

# ALL EARTH & SKY

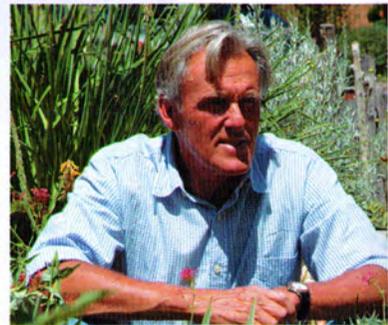
BY WOLF SCHNEIDER

PETER HAGEN finds inspiration for his paintings in the enduring beauty of the Southwest

**H** HE LIVES JUST A BLOCK OFF OLD PECOS TRAIL—one of Santa Fe’s busiest thoroughfares—yet Peter Hagen has managed to create a rural paradise for himself. A dirt road leads to his home, which is hidden behind a thicket of trees, including the aspens he planted. His garden is full of gaillardia, day lilies, roses, hollyhocks, and lavender. A pitcher of tea is brewing on the garden wall when I show up. Nearby stands a barbed-wire sculpture of a colt that Hagen got years ago in a trade for his old Isuzu Trooper. This is a fellow who knows how to create the life he wants. But it wasn’t always that way. Self-discovery came gradually to Hagen.

Tall and muscular with thick, silvering hair, Hagen is an athletic guy who hikes, bikes, skis, and sails. When he greets me at the door, it’s hard to believe he’s 62. It’s even harder to believe that he’s from Flushing, Queens, in New York, because if Hagen has one preoccupation above all else, it’s his connection to the land. His love for open country is evident in the landscapes he paints year round, turning out 100 new canvases a year. “I love the beauty of it,” he says. “The more I look, the more I see.”

Hagen paints landscapes of New Mexico and southern Colorado (and occasionally scenes of Martha’s Vineyard, where he goes each summer for a few weeks to a family home). His color-saturated, light-filled paintings emphasize the mountains, canyons, arroyos, and clouds of the Southwest. “It’s all earth and sky,” he says. “That’s New Mexico.”



BELOW: THE QUIET OF A SUNSET, OIL, 30 X 48.





ABOVE: TRACKS IN THE ARROYO, OIL, 24 X 30.  
 OPPOSITE PAGE: SANTO DOMINGO COUNTRY, OIL, 24 X 30.

Hagen used to paint everything *en plein air*. He now divides his time between smaller plein-air paintings that might be 8-by-10s or 18-by-24s, and larger studio paintings that range from 18-by-24s to 30-by-48s. His paintings capture familiar landscapes around northern New Mexico—places like Abiquiu, Taos, the Jemez Mountains, and Chimayo. “You can get little views around town, too,” he says. “But I usually drive out about an hour’s radius.”

Yellows and blues tend to dominate in his studies of atmosphere, space, and distance. “It’s just what I see out there, like the yellow chamisa in fall. I use a lot of ochres, which have a lot of warmth. And the blue skies—cerulean blue and French ultramarine,” says the artist, who straddles the line between impressionist and realist.

Usually his paintings are horizontals, generally two-thirds earth and one-third sky, but sometimes Hagen

flips that compositional formula. “The first things I look for are shape and composition,” he emphasizes. What constitutes good composition? “Well, certainly having depth, having different layers terraced back. Having an object off center on one-third or two-thirds of the painting. And, of course, a focal point.”

Summertime monsoons are a preoccupation at the moment. “We’re surrounded by the Jemez, Sangre de Cristo, and Sandia mountains. You can see the clouds building up around 11 a.m., and it’s fascinating,” he notes. “Nature and landscapes are the most beautiful things there are. Well, except for some music.” Like? “Classical and opera. Andrea Bocelli has a great voice,” is his immediate response. He then adds, “I like country-folk too—Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen.”

Hagen listens to music while working in the



studio—but that’s the only distraction he allows himself. His studio is a 400-square-foot space a few miles away on Santa Fe’s historic Upper Canyon Road. There is no phone, and he rarely invites people to visit. “It’s down in the canyon with cottonwoods all around. It’s on the river, very quiet and peaceful,” as Hagen describes it. He’s typically there from noon to 7 p.m. “I like it because it’s away from the house, and I’m not disturbed.”

**H**AGEN DID NOT GROW UP AMIDST such tranquil surroundings. Born in 1944 to a father who worked in advertising and public relations and a mother who raised four children, he lived in the noisy inner city of Flushing, NY, until the age of 12, when the family relocated to more rural Stamford, CT. A middle child, Hagen had older and younger sisters, which made him an early expert on the opposite sex. “To

this day, my three sisters say I was treated special because I was the only boy,” he chuckles.

His artistic ability—and his attraction to the West—surfaced in fourth grade, when he drew a cowboy for the cover of a school publication. “It came easily, and my teacher told my mother there was a budding artist here,” he recounts. “My family was very supportive of my talent.”

In 1962 he went off to college, to the University of Arizona, but lasted only a year. “I was homesick. I missed the family. My mother calls me a late bloomer,” he laughs. He returned to the East Coast, where he took drawing classes at the Art Guild of Connecticut. He then earned a bachelor’s degree in fine arts at the University of Bridgeport, where he majored in graphic design. “The generally accepted path from school was to go to New York to become an advertising illustrator,” he recalls. “But I didn’t

want to be in New York.”

Instead, he rented an apartment with friends in Connecticut. By age 26 he was already part-owner of a restaurant, which is where he met his wife, Lindsay. When the restaurant closed down in 1972, they took off on a skiing trip to Crested Butte, CO—and they stayed for the next 16 years. Hagen worked on the ski patrol, hiked and fished, and eventually got into real estate.

“I think real estate was the beginning of my becoming a landscape painter. I was better at showing the land without houses. I’d point out all the trees, the mountain views, the water if there was a river close by,” he says. All that looking at land led him back to painting, with the landscape as his subject. In 1988, at the age of 44, Hagen and his wife moved south to Taos, NM. He was intent on reinventing himself as an artist.

Early on he’d been influenced by Monet (“especially his color palette and the looseness of his painting ... and the peacefulness”) and van Gogh (“I’m drawn to the strength of his colors”). Then he was taken with John Singer Sargent (“I love his flowing brush strokes”) and Joaquin Sorolla (“for his loose and colorful style.”). Hagen began taking workshops with Ray Vinella. “He gave me really good direction about what goes on a canvas and what doesn’t,” says Hagen. “Like how I start a painting with the large shapes and work into the small.” It took only a year before Hagen had gallery representation. He palled around with painters Walt Gonske and Rod Goebel, and he took more workshops with Vinella.

Life in Taos was good. But after 10 years there, Hagen and Lindsay moved to Santa Fe in 1998 so they would have more school choices for their son. “Moving to Santa Fe from Taos probably kicked me into gear. It made me work harder and be more conscious of galleries,” he reflects. “Taos is a little more laid back, more relaxed. I work a lot harder down here, which I enjoy. Here I realized what I had to do and the avenues I had.”

Now entrenched in Santa Fe life, Hagen still hangs out with Gonske, still bikes and skis, and watches PBS with his wife. But mostly he paints. At 62, he’s made peace with the slowness of his own self-discovery as an artist, and he relies on his own

conviction and patience to keep at it. “You do struggle, for sure. All along you struggle. I’ve thrown canvasses long distances and gotten very mad. It can be a roller coaster ride. I’m not gliding smoothly all the way. I work very hard at things,” he says.

But he’s his own boss and, more important, he can devote his time to the land, which is what he really wanted all along. He’s let his realtor’s license expire, because he’s never going back. “A friend said, ‘You left a lot of money on the table,’ because after I left Crested Butte, the market exploded,” Hagen



ABOVE: JUNIPER SHADOWS, OIL, 24 X 30.

chuckles. “But now I sell real estate in a different way.” And he makes sure it stays gorgeous and undeveloped in the process. □

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**Santa Fe-based Wolf Schneider has been editor in chief of the *Santa Fean*, editor of *Living West*, and consulting editor of *Southwest Art*.**

**Hagen is represented by McLarry Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM**