

Chapter 2

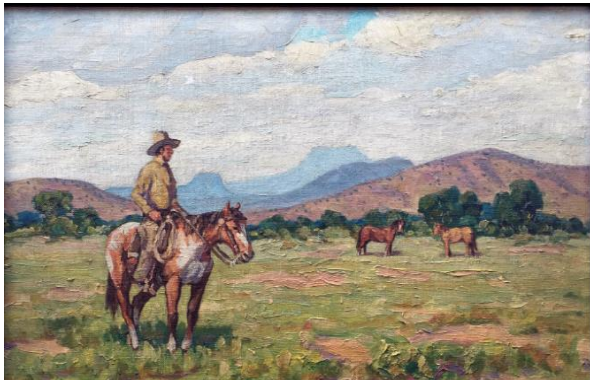
THE ART of FRED DARGE

Artists are talented and gifted creative people. Fred Darge was, without exception, one of those extraordinarily gifted people. Not only could he paint fine art, but his skilled hands could carve wood with the uniqueness of almost bringing the animals to life. His talented mind and hands were used to carve Longhorn cattle that looked like the ones that appeared in his paintings. He also carved detailed ornate frames to showcase his most note-worthy paintings.

Unfortunately, it will never be known what prompted Darge to attend the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) that, from the day it began operation in 1879 to this day, is one of the highest rated and most respected art schools in the nation. The acclaimed AIC has, graduated many of the top-rated artists of the 19th and 20th century. Of the many important decisions that Darge made in his lifetime, attending the AIC was pivotal to his professional art career. They teach a



Jefferson Park, Illinois, 18" x 24", Oil on Canvas, Circa 1927, Courtesy of Vander Molen Fine Art



Title Unavailable, 12" x 16", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa Maybe 1929, Collection of Mrs. Eva Martina Fredrichsdorff, Aerzen, Germany

robust basic foundation of technical skills needed to become successful. Darge graduated from the AIC with all the needed skills and over the span of his career advanced his abilities into an impressive refinement.

As with most artists, over the lifetime of their career, they make changes and timely adjustments to their style of painting and are gradually accomplished. Darge eventually found his own style. As is readily noticed, his style evolved from this earliest known painting, *Jefferson Park, Illinois*. As Darge began painting, he used heavy impasto layers of paint that were markedly visible in the texture of the clouds. It was a hallmark of trying to show color contrast and definition rather than a more refined style of blended shading that he would eventually capture. There is a certain amount of raised texturing in the trees, but since the colors are darker it is not as noticeable.

The second painting displays similar characteristics as the circa 1927 painting, but there is a very slight lessening of impasto layers of paint. Looking at the mountains in the far background, one is left with the feeling that Darge

is just getting started at something that would become a hallmark in his art – high mountains. Darge kept working and refining his skills with a paint brush as he was taught in school. It is apparent he worked hard at his development, because by the late 1930's and early 1940's he



The Approaching Storm, 18" x 24", Oil on Canvas, Circa 1950's,
Courtesy of Heritage Auction Galleries 2012

could paint dramatic high mountains with high bellowing clouds with ease. His other trademark, tenacity, helped him attain his goal as an accomplished artist. His persistent efforts to reach the level of producing works he deemed satisfactory was rewarded not only by his own feeling of accomplishment, but also the approval of art critics, his art peers and patrons. He could now do it all, with apparent satisfaction.

His early style of painting seemed to gradually change by the late 1930's and slowly, but successfully, he was able to transition to smooth untextured compositions where every color flowed from one to the next without ridges and coarseness. Many dealers and collectors' credit Darge's best years to the very late 1930's up through the 1950's. Once he reached the point of his own satisfaction, he was off and running. It would lead one to believe he always knew where he wanted to be; it was a matter of working over and over until his desired refinement took hold the way he envisioned everything to look. He knew the apex of where he and his clients would be satisfied and kept working until it finally arrived. *The Approaching Storm*, exemplifies his striking transitional accomplishments.

Once he was satisfied, he could paint great mountains as backgrounds and clouds full of rain, he presumably started to think about traveling to New Mexico. He now had the ability to paint like the best of them. It wasn't that he had tired of those white face cows, he had the talent that needed to keep busy and a lasting yearning to see the country. Realistically, Darge had met some of the early Santa Fe and Taos artists while in San Antonio and Dallas and had learned about the many positive things about painting in New Mexico-dramatic high-altitude sky colors and cloud formations and unique people and places.

One of the common problems of artists is they are always seeking the next scene to paint. Fred Darge was not an exception to this creative dilemma. He seemed to have known from the very beginning what he wanted to capture on canvas-people experiencing their lives-and it was a matter of finding the people and the locations. Those places were roughly the western half of Texas and New Mexico. It would suggest he could go to either place and stay busy. Assuming

his career total of paintings is around two thousand, it would be realistic to assume that at least approximately twenty-five per cent were completed in New Mexico. Texas may have been home, but his paintings reflect his interest in New Mexico.



Courtesy of ASKART

It is not unusual for artists to change their signature as their career advances. Darge was no exception. When he first began his art career, he was very consistent in signing all of his art work with a somewhat rectangular “D”. Notice the initial “F” with the extended top cap extending to the left. He continued this signature up to and through World War II.



Courtesy of ASKART

At end of the war in 1945, Darge made the change over to more of a square “D” with slight extensions on the left side on both the top and bottom. The top right side was slightly more rounded than the bottom. It generally appears more often than not. Notice the change in the “F”. This signature was used the rest of his career with very little variance. This change is attributed to his working at North American Aviation after discharge from the Army to the wars end as a draftsman and technical writer which required exacting standards of style and printing.

The vast majority of his later art work is signed in the lower right-hand corner.

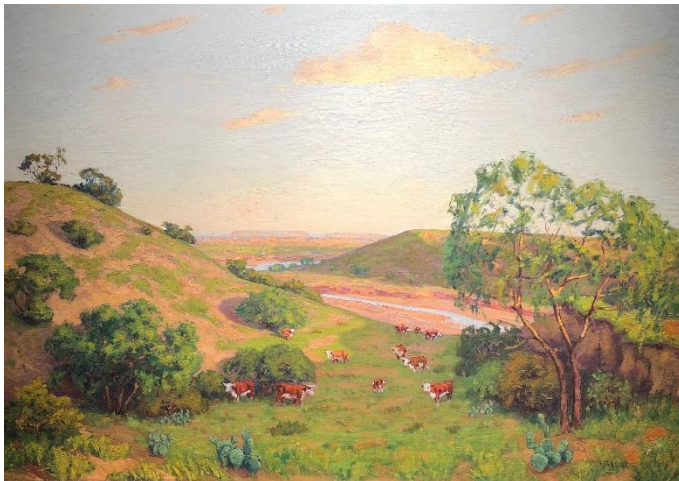
Darge did not date any of his paintings. Noted Dallas art collector and authority on Early Texas Art, Bill Cheek, attributes this to the theory that “many artists were afraid that if the painting did not sell within a theoretical time limit, collectors would think it was old or outdated merchandise.” Darge presumably must have been a believer in this theory.

Darge deserves credit for something many artists do not do. Most of the time, he wrote the titled name and location of the completed art work on the verso in the top left-hand corner. Not always, but under most circumstances. As a collector it is always interesting to know the location of the great scene on the front of a canvas. It is this fact that helped identify the connections of ranches to corrals, buildings and mountainous backgrounds. In some respects, Darge made it sometimes easier to follow him around on his travels than first realized. The where is known, but precise dates are mysteries. The many newspaper articles recovered in research sometimes helped to pin point key dates. A collector summed it up with, “when it comes to art, you can’t have everything.” A succinct observation, all too often true.

If a painting is without a location on the verso, there are a number of approaches to utilize in efforts to find the possible location. Be forewarned, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Approach the pursuit from several different angles. If for instance there are cattle or horses, look at the background for a known mountain range. Next, look closely at the shoulders and hips of the cattle or horses for a brand. If there is a brand and it is believed to be located in one of several different counties, you can check with the county clerks' office in any county in Texas, and they will look up the brand registration for you when they have time.

Online information is available from askART.com. A one day or one-month access can be purchased that will show all of the paintings that have gone through the various listed auction galleries. Carefully examine and compare your painting to those shown online. Look at the buildings in minute detail, count the number of rails or wires on fences and look at the background formations (hills or mountains) and see if there is a match to your painting.

An actual experience in trying to identify a location that will never be forgotten involved a 25" x 30" painting titled, *Grazing After a Drink* that was in a David Dike Fine Art auction on January 21, 2017. There were no recognizable clues in the landscape. The cattle were Herefords. That was an early clue. At the time, the ranches owned by Jack and Myrhl Frost research was underway. Locating the 12,000-acre Bandy ranch owned by the Frost's was



Grazing After a Drink, 25" x 30", Oil on Canvas, Circa 1950's, David Dike Fine Arts.

proving to be a problem, but at the time it was believed that this painting may be part of the Bandy ranch. Justin Hansard, the Montague County Extension Agent grew up near Roby, Texas and is very familiar with both Fisher and Kent Counties. An email with a photograph of *Grazing After a Drink* was sent to Hansard, asking him if he knew anything about the ranch or the location. Within thirty minutes, he emailed a reply with the exact location of the painting. It is the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos River in Fisher County. Looking closely at the painting in the far background are the

two mountains. The Bandy ranch is farther north in Kent County.

Trying to find the location of paintings without a description is somewhat like shopping for a new or used car. Dealers and prices should all be compared. It may take a while to find the information, but is generally worth the time. The results may surprise and reward good detective work. Rewards have come by connecting dots and asking a lot of questions.

If art is a form of communication, Darge has made positive contact with his collectors. In reality his art is easy to understand because of his intention from the very beginning to "paint

the working ranchman and his daily routine of making a living.”¹ It was simply a matter of converting vision to canvas. What makes his art so collectable is at times his ability to add an element of drama with the bucking broncos, the cattle and horse roundups, the posse’s looking for cattle thieves and the riders falling off their horses. Darge’s skilled ability to make his canvases come alive with interesting dynamics is the thing that has captured collector’s hearts and imagination. It would have been fun to be able to sit next to Darge, like Julia Nail Moss did as a young girl and watch him add the finishing touches to a canvas to create the “wow” affect to a particular painting. Think of all the people that took art lessons from him and learned how to paint. It would be interesting to hear their experiences and be able to ask questions.

It has been previously noted that Darge produced a very high number of small paintings. His more standard sizes were 8” X 10”, 9” x 12”, 12” x 16”, 16” x 20”, 18 “x 24”, 20” x 24”, 24” x 32”, 25” X 30” and 36” X 30”. When he began his career as a full-time artist, a good many of pieces were large size paintings. As one can understand, larger paintings require more detail and time along with a commensurate price. Because of the economics of the time period, larger and higher priced art works were harder to sell.

Most of the small paintings, 16” x 20” and under were done on canvas panels, commonly referred as canvas board. The estimated number of these paintings is approximately one thousand. Like everything else in Darge’s life, there was an economic reason for canvas panels. They were inexpensive, already had a coat of gesso and easy to handle and store. A 16” x 20” panel today sells for \$2.20 in quantities of less than fifty. In the 1920’s and 30’s they were probably available for 30 cents or less. Darge recognized a good product at a very affordable price that saved a lot of time.

It is understood that Darge’s smaller paintings were more saleable to art collectors. Artists have to financially sustain themselves and it was his way to bring in cash quicker rather than later. The paintings may have been smaller, but think about how many more, smaller paintings he could do in the time it took to do a larger one. The dollar amount for the smaller paintings per square inch in all probability exceeded the cost per square inch of the larger paintings. In the long run, the smaller pieces sold more quickly and the cash register rang more often. It appears from the large number of paintings that have gone through the auctions, everyone was happy, especially the artist.

When looking at Darge’s art work, as with all art, it is best to look with an educated eye. Familiarize yourself with the artist’s work by looking at as many pieces as possible. Learn to identify the typical elements in style, subject matter and color. Additionally, look for elements that differ and keep those features in mind when viewing other paintings. Do your homework the best you can and don’t assume or take anything for granted. Unfortunately, there are several paintings purported to be completed by Darge that are very questionable. As one would expect, they have been offered for sale on the internet, the new and unregulated Wild West. Be careful! The art market is not what it used to be. To protect yourself, deal only with reputable known sellers.



Deer Sculpture, Monochrome Wood Carving, 8.50" x 11"x 2.25", Courtesy of David Dike Fine

There are wood carvers and then there is Fred Darge. As has been repeatedly stated, his skill and ability at wood carving is the equivalent of turning firewood into classic art. They are jaw-dropping beautiful. Every piece is anatomically correct, unique and slightly different. His hand painted natural colors bring out the richness of his ability to almost bring to life what started out as a block of wood is truly stunning. The meticulous detail quickly catches one's attention. They have become quite coveted by collectors for good reason. The innocence of the face of the deer is life like.



Longhorn Sculpture, Monochrome Wood Carving 8.5" x 12" x 8", Courtesy of David Dike Fine Arts Auction 2008



Three-Dimensional Wood Carving, Monochrome Done on Cedar, 10" x 20", Courtesy of Bosque Crossing Gallery

During discussions with Ken Duperry it was pointed out that Darge would occasionally carve antelope, bison, deer, bears and horses. In order to be exceptional at a skill, one of the necessary factors is that you have to like what you are doing. Darge's wood carvings explicitly bring this to mind. The anatomy of each animal is precisely carved and well proportioned. Like his paintings, it would have been fascinating to sit next to him and watch him carve one of his master pieces right before your eyes.

The question arises as to whether Darge created any bronze sculptures. When C. W. and Marlene Cruce sold the remaining pieces in their inventory of Darge's of art work to Ken Duperry, there was a bronze sculpture of an elephant. Hearing this story prompted another search of his past paintings. The connection to the elephant bronze may be associated with the 24" x 30" painting *Ringling Bros. Circus, Dallas Texas*. It is a very well executed painting of a

snapshot in time. The background is the large circus tent with brightly colored American flags blowing in the wind and a foreground full of circus performers and the ring master talking to a lady atop a white horse. It is another example of a Darge painting depicting people going about their day to day routines and special activities. The circus, in all probability, sparked his imagination for the elephant.

When you have an almost fifty-year career as an active artist and complete approximately two thousand works of art; how do you remember all the names of past paintings if you didn't write them all down? The answer to this question is, he didn't. He used the same name for multiple paintings with different subject matters. Several of the common names are, *A Friendly Encounter*, *Friendly Encounter*, *The Approaching Storm*, *Going Home* and *Lone Rider*.



Moline Mountains, Sierra Blanco, West Texas, 8" x 10", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa 1950's, Collection of Ellis Turner.

Being an artist is also like being a retail merchant. You must have a sense of what people want to buy. Trying to sell a painting without a frame or one that has a frame that is unsuitable for the painting makes it almost unsaleable. Darge had an economic answer for this problem. He originated what was to become known art circles as the "Darge Frame." He created two styles. By today's standards they were not real classy or trendy, but they worked for what needed to be accomplished. And as always, were economical. Darge wouldn't have it any other way. He wanted his art to

be affordable and most of all to sell.

To produce his own frames, Darge developed a relatively easy way to utilize standard moldings to create original carved frames. He purchased architectural moldings from a local millwork facility by buying long lengths of a standard profile. He would miter the corners to fit the given piece of artwork and install the fillet, the thin inside liner piece. The next step was to



Tack House and Corrals, Burnham Ranch, Big Bend Texas, Collection Unknown



The Old Homestead, 9.5" x 15.5", Oil on Canvasboard, Circa Unknown, Collection of Patricia and Jeffrey Sone

carve the kerfs on the four outside edges. The last and final step was the finish. It was similar to Henry Ford's Model T's. You could have any color you wanted, as long as it was black. Darge took a more conciliatory approach to his clients, he not only offered three different frames, but he also offered different finishes. Frame colors were either a white-wash or a reddish-brown stain.

Look very carefully at *The Old Homestead*. Do you see some things about this painting that are noticeably different? Fred Darge and Reveau Bassett, both friends and longtime residents of the Oak Cliff neighborhood of Dallas were not supportive of modern art by any definition.

It is believed this painting is Darge's way of poking fun at the "Dallas Nine" and Jerry Bywater's style of painting clouds. The large barn, trees, dark blue background mountains and square pastures done in the cubist style of art may also include Otis Dozier as a target of Darge's making fun of modernism. It appears he got his point across without having said or written anything to become controversial, as in silence is golden.

Seeing this unique painting now answers the question of

why Fred Darge never became a member of the "Dallas Nine."



The Stampede, 30" x 36", Oil on Canvas, Courtesy of Alterman Galleries 2015

When it came to complementing an extraordinary work of art with an over the top frame, Darge left nothing to the imagination. An extra special painting deserves an extra special frame and he amply delivered on everything down to the last detail. *The Stampede*, is an exceptional example of Darge at his absolute finest.

There is no one more qualified to adequately describe this historically important artwork and associated frame better than what Michael Grauer did when he wrote the lot number notes for this painting listed in the Altermann Galleries auction dated November 15, 2015.

Lot #88 Note(s): The Stampede is Darge's homage to the old-time trail drivers and the drovers who continued to take herds to rail heads after fencing of West Texas began in the early 1880s on ranches such as the Frying Pans and T Anchors in the Texas Panhandle. And, unlike most cowboy paintings, Darge accurately renders the lead cowboy attempting to turn the herd into a mill with

his “oilskins” and not a six shooter. Most cowboys on the rails did not wear sidearms as they simply got in the way. The lead cowboy also wears pre-1930 chacareras, rides a “bear trap” swell-fork saddle with “monkey-nose” tapaderos on its stirrups, a sign of status among cowboys in West Texas and New Mexico. The Stampede may be Darge’s masterpiece along with a now-destroyed painting of a trail drive. The hand-carved frame on *The Stampede* is a tour de force with its hand-carved horse and cow profiles in each corner and a longhorn at the top and (possibly) Hereford at the bottom.

Read these notes carefully and think about the accuracy of everything Michael Grauer has described in this painting. Simply put, *The Stampede* is a classic example of the lengths Fred Darge went to in this important and monumental effort to relive the historic trail drives.

The following is a list of the museums that we are aware of that have had the good fortune to have been gifted Fred Darge paintings to add to their collections.

Dallas Museum of Art – *Survival of the Fittest, 24” x 32”*, Oil on Canvas,

The Lone Rider, Ed Love Ranch, West Texas, Oil on Canvas Board, 12” x 16”

Daughters of the Republic – *Panther Peak in Big Bend Country, 12” x 16”*, Oil on Masonite, of Texas Circa 1940

Sam Nail, Nail Ranch, Big Bend Texas, 12” x 16”, Oil on Masonite, Circa 1939 – 1940

Wilson Ranch, Goat Herd, Big Bend Country, 24’ x 32”, Oil on Canvas, Circa 1939 – 1940

Wilson Ranch, Saddle Shed, Big Bend Country, 12 ¼” x 16”, Oil on Masonite, Circa 1939 – 1940

Bay Horse, Nail Ranch, Big Bend Country, 12” x 16”, Oil on Masonite, Circa 1939 – 1940

Bringing in the Strays, Burnham Ranch, Big Bend Country, 12” x 16”, Oil on Masonite, Circa 1939 – 1940

Burnham Ranch, Big Bend Country, 18” x 24”, Oil on Masonite, Circa 1940

El Rancho de Taos, New Mexico, 12” x 16”, Oil on Masonite, Circa 1940

Spanish Goat, Burnham Ranch, Big Bend Country, 8” x 10”, Oil With Pencil on Masonite, Circa 1939 – 1940

All of the above listed paintings were a gift from Dr. William E. Howard in 1943

Museum of Texas Tech University – *Indian Summer in the Palo Duro, 17 ½” x 18”*, Oil on Canvas

Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum – *Moonlight Palo Duro Canyon, 7 ½” x 9 ½”*, Oil on Canvas Board

Approaching Storm-Brady Ranch, 8 ½" x 11 3/8", Oil on Canvas Board

Witte Museum

The Witte Museum was one of the earliest recipients of the work of Fred Darge. We made every effort to contact them by telephone, mail and email but for some reason they did not see fit to follow through on our requests for information. No way to run a museum mostly supported by public tax payers.