

LARRY RILEY

'I Love Beauty'

By Vicki Stavig



Larry Riley

Larry Riley pulled back a bit from painting a few years ago but he didn't pull back from creating. During COVID, when galleries were closed, he turned away from his easel and began to make classical guitars. It wasn't the first time during his 76 years on earth that he veered from the road he was on and let his curiosity lead him. He's taken chances—and reaped rewards—by mapping his own route.

In 1982, after spending nine years taking care of people's teeth, Riley sold his dentistry practice and turned to fine art. Later, after spending about 40 years as a painter, he took another road—one that led him to a new adventure: making classical guitars. Today, he is back in his studio, focusing on painting the people and scenes that have caught the attention of collectors around the world and earned him countless accolades.

But let's go back to those guitars. "I took a little time off from painting and built some classical guitars," Riley says. "I needed to do something different, to change my attitude. I started playing classical guitar in college, and I've now built four of them. It's very intense work. It took me almost two years to build one of them."

One of Riley's guitars is made of Madagascar Rosewood that, he says, "is very rare in the world today," while two others are awaiting his finishing touches. He's sanded the tops and will do a French polish on one of the classical guitars and a three-color finish on a steel string guitar to make it look as though it were crafted in the 1930s.

Riley doesn't sell any of his guitars; he adds them to his collection



Brandon's Portrait, oil, 12" by 9"

"I got a call one day years ago from the mother of one of the girls I had painted for years, saying that they had just had a boy! A chance to paint some new things."

(Left) Navajo Pride, oil, 14" by 11"

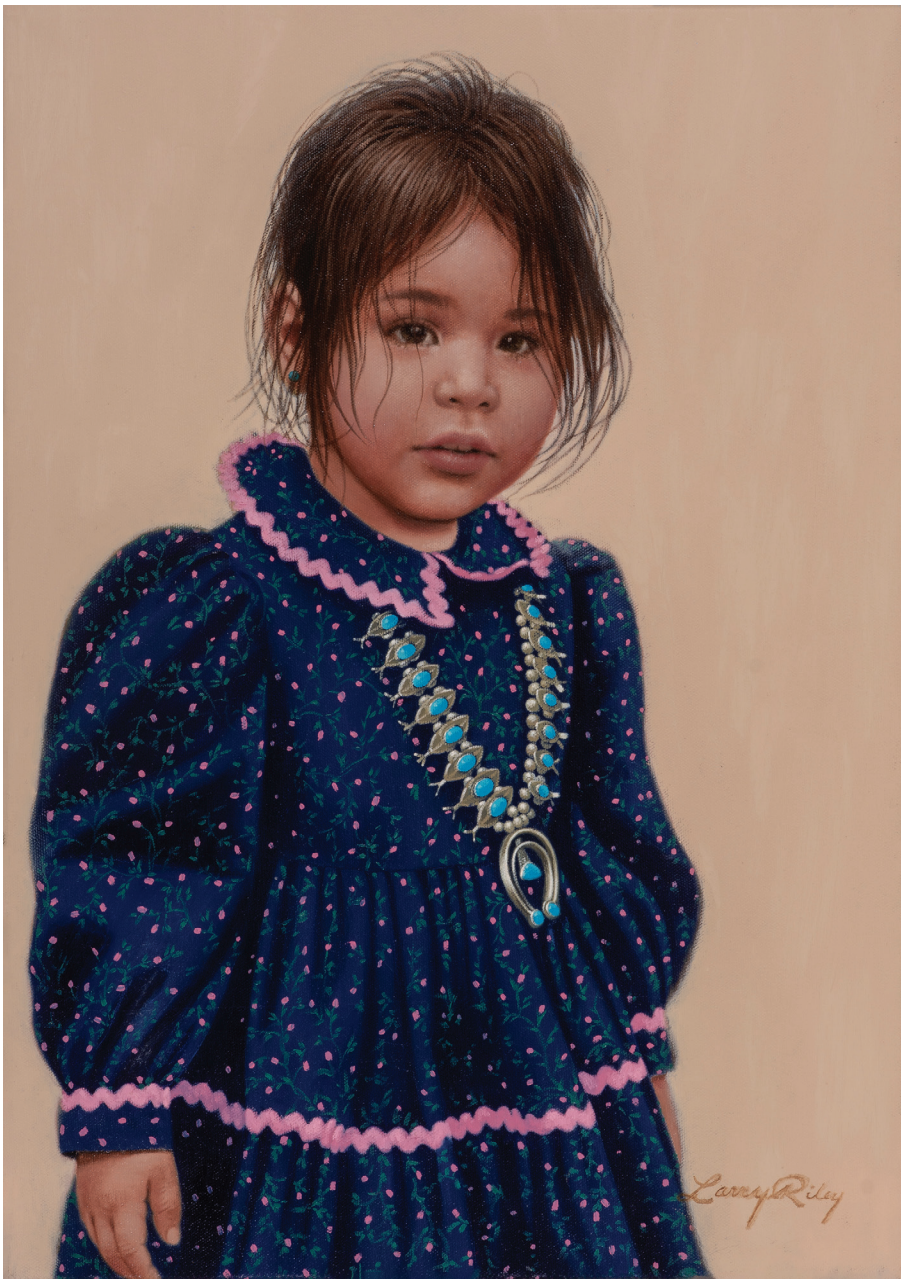
"The perfect painting for the 4th of July! He was in a parade in Gallup, New Mexico."

but won't say how large that collection is. Along with the personal satisfaction he felt as he created those guitars, Riley was thrilled when, while visiting a Guitar Center several years ago, he met master guitar maker Pepe Romero, Jr., a member of the famed Romero family—known as the Royal Family of Classical Guitar.

Now living in northern Phoenix, Arizona, Riley paints in two bedrooms that he has converted to

studios. He was born in Canada and, when he was 3 years old, his father died. "He had been a pilot in World War II and flew Lancaster bombers out of England," Riley says, adding that, when his father returned, he worked as a bush pilot and, later, as an aerial firefighter. "One of the planes blew up and killed him; he was only 23 at the time.

"After he died, we moved to Vancouver, where my grandmother lived, and later moved to Oregon,



(Left) *Ribbon Dress*, oil, 21" by 15"

"This is the youngest of four sisters I have painted over the years. All four sisters grew up and got nursing degrees."

where my mother's sister lived. I was a weird kid who read books about art and science. I built a chemistry lab, a clubhouse, and a three-room cabin. I also did charcoal drawings and knew I would be an artist one day. I got transparencies from the Louvre and copied them. And, when I was 12 or 13, I won three first-place awards at the state fair in one year."

Riley also formed a friendship with his neighbor, an oral surgeon, and that relationship was so strong that, instead of studying art, he became a dentist. He never put his dreams of becoming an artist completely aside, however. He had been painting while he was in college—even had his work carried in a gallery—and continued to paint while practicing dentistry.

"I did seascapes of the Oregon coast and then did portraits," Riley says. At one point, a friend purchased all of Riley's portraits but, when Riley saw the friend's guitar collection, he returned the money in exchange for some of those guitars.

Eventually, the time came for Riley to make a decision—continue on as a successful dentist with his own practice or take the leap and pursue fine art. He took the leap. He sold his practice, loaded his wife Pat and their four children—ages 1, 3, 5, and 7—into the car and drove to Arizona, where a gallery was already carrying his work. They lived in Flagstaff for two years before moving to Phoenix.

Riley has long had an interest in, and an affinity for, Native Americans. While living in Oregon, he painted the Nez Perce and, after moving to Arizona, he began to paint Native Americans of the Southwest.





Georgette's Loom, oil, 18" by 24"

"I really enjoyed painting the strong light in this painting and the textures of the wood hogan."

Although he faced some challenges, he continued to paint the people he had come to love, doing so with a realism that captured their beauty and their customs in great detail.

"The first few years were challenging," he says. "In one week, I logged 105 hours painting. I had my first one-man show in 1988, five years after the move to Arizona, and it sold out."

Riley also began meeting Western artists, including James Bama and Don Crowley, who generously

shared advice and support as he began to paint figures. He also began to form strong relationships with Native Americans who live in the area as he attended powwows and befriended a bull rider, occasionally "working the chutes" for him at roundups.

Some of the friendships Riley has made with Native Americans

have lasted three decades. Years ago, when a beautiful young girl caught his eye at a powwow, he respectfully asked her parents if he could paint her. "Her father was a medicine man, and her mother was a weaver," he says. "They had four girls, and I painted all of them. I would go to the reservation, and we would work all day until dark."

"It's a gift, but you have to have a passion that won't go away."



Larry Riley

(Left) *Proud Heritage*, oil, 24" by 18"

"It's hard to find someone who looks so good and looks so historic. I like to think that I might be recording a bit of history thanks to some of the subjects I paint."

I got the best pictures when they were just playing."

Then came a period when Riley didn't see those girls for several years, only to discover that they had all gone into nursing. They still remembered him well and said they wanted some of his prints for their homes. He, of course, readily obliged.

On one occasion several years ago, Riley attended a powwow in Flagstaff and offered some of the Native American children there \$20 each to pose for him. Word spread, and soon he was surrounded by many more than he had originally expected. "I told Pat, 'Go to the bank and get more money!'" he says.

After 28 years of marriage, Riley and Pat divorced, and he is now married to Mary, who is retired from a career in marketing and who had also managed a foundry. What hasn't changed over the years is Riley's commitment to creating paintings of people he sincerely admires. "I paint real people," he says. "I want them to be real, to be historic. I can't paint someone unless I know them and care about them. I love beauty, and I'm trying to find that unique individual who has charisma."

Riley says his style hasn't changed over the years, although he tries to put a little more paint on his work and to make his backgrounds looser. His style, his subjects, and his talent have captured the attention of art lovers and found homes throughout the world. In fact, he estimates that, during his career, he's sold approximately 1,200 paintings.

While sales and accolades are wonderful, Riley says, "The biggest



Ute Warrior, oil, 16" by 12"

"Forty-five years ago, when I decided to paint Western subjects, this was the first model I found."

thrill for me is the artists I show with. Their talent motivates me." He also enjoys the camaraderie he shares with other artists as a member of the Oil Painters of America, the American Impressionists Society, and the National Oil and Acrylic Painters' Society.

Riley encourages anyone who is interested in art to go for it. "Just try it and see what happens," he says. "Find a way to succeed. You need to be consistent so people know your

name and know your work. Be willing to take chances. Learn from older artists. It's a gift, but you have to have a passion that won't go away."



Vicki Stavig is editor of *Art of the West*.