

J MARK KOHLER

# PAINTING THE COWBOY'S SOUL

By Emily Van Cleve

Mark Kohler savors the slow life in Sabinal, Texas, a town of approximately 1,600 people halfway between San Antonio and Del Rio. It's a place where hunting deer, wild hogs, turkeys, and dove are big business, and ranches fill the expansive landscape. Sabinal is cowboy country—a town where a cowboy artist like Kohler can feel at home. In fact, Maurice Chambers, one of the first cowboys Kohler ever painted, runs a ranch in the area.

Painting cowboys doing what they love best—tending cows and riding their horses—is what Kohler does best. It isn't enough for him to photograph cowboys and then use those photographs to create watercolor paintings back in the studio. Kohler gets to know most of his subjects deeply and personally. Many are friends or become friends after he's spent weeks being around them.

As those cowboys go about their daily business, Kohler quietly observes the nuances in their walk, the subtle changes of expression in their faces as they deal with daily joys and struggles, and the energy that fuels their day-to-day activities on the open range. He engages them in early morning chats and late-night conversations that flow naturally out of a hard day's work. Trust develops and mutual admiration flourishes.



*Throwback, watercolor, 12" by 11"*

*"Walter Weir represents all that is good about the West. He takes life as it comes and laughs through 98 percent of it. I guess he figures the other 2 percent can be handled with a good horse and a new rope. A true throwback to the cowhand of yesteryear, Walt makes cow brandings a pleasure. Ground work, you say? No problem. Header? Heeler? No problem. Walt's jovial outlook should be an example for us all to live by."*

Kohler's network of cowboy friends extends far beyond Texas. He often travels to ranches in New Mexico, Idaho, Montana, and Nevada to absorb the real life of the working cowboy. Nothing fancy here—just down-to-earth folks carving out a simple life on the range that's rapidly disappearing in today's high-tech society.

Although he was born in Austin, Kohler grew up skeep shooting, hunting and fishing in the Texas woodlands. A fly-fishing fanatic, Kohler and his wife Pam spend summer vacations traveling the West to enjoy the best fly-fishing spots in the country. Not surprisingly, some of his paintings depict lone fly fishermen in their favorite rivers and streams.

Art has been a part of Kohler's life since early childhood. His grandfather, W.E. Beasley, a railroad

man who spent countless hours making fiddles and furniture after he retired, played an important part in his life. "I spent my childhood with him," Kohler recalls. "I learned about perfection and perseverance from him."

Kohler remembers seeing five broken fiddles on his grandfather's shop floor and wondering why they were there. "He told me there were little imperfections in them," he says. "My grandfather taught me to stick things out and get them right."

Art became a serious part of Kohler's life during his years at Anderson High School in Austin. "I was beyond bad at most school subjects," he says. "None of them interested me, so I didn't care if I did well or not."

Fortunately, the school's art teacher in the late 1970s was noted



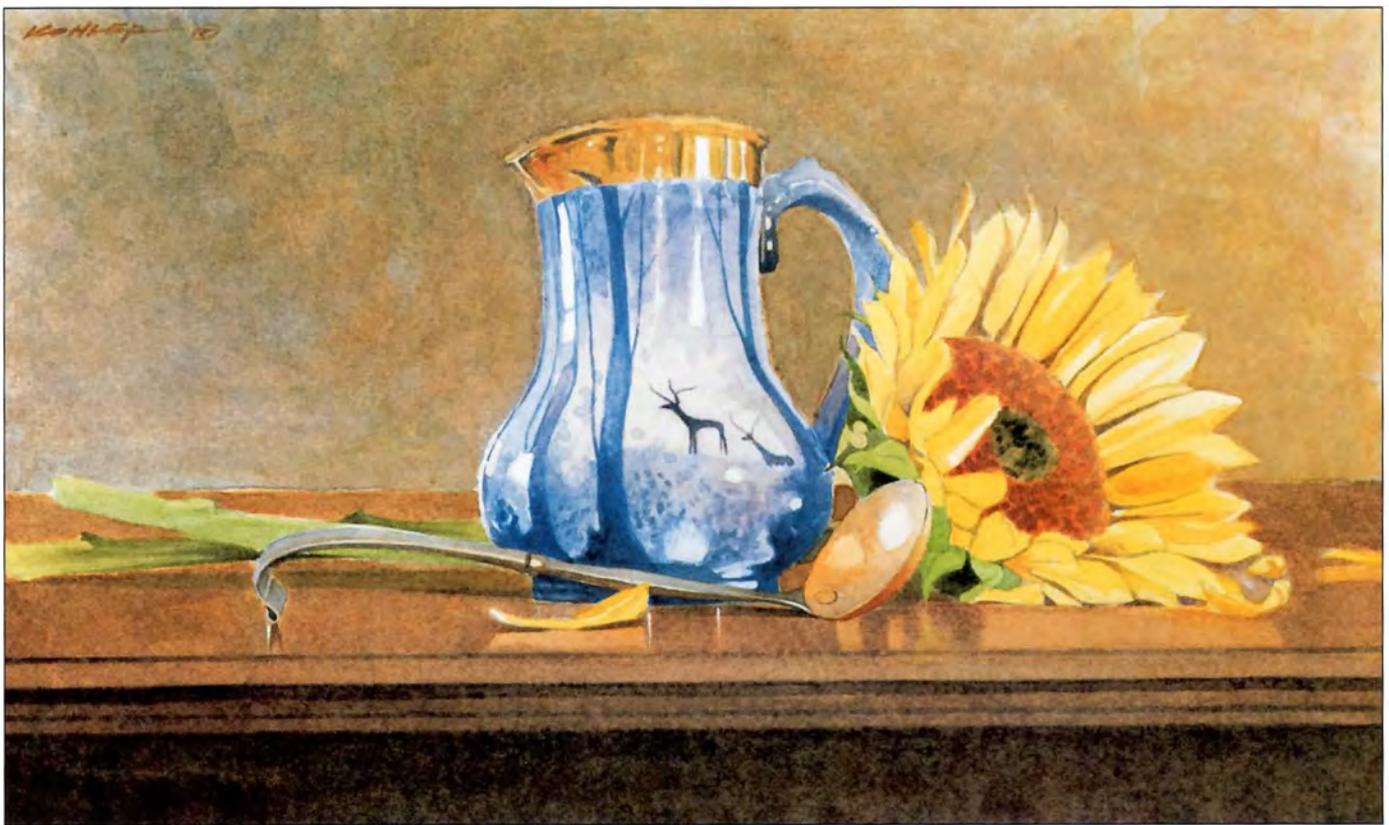
*Coming up Short, watercolor, 12" by 19"*

*"My favorite paintings are of top hands roping. This is where you can see cowboys at their best. When horses are thundering and ropes are hot and fast, the real intensity of the man can be seen. By the same token, when a loop misses, nowhere else can you see greater agony or disappointment. A miss to a cowboy is as bitter as it comes. This painting of Chance shows the intensity—you can see the anguish of watching a missed heifer pulling away and the lost glory of building a new loom, an empty new loop."*



*It Ain't Braggin', If You Can Do It, watercolor, 19" by 14"*

*"There's a big line drawn in the sand that separates men from boys when it comes to riding bucking horses. All the bravado, chest pounding, and bold talk stops when your number comes up. Bad horses are the equalizer, and one you rode yesterday might pile you up tomorrow. If you're man enough to be in the game and to take the raking, well, then you've got my respect. But cowboy to cowboy, you're expected to make the ride, break the horse, and walk your talk. After all, it ain't braggin', if you can do it."*



*Borrowed Blue, watercolor, 10" by 8"*

*"This little painting has much more to it than is apparent. The little Bavarian pitcher is highly collectible. One of my noted collectors had it on display, and I was desperate to paint it. Luckily, he is a generous and trusting man and gave me the chance to work with the piece. This is the second painting I've done with this treasure, and it was a success. Even with the bold sunflower, the little pitcher captivates me with its Old World charm."*

Southwestern artist Amado Pena. "His career began taking off during my junior year in high school," Kohler says. "He was preparing his serious students, like me, for art careers."

Because Pena was allowed to develop an intense art program at the high school, Kohler had a class with him every day of the week. A stickler when it came to production, Pena required his students to constantly make new work whether it was good or not. "We were taught to learn through repetition," Kohler recalls. "He told us it was better to do 50 drawings a year than just a few."

Following his high school graduation, Kohler enrolled at Southwest Texas State University's art school in San Marcos, where he learned the basics of painting and drawing. When he was required to choose a major—fine art or illustration—he chose illustration,



which fit nicely with his bent toward representational art.

Armed with a degree in commercial art, Kohler joined a small advertising firm in Austin and embarked on a career as a production artist. His assignments ranged from illustrating ads for car lubrication services to creating fine art illustrations for books. When computers became an important part of the commercial art business in the early 1990s, however, Kohler became disillusioned and left the industry. For the next four years,

he negotiated claims and dealt with lawyers as an adjuster for Farmers Insurance Group. "I developed a lot of confidence during this time," he says. "I learned how to handle myself. It was a really good learning experience."

By the end of the fourth year in the business, however, Kohler's passion for fine art resurfaced, and he began to paint late at night. "I chose watercolors because I always liked Homer's work and the crisp, fresh look of watercolors," he says.



*C.V. Trio, watercolor, 13 1/2" by 11"*

Inspired by sporting watercolorists Chet Reneson and Thomas Aquinas Daly and the direct painting style of cowboy painter William Matthews, Kohler turned his attention to painting cowboys, animals, and the natural world. "Pam was the one who urged me to drop insurance and take the leap into art," he says. "She helps me with the business side of my work. We're a team."

Kohler exhibited his first paintings at a western art show in Arlington, Texas, in 1995. He sold a few pieces and, encouraged by the public's interest in his work, quit his job to pursue painting full time. In 1996, while selling his paintings at the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas, Nevada, he met Shawn Goemmer, a cowboy who would become the subject of several of his paintings.

"I noticed a man wearing muddy boots who was walking with a cane," Kohler recalls. "His horse had reared up and thrown him. His pelvis was smashed and his spleen was busted. He looked like a neat, tough, ranching character. It turned

*"Originally, the KM Ranch, the C. V. has now dwindled down to roughly 55,000 acres. It exists quietly with the likes of the RO's and the Diamond A's. These are all classic old ranches that remain virtually unchanged. The C. V. is still loaded with all the romance of the Old West. Branding is my favorite time. There are potential paintings everywhere. So many things are happening fast: people, horses, and cattle are moving everywhere, and it's all at a frantic, controlled pace—sheer heaven for an artist."*

out that his wife was looking at my paintings at the same time I was looking at him. We met and became friends that day."

Kohler has followed Goemmer and several other cowboys around the country, watching them at work. Being careful to stay out of a cowboy's way while he's working, Kohler keeps a camera and sketch book in hand because, he says, "everything is moving so fast." Paintings are often a result of images taken from multiple photos and sketches.

"Everything is real," Kohler says. "The people are real; the horses are really their horses. I make sure to pay attention to the little things—like the rowels on the spurs—because the cowboys will notice how I paint

every little detail."

As a way of saying 'thank you' for letting him be part of their lives, Kohler tries to give each cowboy a painting. "Most of these guys don't have anything like that," he says.

Kohler has completed some three dozen paintings of Goemmer and another three dozen of cowboy friend Mark Kirkpatrick. Many other cowboys have been willing and gracious subjects, and Kohler is always on the lookout for new and interesting faces. "It's the kind of thing where Shawn introduces me to someone who introduces me to somebody else," he explains. "The world of the working cowboy is a small world. Often, I run into people time and again through the years."



*Hard Pull, watercolor, 11" by 11"*

*"Introducing an Idaho buckaroo into a nest full of Arizona cowpunchers was a bit unnerving for me. I had repeatedly told Shawn Goemmer, the veteran Arizona puncher, what a good hand Jeremy Morris was with horse and catch twine. This particular summer, everything fell into place, and I was able to arrange for Jeremy to spend two days roping and dragging with the Arizona crew. In true buckaroo fashion, Jeremy handled himself with style and grace. He displayed fancy rope shots, a slick horn, and a hard pull to the fire."*

Since 2000 Kohler's work has received national attention, despite the fact that he hasn't actively sought it. He was invited to exhibit his work at both the 2001 and 2005 Black Tie and Boots Inaugural Balls for President Bush in Washington, D.C. The Phippen Museum of Western Art in Prescott, Arizona, awarded

him with first-place honors in the watercolor division in 2004 and 2005. And his work has been published in several books, including his own coffee table book, *Mark Kohler, Working Cowboys*.

Kohler's goal is not only to capture a way of life but the importance of the people he portrays. "My paintings

are about the soul of them and me," he says. "They're about the close relationships I have with cowboys."

Since he invests a lot of emotional energy in every painting, Kohler feels comfortable spending hours on a piece and then, if it doesn't say what he wants it to say, tearing it up and throwing it in the garbage. That work ethic, that focus on detail and accuracy, harkens back to Kohler's childhood days. "I'm a perfectionist like my grandfather," he says. 

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