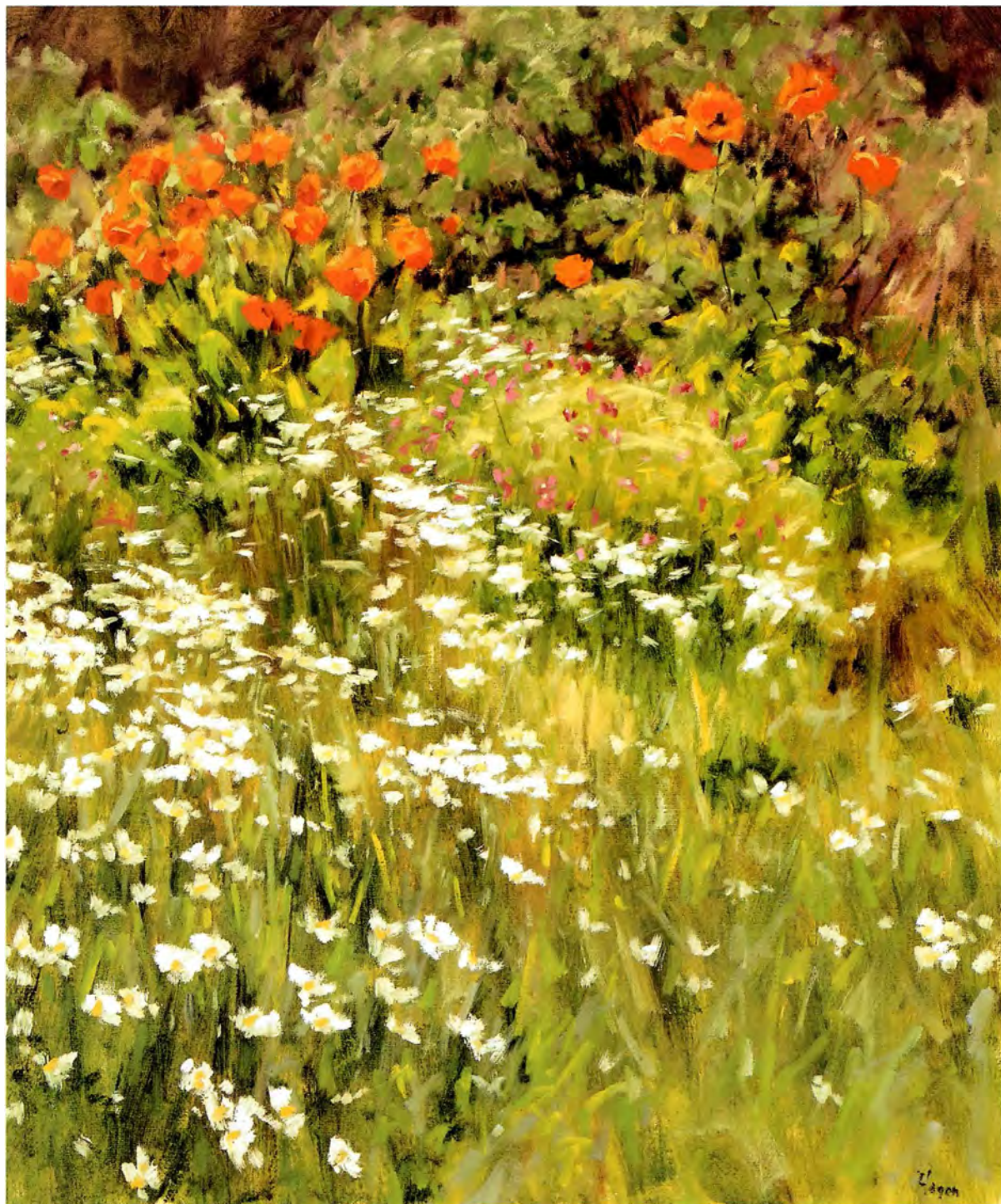


A PASSION FOR THE OUTDOORS

*Grand and intimate landscapes come alive
in the plein air paintings of Peter Hagen.*

By Gussie Fauntleroy



"Poppies," oil on canvas, 24" × 20"



"Hillside Chamisa," oil on canvas, 11" × 14"

Things could have turned out very differently for Peter Hagen. His could have been a fast-paced urban life in the advertising world, moving smoothly from graphic arts studies to design and illustration jobs in New York City, as many of his art school classmates did. His father, who worked in advertising, would have helped open doors

for his son. And in fact Hagen did try his hand at ad work for a couple of summers during school.

But something else called. Something more immense and even more exhilarating than the stimulating pace, the crowds, and the creative challenges of the city. Something which, over the years, would

prove to be the artist's true workplace and home: the western outdoors.

Hagen, who grew up in Connecticut, earned his degree at a time when the New York art scene was focused on abstract expressionism, and the former (and future) popularity of landscape painting was at a low ebb. But landscape was what Hagen



"Winter Evening," oil on canvas, 14" × 18"



"Early Morning on a Ridge," oil on canvas, 9" × 12"



"Aspen in the High Country," oil on canvas, 24" × 18"

loved. So without a clear market for his art, he set his brushes aside for a few years and with his wife, headed west. For 15 years he explored, skied, climbed, fished, adventured, served on ski patrol, sold real estate, had restaurant jobs, and did other types of work in the Colorado mountains near Crested Butte.

Finally, in the last few years of his stay there in the 1980s, he returned to fine art. It was a return to his aesthetic roots, which had found their earliest foothold in the rich environment of New York City art museums when he was a boy. Hagen recalls being captivated, in particular, by impressionists such as Monet and Van Gogh, and deciding at about age 12 that he would become a painter.

"I just got some oil paints and started in my back yard—I did a painting of the wood pile," he remembers. "No one in my family was an artist, but just from seeing artwork I got really excited and thought, 'I would love to do that.'"

So he did, in Colorado, taking a French easel into the mountains and honing his plein air skills in a stimulating and challenging environment of swiftly shifting weather and light. He learned to paint fast, capturing the essence of a scene before it changed. In 1987 he moved to Taos, aware that his work would benefit from the milder climate and the community of landscape painters in the northern New Mexico town.

In Taos Hagen studied with acclaimed painters Ray Vinella and Ned Jacob. His subject matter expanded to include such familiar New Mexico terrain as sandy arroyos, golden chamisa in the fall, and the tan and dark green of piñon and juniper-dotted hills. At the same time, the artist continued his forays into the Colorado mountains and made periodic visits east to capture another side of his outdoor fancy: the sea coast, sailing vessels, and colorful harbor towns he loved as a child.

Today Hagen lives with his wife and son in Santa Fe. From there he can venture far or near to seek out views whose color and composition excite him. Sometimes these are as close as his back yard, where winter shadows on junipers and snow have been the subject of at least one work. With its intimate focus and wintry, wilderness feel, the painting could easily have been done many miles from home.

"There's a lot right here. Sometimes I can go just a quarter mile away and usually I'll find little places that are beautiful. Other times, it's something grand that catches my eye," Hagen observes. "You can drive by something 20 times. Then you pass it the 21st time with a certain light that day, and you say, 'God, look at that!' Or it's in bloom,



"Arroyo in the Sage," oil on canvas, 16" x 20"

or there's a color you never noticed before, and you think, 'I've got to paint that.'"

Almost all of Hagen's work is done on location. As centuries of plein air painters before him have done, he thrives on the excitement of ever-changing elements and the inspirational spark of being right there in nature. As he puts it, "Everything is alive; it's all there: the time of day, the weather, the cars, bugs, heat, snow. I love exploring. I'm always looking. I love the adventure of going off and finding a new little canyon, or a beautiful group of aspens.

"Sometimes I think that someday this won't be exciting anymore, but every time I go out I see something incredible, and it's just as exciting as the last time. And as the years go on I find myself appreciating it even more. You see more, and just begin to realize how great it is."



Peter Hagen's landscape paintings may be seen at McLarry Fine Art, 225 Canyon Road. Hours: 10:00-5:00 Monday-Saturday and 11:00-4:00 Sunday. (505) 988-1161 or 1-877-983-2123. www.mclarryfineart.com.