

POSTED ON [APRIL 6, 2016](#) BY [SIDNEY DAILY NEWS](#)

# Painter also ranked dancer

NEWS

By Patricia Ann Speelman - [pspeelman@aimmedianetwork.com](mailto:pspeelman@aimmedianetwork.com)



*Editor's note: Airstream will host a fine art invitational exhibit of landscape art, May 31-June 5, at its headquarters in Jackson Center. This is one a series of stories that will profile the artists whose work will be shown.*

SIDNEY — Owners of landscape paintings by Arturo Chavez include some of the world's major corporations, the state of New Mexico, several prestigious museums — among them the Madi Museum in Budapest, Hungary, the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, the Phoenix Art Museum, the Millicent Rogers Museum in Taos, New Mexico, and the Ella Carothers Dunnegan Museum in Missouri — and wealthy, private collectors.

They might be surprised to learn that the man who created their breathtaking artworks is a world-ranked dancer of the Argentine tango who takes ballet classes and majored in classical guitar in college.

"I'm an avid tango dancer. I've been doing tango for 25 years," Chavez said by phone recently. That's about half as long as he's been painting landscapes, something he began to do when he was in junior high school.

His artworks are quite large and they portray the vastness of the southwest desert and mountain ranges that surround his Placitas, New Mexico, home. It was seeing the work of Wilson Hurley that got Chavez interested in grand-scale painting.

"In the late 1960s, I went to an officer's club and saw (Hurley's paintings). It blew my socks off," Chavez said. "I was so excited. How could anybody paint so beautifully?"

He went back to the officer's club again and again, measuring sections of the paintings with a tape measure and a value finder to discover the precise levels of light and dark.

"I broke them down by patterns," Chavez said. He taught himself to paint by using the same measurements. Almost 20 years later, Chavez met Hurley.

“I asked him if he’d teach me to paint,” Chavez said. “I can’t,” Hurley said. ‘Nobody could. It’s a hand-eye coordination that you have to do on your own.’”

The younger artist was reminded of a story he’d heard that Michaelangelo was once asked whom he studied with. His answer? “God.”

“I found that amusing,” Chavez said. Hurley offered to guide rather than teach Chavez, and they enjoyed a 25-year friendship. Hurley told Chavez that it could take 20 years for Chavez to achieve the level of work he aspired to.

“And guess what. It took me 20 years,” Chavez said. He is now internationally known for the large-scale works he creates. It took him awhile to figure out how to actually complete a painting that measured in feet instead of inches. A couple of first tries never got done.

“Painters who do 24-inch by 48-inches, the whole canvas can be interpreted globally. What I learned (was that) I had to do 80- to 100-square inches a day and I could finish it.”

Chavez begins with much smaller field studies, paintings about the size of a sheet of typing paper, that he completes en plein air, outside at the sites of his subject matter. He also takes photographs to use for reference when he is back in the studio, where he creates an intermediate-sized painting.

“If I like it, I upscale to a large-scale work,” he said. His giant canvasses capture the boundless stretches of the American Southwest.

“Do you know that Arturo is an experienced pilot?” asked Lois Spiegel, who handles exhibitions and sales at the Four Corners Gallery at the Tucson Desert Art Museum in Arizona. Some of Chavez’s non-landscape work is on view there now in an exhibit called “Contempo.”

“He likes to transport you to viewpoints on high. He’s fascinated with giving you a view that you can’t get any other way. It’s a very ethereal perspective,” she said.

The perspective takes shape in the studio as Chavez pencils in the entire composition. He then indicates values, writing the numbers across areas of the drawing.

“Sometimes I do cross-hatching like the masters did,” he said. And then, he picks up his brush.

“Arturo is a 13th-generation New Mexican. So (his family) goes back to the conquest. To capture that character of the land, Arturo mixes his own paints and pigments, including earth and metals to reflect the light,” Spiegel said. “When you get paints that are factory-ground, they grind pigments to uniform particles. When Arturo grinds, he keeps them jagged. It’s very three-dimensional. It gives a textural quality and a jewel-life refractive appearance. It’s going to reflect the light, just like the earth does.”

Chavez has been painting landscapes for 36 years, but there was a 15-year period of painting lots of figures — people, animals, portraits.

“I sold hundreds of paintings. It was a great career,” he said. “In 1999 to 2002, I decided to do raw landscapes. I realized that I needed to focus and I needed to focus in a very serious way. I decided to become well-known for large-scale landscapes.”

He has enjoyed outstanding success.

“He paints well-known monuments in sweeping intimacy with nature. He takes flight over the landmarks of the Southwest. It’s just dazzling,” Spiegel said.

But for the last year, he’s been creating other kinds of artworks.

“I’ve enjoyed with all my heart making the landscapes. I paint by inspiration. I could be back on my landscapes next week. I don’t know,” he said. “I have enough to sell that I can explore other avenues of my creativity. If artists don’t do that, they die. To be a true artist is a compulsion.”

Recently, Chavez has been compelled to make paintings of animals, some in unusual or abstract settings. There is a trompe l’oeil quality to them: they trick the eye into thinking a painted object is a three-dimensional object. Some of them are in the Contempo exhibition, but he has not displayed them yet on his website, [www.arturochavez.com](http://www.arturochavez.com). The artist is concerned about whether collectors will want his new work.

“Collectors are very skittish about change,” Chavez said. “(But) I reached a point where I wanted to do something else. I’m having such a fun time with these little animals — a pair of lions, a frog with a dragonfly. A week ago, I woke up thinking, ‘I want to paint a black rabbit.’ I’ve been excited by this. I’m inspired by this actual illusionary artwork.”

There’s nothing illusionary, however, about the one artwork he would own if he could have anything ever made. He’d take the “Capture of Carthage” by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. It hangs in the Metropolitan Museum in New York City.

“It’s a magnificent piece, 16 feet high (Editor’s note: It’s actually 13 1/2-feet high). The fluidity, style, composition. It just blew me away when I saw it,” Chavez said.