

PERSONAL VISIONS

By Myrna Zanetell

In the hands of Arizona-based artist Robert Peters a simple brush becomes a magic wand, transforming his canvases into light-filled imagery so palpable that viewers literally smell the sweetness of pastoral meadow grasses and flowers, their eyes drawn to the majesty of distant mountain vistas or, conversely, they might chafe at the hot winds and prickly cactus inherent along desert paths, some of which might wend their way to the ruins of ancient cultures. It is Peters' ability to orchestrate color and values that provides depth and emotion to these settings, while a judicious

use of detail breathes life into even the most static of subjects.

Like many artists, Peters' artistic vision is an amalgam blended from a lifetime of memorable experiences. In his case, they began with annual family camping trips to remote regions of Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado, that imbued him with indelible images of nature that remain a wellspring from which he continues to draw inspiration.

As a child, Peters loved drawing pictures of horses, never realizing his sketches portended a career as a professional artist. Although his many trips to the museum in his

hometown of Phoenix had increased his fascination with painting, he did not enter the arts program at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff until his sophomore year. Even then he found little encouragement for his efforts at realistic painting until he encountered Melinda Pordenlon. A professor who also

Above - Wings of Autumn, oil, 22 by 24"

"Still life painting is a relatively new endeavor for me, although as a freelance illustrator I had painted hundreds of objects for advertising and publishing projects, so it is not completely unfamiliar territory. I decided to start with arrangements of objects from the Ancestral Puebloan culture, as I have a deep curiosity about these ancient peoples."



Sonoran Afternoon, oil, 18" by 20"

"When my family moved west in 1968, I was just a young boy, and the first sketches I had ever done were of the deserts around the outlying areas of Phoenix. I can still remember how exotic and captivating it was; I was just mesmerized. I think I enjoy capturing these same scenes even more so today."

worked as a freelance illustrator, she guided him to a career in the field of commercial art that eventually led him to New York City. He not only began to earn a substantial living creating advertising for major firms such as AT&T, Motorola, and IBM, he also was accepted as a member of the prestigious Society of Illustrators.

By the early 1990s, Peters and his

wife Nanette had tired of city life and moved to Durango, Colorado, where they purchased a 15-acre ranch. The couple began to raise Paint show horses while Nanette continued in her professional capacity as a registered operating room nurse. It also became a time of transition, as Peters began to create fine art paintings whose compositions once again focused on his love of horses and the Western landscapes.

Later in the decade, the couple relocated once again, this time to Paso Robles, California. By then a full-time artist, Peters spent hours walking along beaches at Big Sur and Carmel, internalizing details of light and form, the misty Pacific air

adding a new quality to his work. Two children—daughter Katherine, now 13, and son Bryce, 9—were born in California, creating a change in family dynamics that prompted a final relocation to Prescott, Arizona, a move that placed them close to both sets of grandparents. The Peters currently reside on four serene acres that adjoin the Granite Mountain Wilderness area. Completing the family are two retired show horses, three dogs, and a diverse collection of frogs, snakes, and other wild creatures.

Experiences gained by residing in diverse Western locations, combined with new inspirations garnered during frequent research trips, allow



Rhythm of Winter, oil, 22" by 28"

"I'm not sure there will be enough opportunity in my lifetime to paint all the snow scenes I would like. Many times they are the most fun to paint, as it seems that the harmonies of line, form, and color are most apparent during the winter months."

Peters to feel at home producing compositions that transcend a wide variety of subjects. In 2008, when he was invited to show his work for the first time at the Eiteljorg Museum's Quest for the West Exhibition, Associate Curator of Art Carol Street confided to Peters that she felt his ability to paint such diverse subjects was one of his greatest strengths.

Peters recently has added still life compositions to his oeuvre, explaining, "These bring a whole new perspective to what I do. When you are out in the field, you have to work with what nature provides and respond to that. I enjoy portraying

prehistoric ancestral pottery and artifacts. What especially piqued my interest in these is that I began to see a connection between the native people's artwork and the landscape. During the period they lived, their whole world was about their environment, and their personal views show through in their artwork.

"Painting a still life is completely different from portraying a landscape in that not only are you choosing your subject, but you are also free to orchestrate the lighting so there is more personal input into what the final image is going to look like. Although these still lifes





Living Waters, oil, 28" by 30"

"Water is always a joy to paint, partly because of the importance it plays in the cycle of life. You simply cannot separate these two essentials. The harmony and beauty that is present between life and water can sometimes be wonderfully obvious."

represent only about 10 percent of my subject matter, they are a lot of fun to produce and definitely represent a change of pace."

After observing the progression of Peters' work for more than a dozen years, John Geraghty, trustee and special advisor for the Masters of the American West Fine Art Exhibition and Sale, invited him to be one of the founding artists of the event. The invitation spoke volumes about Geraghty's respect for the

man and his abilities.

Although Peters doesn't refer to himself as a plein air painter, Geraghty says, he works on site, taking notes of color, values, shapes, and forms, capturing in his mind that precise moment when the light is perfect or the atmosphere is most intriguing. "What I admire about him is witnessing over the past few years his continued improvement and commitment [to his craft], striving to bring out the best that an artist can do rather than relaxing and resting on past accomplishments."

Peters confides that his preference to be a studio painter is a bit unusual in the light of the phenomenal popularity that plein air painting has recently enjoyed. "I have tried it, and completing paintings on site has never worked that well for me," he

says. "One of the paramount things in creating a work of art is the artist's personal vision. You really have to have individual perspective. How you arrive at that takes time and pushing yourself to be the best you can. When I start out with a preconceived idea, I seldom find what I'm looking for, so the alternative is to respond to what's there. You have to translate that, using the personal vision of what you feel about this subject.

"On research trips, I create sketches, using color and value notations. I also take reference photos that can be especially helpful when I'm portraying a notable place that many individuals might have seen. About half the time I might do a small study as a prelude to the larger work. Alternately, I may simply



Ancient Empire, Mesa Verde, oil, 20" by 30"

"Prehistoric ruins have been a favorite subject of mine for many years. I have visited literally hundreds across the Southwest and always find them to be inspiring. I usually like to hand paint a petroglyph design on the frames that are included with these paintings. This particular piece was the high-selling painting at the 2010 Prix de West live auction."

March, Yavapai Point, oil, 40" by 72"

"Being only a two-hour drive from my home, the Grand Canyon is probably the ultimate challenge to a landscape painter. I have painted the canyon in all seasons, but I have a special liking for the power, intensity, and solitude of the winter months."





The American Southwest, oil, 30" by 40"

"I have visited Monument Valley since I was a child, and the feeling is always one of awe and amazement. It is unmistakable and certainly one of the most remarkable and unique landscapes on earth. This particular piece will be included in the upcoming Quest for the West exhibition at the Eiteljorg Museum."

begin by just drawing on the canvas. Learning how to work this way is a lifelong endeavor, and I don't think you can actually teach this ability.

"I find that one of the most energizing things about painting is improving the quality of what you do, and I believe there is no limit to how far you can take your abilities if you keep working at it, discovering new techniques and pushing the envelope. I also love to experiment with different types of lighting, or the scale of objects. In landscape paintings, scale is terribly important, which is why I sometimes add


horses or buildings to establish size. As for my palette, I choose colors that are most appropriate for the subject and that especially reflect what I want to convey about that subject."

As for new challenges, Peters says he would like to explore Central Utah, the canyon lands and Monument Valley. Painting there would definitely bring back memories for the artist, who visited the area frequently as a child. He also appreciates the many challenges of painting the Grand Canyon area. "You can go there every day of the year and see something different," he says.

Having turned 50 in January, Peters reflects that, between his tenure as an illustrator and now as a fine art painter, nearly half his life has been devoted to his career as a professional artist. "I'm so fortunate to have built a wonderful base of

collectors who have come to expect a high degree of competency from my work, and I enjoy fulfilling those expectations," he says.

The spirited competition among collectors to obtain one of Peters' most recent images was reflected at the 2010 Prix de West Exhibition at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Not only did Peters have a sellout show, but his 20" by 30" rendition of ruins at Mesa Verde commanded the highest price among the 11 pieces offered at the live auction during the closing night festivities.

If the past 10 years are a barometer measuring Peters' determination to excel, then his best paintings are still on the horizon. 

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