekend magnet for the New York art crowd. Riley was encouraged by them to go to New York to attend the Art Students League, which he did in 1941. He was told by Bob Harris, "Be sure you get into Harvey Dunn's class."

"It was very exciting for a young artist," says Riley. "I was invited to spend a weekend at Bob Harris' in Westport." In addition to the Art Students League, Riley also attended the highly regarded Grand Central Art School. And he did indeed study with Harvey Dunn, who in turn had been a student of the great American illustrator Howard Pyle. Ken Riley is now the last living student of Harvey Dunn, and treasures his connection with the earlier masters.

During World War II, Coast Guard Specialist Second Class Riley's talent was utilized by the military to depict numerous South Pacific battle scenes. After the War, his career (in a nutshell) blossomed as one of the most successful members of the Society of Illustrators. In addition to painting



"The Peace Makers," oil on panel by artist Ken Riley, will be sold at the upcoming Jackson Hole Art Auction on September 18 in Jackson, Wyoming. One of the premier Western art events in the country, the auction generates several million dollars in sales every year.

covers for "virtually all the slicks," Riley painted the series of Horatio Hornblower covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*, traveled in the western United States where he became fascinated with the early history, moved to Tombstone, Arizona, joined the Cowboy Artists of America, hit the trail of Western art and never looked back. Ken and Maria moved to Montecito three years ago to escape the oppressive heat of Arizona.

Before September is over, Ken Riley will reach another milestone when he celebrates his ninety-first birthday. How many people at that age can honestly say they are at the top of their game, still working on a daily basis and producing some of the best results of their career? Not many, so there must have been something in that Missouri water when Ken Riley came into this world in 1919. Long may he wave that paintbrush.