



Roger Burnett, Historical Society for Southeast New Mexico director, indicates detail in an 1885 painting by J.C. Cowles. (Lia Martin Photo)

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After the single painting perched on an easel was unveiled and its meaning to the community revealed, a sense of wonderment began to run through the room of 20 art patrons at the Roswell Museum and Art Center, Thursday. They learned that the pastoral scene was important because it shared a rare vision of local history.

The oil-on-sheet-rock depiction of John Chisum's ranch on South Springs River near Roswell was painted in 1885 by John Clifford Cowles.

Patrons had been invited to the museum for the annual VIP Behind-the-Scenes preview of the upcoming year, according to Laurie Rufe, RMAC director. The unveiling gave them a brief peek at an exhibit planned for Jan. 6, 2012, to show during the New Mexico Centennial celebration.

"It will be a wonderful opportunity to work with the historical museum again," Rufe said, "we had a very symbiotic relationship."

Roswell: Diamond of the Pecos is a joint project of RMAC and the Historical Society of Southeastern New Mexico. The two organizations were one in 1937 when the WPA and Federal Art Project sanctioned the Roswell WPA Art Center. They will celebrate their 75th birthday with shared history.

The Cowles painting will be the centerpiece of the exhibit. According to Andrew John Cecil, RMAC curator, this may be the only documented painting of the Chisum ranch.

Cecil said there are many unsolved mysteries surrounding the painting. What was the connection between Chisum and Cowles? Why did Cowles paint Chisum's ranch from a bird's eye view, and after the rancher's death? Did he use a photograph, or was he in Roswell?

Chisum was the Cattle King of the Pecos after he sent his herds from Texas to New Mexico in 1854. He owned upwards of 100,000 head at the height of his days as a cattle baron. He claimed land for his cattle ranch at Bosque Grande. Later, he sold off most of his cattle before moving to South Springs River.

Roger Burnett, Historical Society for Southeast New Mexico director, said the painting had never been recognized as an important one, although it must have been housed at the historical museum since 1975. In any case, Burnett said that in late January he invited the RMAC staff to look over acquisitions in their archive building and in the White house. Rufe remembers Cecil moving aside material in front of the Cowles painting and he read the artist's signature.

Immediately, Cecil said he knew this was a major painting; that it was an important find.

To understand the significance of the painting, Cecil said, one has to understand the era. It was the very end of the time when the romanticism of the region brought European investors and adventurers to the West, and to New Mexico.

"The whole face of Western land was changing. Roswell had incredible grasslands. We had thousands of cattle and sheep grazing the land. Manifest Destiny was actualized," Cecil explained.

There was an incredible amount of foreign interest, especially from England and Scotland, in buying up ranches and farms in the West just before the Cowles painting was done.

In the past month, Cecil has been able to find paintings Cowles donated to the Panhandle Plains Museum in Canyon, Texas. One shows cattle baron Charles Goodnight's ranch; the other, Palo Duro Canyon, another Goodnight property. Both are dated 1887.

There are two additional Cowles paintings. One is in Boise, Idaho, dated 1890, and the other is a painting of the Bar 7 Ranch in Cimarron, dated 1896.

Cecil says Cowles left the West and moved to France in 1898 to study at Beaux Arts. By 1903, he was living in Los Angeles and published a book, *The Whispering Buddha*, in 1932. Cowles died the following year. In 1939, someone in Hollywood wrote a screenplay using his novel.

The painting will need restoration, Cecil said. "We have something wonderful. It is one of a kind. What a centerpiece we will have for the Centennial."

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