

INSIDE

Obituaries	B-2
Police Notes	B-2
Roadrunner	B-2
Best Bets	B-6
Movies	B-6
Television	B-6



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Death of William Lumpkins closes chapter of local art history

By DENISE KUSEL
The New Mexican

William Lumpkins, dean of Santa Fe painters and a pioneer in passive-solar architecture, died Monday following a long illness. He was 90.

The death of Lumpkins, an elegant, dapper man who was known for wearing a flat-brimmed Stetson on his head and cowboy-style scarf around his neck, closes a chapter of Santa Fe's art history.

Stuart Ashman, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, on Tuesday called Lumpkins one of "the most important figures we associate with the art of New Mexico."

Born in 1909 on Rabbit Ears Ranch in Clayton, N.M., Lumpkins' ties to Santa

Fe stretch back to its art colony days and the group of painters known as the Cinco Pintores.

Throughout his life, he was best known for his bold, abstract acrylics on paper and was one of the last remaining artists of the Transcendental School spearheaded by Raymond Jonson and Emil Bistram.

Although he was born in a rural part of the state, Lumpkins was fond of saying that "Unless you have two or three oil wells, you don't want to ranch." After he left the ranch, his artistic wanderlust took him first to Albuquerque and The University of New Mexico, where he studied with Sheldon Parsons.

He later moved to Southern California to study architecture, but never finished school.

"I got tired of it," he said in a 1998

interview in *Pasatiempo*. "I heard they (the Works Progress Administration) were hiring in Santa Fe, so I went back to New Mexico."

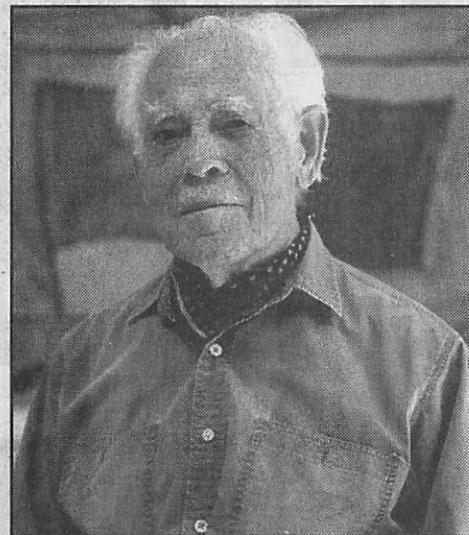
He found himself kicking around Santa Fe in 1935. The population was about 10,000, and he described Canyon Road as a "mud rut. Camino del Monte Sol was even worse. But I showed (Gustav) Baumann a portfolio of watercolors and he hired me on the spot (for the WPA). He said, 'OK, you're hired. You're a painter.'"

Lumpkins was a pioneer in passive-solar design before anyone knew what it was. Examples of his architectural work that have become Santa Fe landmarks include Rancho Encantado, First Northern Plaza, DeVargas Center and parts of the Inn at Loretto and sections of La Fonda.

Throughout his life, Lumpkins, who was a practicing Buddhist, rebelled against easy definitions. He may have been an artist and an architect, but first he was a man. When the going got tough, those who knew him said, Lumpkins rolled up his sleeves. He was a catalyst, an agitator for change and a fighter for civil rights.

"He really cared so much," said Norma Lumpkins, his wife of 38 years. "He loved Santa Fe. It was in every fiber of his being. He never got the place out of his system.

"He was his own man. He always was ethical in his dealings with people. He was a quiet man," she said. "Bill, to me, was very giving, but there was a part of him that was an island, an interior part.



William Lumpkins in a photograph taken in 1998 by Jack Parsons.

Please see **LUMPKINS**, Page B-3

LUMPKINS

Continued from Page B-1

I think that's where his creative process was. He kept that for himself."

Lumpkins was a founder of the Santa Fe chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and helped start the first legal-aid society here because he was disgusted with the way justice was meted out.

During the land-grant strife in the 1960s that culminated with a raid on the Tierra Amarilla courthouse, Lumpkins said he saw men and women held in stock pens.

"There was a blatant denial of civil liberties by the district attorney in Rio Arriba County, and we did something about it," he said.

In 1985, along with Pony Ault, Lumpkins founded the Santa Fe Art Institute.

"He was the guiding force behind it," said Institute director Carrie Benson. "He had the vision, and he was able to get really big names to come in, such as Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Theibaud and Nathan Oliveira.

"He was a beloved member of this community," Benson said, "and his life and the way he lived it was a wonderful example for all of us."

In 1988, Lumpkins was among those selected to receive Santa Fe's first Arts Recognition Award and was a past recipient of the Governor's Award for Excellence and Achievement in Architecture and Painting, and a received a National Historic Preservation Award for Barrio de Analco in Santa Fe.

Lumpkins was named a community Living Treasure and, in 1998, received the Rotary Foundation's Distinguished Artist award.

"He was a truly significant figure for the region and beyond," Museum of Fine Arts director Ashman said. "He was distinguished as an architect and great proponent of artistic quality and craftsmanship in the construction of houses continued his artistic legacy."

"When I first met Bill Lumpkins in 1977, I was sitting at the French Pastry Shop when a very distinguished gentleman came in wearing an elegant hat. He looked around, and there was no place else to sit, so he joined me," Ashman said. "We talked about art in New Mexico and when he left, he forgot to pay, so I covered his coffee.

"After, as I was walking down the street, I met him running back to the Pastry Shop. 'I forgot to pay,' he said. 'Don't worry,' I

answered, 'I took care of it.' He said, 'Thanks, I'll get the next one' and that's how our friendship began. He was the most humble, appreciative artist in my 20-plus years as a museum and gallery person," Ashman said.

In one of his last interviews, Lumpkins was asked if he were in a particular cycle of his life. After pausing and thinking about the question, he answered, "No, I feel it's part of a process, and I'm in the process."

One of the last parts of this process will be played out at a memorial service scheduled for 11 a.m. March 28 in St. Francis Auditorium at the Museum of Fine Arts. A reception will follow at 12:30 p.m. in the William Lumpkins Ballroom at La Fonda.

In addition to his wife, Norma, Lumpkins is survived by two sons, Will Lumpkins of Santa Fe and Larry Zins of Boulder, Colo.; two daughters, Markley Lumpkins and Jennifer Mudd, both of Santa Fe; two granddaughters, Monet and Ancorneil Lumpkins, both of Los Angeles.

The family has asked that memorials be made to the Hospice Center of Santa Fe and the Museum of New Mexico Foundation. Funeral arrangements are pending through Santa Fe Funeral Options.