



The work and vision of Western artist William Matthews graces Dickies Arena in Fort Worth, Texas, in two bas relief bronzes flanking a mosaic mural high above its south entrance. He is pictured here with the finished pieces at the arena's opening in the fall of 2019.

WESTERN ART

Monument to the West

The *Los Caballos* mural and sculpture on Fort Worth's Dickies Arena honors horses as the heart of Western spirit.

By CHRISTINE HAMILTON

As an artist, William Matthews is best known for his watercolors capturing the ranch cowboys and landscape of the American West. But his followers know that he constantly pursues new artistic challenges. His biggest challenge to date, literally, was installed in the fall of 2019 above the south entrance of the new showcase Dickies Arena in Fort Worth, Texas.

The triptych, or three-piece, *Los Caballos* is a 12-by-63-foot mosaic mural fashioned from a Matthews watercolor, flanked by two 12-foot-tall bronze bas relief sculptures, one a Comanche warrior and the other an

early-day American cowboy. Matthews' friend and fellow artist Buckeye Blake sculpted both pieces.

With the arena joining Fort Worth's iconic Will Rogers Complex, the site of many rodeos and horse shows, the building needed to pay homage to the city's Western heritage. Matthews was among a group of 20 artists invited to conceptualize art for the building to do just that.

In tackling the project, he elicited the help of friends, including Andy Wilkinson, a poet, writer, singer and professor at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas; John Grant, a specialist in the installation of monuments and

public art, based in Denver, Colorado; and Blake, of Weatherford, Texas. They discussed ideas and West Texas history, and Matthews formed a vision the city selected. It became *Los Caballos*—honoring horses as an enduring symbol of the West, and the people in Texas whose lives horses have changed.

For the central mosaic, Matthews painted several 8-foot watercolors before a final selection was made. His hunt for reference material took him to ranches in eastern Colorado and Nevada. In his mock-ups for the bas relief sculptures, he "wanted to sketch people who had weight and gravitas," he says. Again, inspiration came from friends—Nevada rancher John Griggs, and Montana rancher and poet Henry Real Bird.

Matthews chose Mosaicos Venecianos in Cuernavaca, Mexico, to build the mosaic. The studio crafts glass tiles using age-old methods learned in Spilimbergo, Italy, the heart of the Italian mosaic tradition. Artisans worked from Matthews' watercolor, using 600,000 individually hand-cut glass tiles in 570 different colors. It arrived in Fort Worth in 32 panels that fit together like giant puzzle pieces.

Via high scaffolding and cranes, the three pieces were mounted in place more than 50 feet above the ground in time for the arena's opening in October of 2019. From concept to completion, the project took more than a year and a half.

Western Horseman visited with Matthews about the process of putting together this monumental project.

What was your vision for *Los Caballos*?

I wanted to show how the horse single-handedly transformed the West. The mural shows wild horses moving through West Texas, and a variation of landscapes and natural features, cloud patterns and weather. It shows the natural world of the horse on land. And the two figures, they had to be a Comanche and the cowboy [as part of Texas history].

On great European buildings you'll see combinations of mosaics and bronzes—

CHRISTINE HAMILTON

that combination is the language of monumental art. It seemed important for this building to have that.

Why did you use a mosaic to represent your painting?

Because it was going to be on the south end of the arena, we knew we would get sunlight from dawn to dusk continually shining on that wall. We knew that paint would never stand up, and it had to be something more maintenance-free. We had to find something that was really going to last and not change, fundamentally. With the glass tiles, the mosaic will stay as bright as it is now, while the bronzes will slowly turn greener and the patina will grow as it ages in the sun.

What was the process of getting the painting translated into a mosaic?

There were a lot of stages to go through, to make sure we were getting it right. [As a test] we had a 6-inch square of my painting blown up to a 4-foot square. The company made a mosaic out of that and we put it up on the wall, 60 feet high, to see how it read.

They basically took my painting and blew it up to size, and it is accurate to an eighth of an inch over 63 feet. I went down [to Mexico] a lot, overseeing the work. It's amazing to see up close how variegated and detailed the colors are. It's what gives it so much character, even from a distance.

How did you have to think differently with this than you would a painting?

Whenever you do anything, you have to start out with a good design first, and you always think about where you're going to be standing viewing it. Posters are generally going to be seen from 10 to 12 feet.

The scale of this was huge. You start with something small and you just make it bigger and bigger. With this, you have to realize when you paint a horse head, that horse head is going to be blown up the size of [a conference] table. It was amazing to think that every brushstroke that I made was going to take 12 people a week working on that one section I made with my brush.



ABOVE: Respected sculptor and painter Buckeye Blake fashioned Matthews' visions for the two 12-foot-high bronze bas reliefs flanking the mural. At left is the cowboy in progress, and at right is the finished Comanche warrior.

RIGHT: The craftsmen and -women of Mosaicos Venecianos in Cuernavaca, Mexico, fashioned the glass tiles for the mosaic, using approximately 600,000 tiles and 570 different pigments.



What was it like to work with Buckeye Blake for the bas relief sculptures?

He and I had never done something like this before—where it was like he was my hands. We're really close friends. We had a lot of fun and we spent a lot of time together. I can't imagine doing it with anybody who didn't know what Buckeye Blake knows. Not only is he Cherokee, but he is thoughtful and very sensitive to both what things look like and what they mean, how they present. That was really important.

Why did you want to take on this massive project?

It's exciting! I'm known as a Western artist, but don't really think of myself in a limited term like that. I like doing different things; I like new and challeng-

ing materials; I like exploring areas that are new to me.

There were huge challenges with this. And there were a lot of times when I just didn't know how it was going to turn out at all. My poor wife dealt with a lot of pep talks! But that's just the way it is doing anything you've never done before. This has been a huge chapter in my life. **WH**