

The Tom Lea Trail: Connecting Texas to the Italian Renaissance and Children to Learning

By Adair Margo

This fall, the Tom Lea Institute and Texas Historical Commission announce a new era in Texas tourism with the release of the [Tom Lea Trail Mobile Tour](#). It is the first Texas heritage trail in a dozen years and the only one named for an artist. The tour is formatted for easy use by people at home, students in a classroom, and travelers from afar.

There's been curiosity about the Tom Lea Trail since it was recognized by the Texas Legislature in 2017 and presented to NATO Ambassadors in Brussels in 2019. Only now is it available as a mobile tour filled with history, stories, and art. As the founder of the Tom Lea Institute, the non-profit organization that developed the tour under the expert guidance of Derek Packard and Holly Packard Cobb, it's my pleasure to respond to questions people have asked with answers written below.

How did the idea of a Tom Lea Trail come about? The seeds for the trail were planted in 2007 when an Italian Renaissance scholar teaching in Poitiers, France named [Luciano Cheles](#) sent an e-mail to a fledgling Tom Lea Institute in El Paso, Texas. He'd been leafing through a book on Texas murals and was struck by a reproduction of [Tom Lea's Pass of the North](#) in El Paso's Federal Courthouse. Luciano thought he saw the influence of the Italian Renaissance painter [Piero della Francesca](#) in Lea's stoic nine-foot figures. Could an artist living in far West Texas be inspired by Piero's work? Googling Tom Lea, he found my name and sent a message asking if Tom Lea had ever seen Piero's work. Immediately I responded *YES!* I'd recorded Tom's oral history 14 years before and he told me how he'd seen Piero's frescoes in Arezzo in 1930 and touched them with his hand. He said he'd found the pictures he'd been looking for his entire life as his eyes filled with tears.

After hearing from Luciano, I also remembered my own experience travelling the Piero della Francesca Trail when I studied art history in Florence my junior year of college. I hired a driver to take me to see his murals in Monterchi, Arezzo, and Sansepolcro, places I never would have visited had Piero's paintings not been there. It dawned on me that just as I enjoyed discovering provincial towns in Italy through Piero's religious art, why wouldn't Europeans enjoy discovering Texas through Tom Lea's art? Why wouldn't everyone? We invited Luciano to come to Texas and travel the Tom Lea Trail. He said it was a "great experience!"

What can people discover about Texas through Tom Lea's art?

Tom Lea was a regional painter, interested in deepening a community's understanding of its own traditions and the character of its own land. Every Tom Lea painting tells you something about the place you visit. At the El Paso federal courthouse, he commemorates the archetypal giants of the region including the Indian, Spaniard, Mexican and Anglo. In looking at the mural closely, visitors see the cultural contributions of each figure and how they adapted to the desert environment where we live. Leg coverings protected their skin from cacti and prickly plants, and their horses are tacked and ridden for different purposes.

There are 12 communities and 24 locations to explore, drawing travelers to different regions of the state either virtually, or by plane, train, or car. Actual travelers can pick and choose what interests them, taking a week or two on an itinerary that includes:

- Odessa: [*Stampede*](#) in the Ellen Noel Museum (originally painted for the Odessa Post Office) and currently on loan to the museum in neighboring Midland. A dramatic scene from the cowboy song “Little Joe the Wrangler,” set near the Pecos River close by.
- Alpine: [*The History of Western Beef Cattle*](#) in the Museum of the Big Bend, telling the epic story of the arrival of the first cattle in America, and their life cycle from breeding to slaughter.
- Seymour: [*Comanche Warriors*](#) in the Post Office near the heart of their historic territory.
- Dallas: [*Rio Grande*](#), that was in the Oval Office of the White House and is reproduced at the George W. Bush Library and Presidential Center.
- Waco: [*A Little Shade*](#) in the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame depicting a Ranger and his mount, and [*R.E.B. Baylor*](#), the founder of Baylor University at the Carroll Library on campus.
- Bryan/ College Station: [*Old Breed, New Brotherhood*](#) of a Fort Bliss veteran from Operation Desert Storm at the Don & Ellie Knauss Veteran Resource & Support Center.
- Galveston: [*The First Recorded Surgical Operation in America, Cabeza de Vaca Removing an Arrow from an Indian's chest in 1535*](#) at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Moody Library.
- Austin: [*Ranger Escort West of the Pecos*](#) commissioned for Texas Governor John Connally. Tom Lea chose the subject to remind legislators that people live west of the Pecos River.
- Fredericksburg: [*Marines Call It That 2,000 Yard Stare*](#), arguably the most famous painting of war ever done, reproduced at the National Museum of the Pacific War as part of the Peleliu exhibit.
- Kingsville: take a tour of [*The King Ranch*](#). Tom Lea took five years writing and illustrating its history.
- Hebbronville: [*El Randado*](#), the ruins of a legendary South Texas horse ranch that could not be painted but had to be expressed in words.

What are other comparisons between Tom Lea and Piero della Francesca?

Despite his greatness, Piero and his work were not widely known in the 15th century when he lived. He studied in Florence, an artistic center, but was from the border in the upper Tiber Valley where the three regions of Tuscany, Umbria and Marche meet. He did his most important work in small towns, not in bustling cities like Milan and Rome. To experience Piero’s paintings, you need to go to the places where they are.

The same is true of Tom Lea. Despite his gifts as a muralist, illustrator, World War II artist correspondent, novelist, historian, portraitist, and landscapist, he is not widely known. He studied art in Chicago but was from the El Paso border, where Texas, New Mexico and Chihuahua meet. He didn’t gravitate to urban art centers but worked from his studio in El Paso

at the base of Mount Franklin alone. He left us works of art across Texas that enliven its history. To experience Tom Lea's paintings, you need to go to the places where they are.

Adair Margo is the founder of the Tom Lea Institute. She chaired the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities for the two-term presidency of George W. Bush and served on the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO. She is the former First Lady of El Paso.