

A HOUSE FILLED WITH LIGHT

*Wilson and Roz Hurley's new home in the Sandias
displays both his paintings and his city in their best light.*

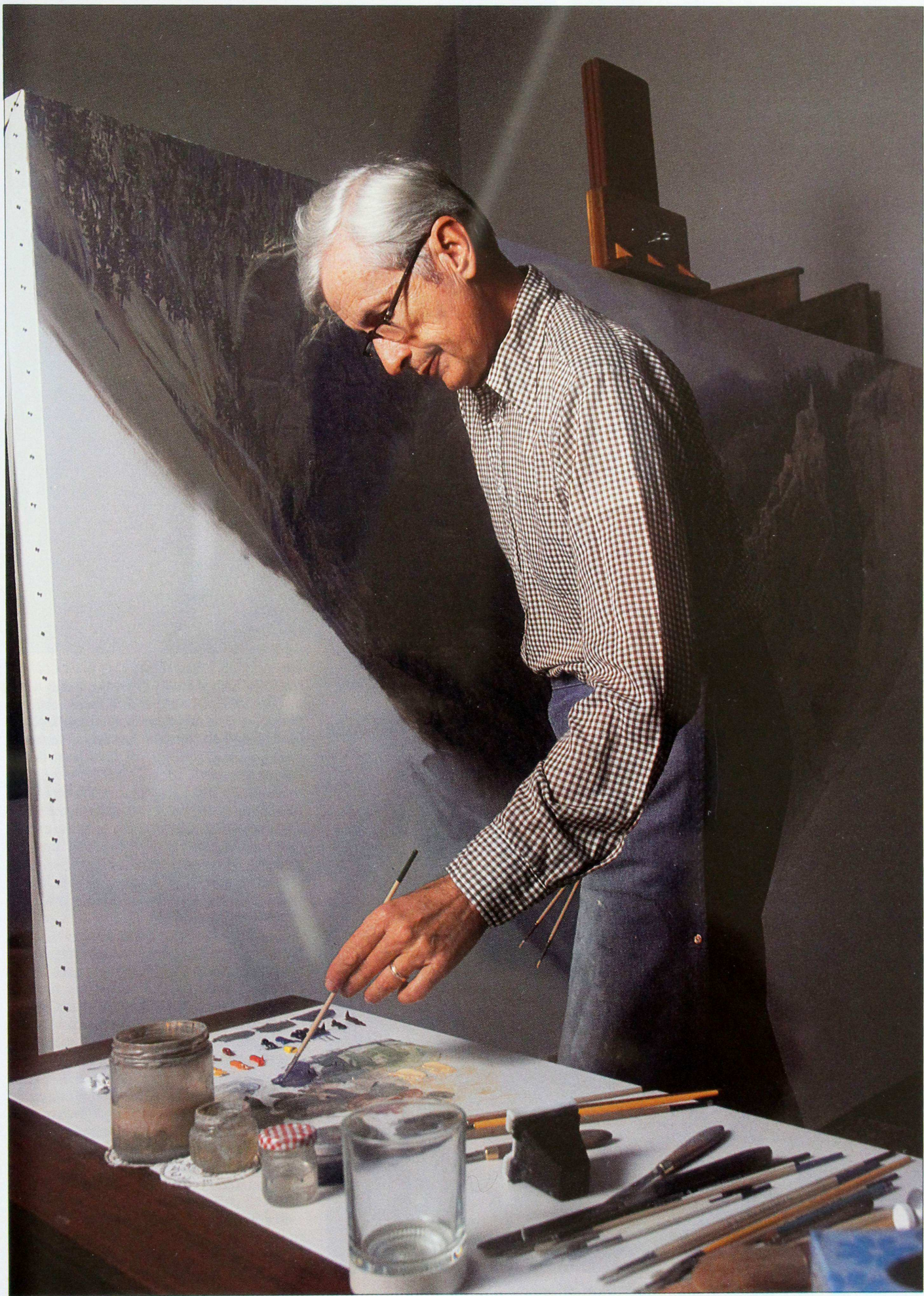
by Melissa Howard



PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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“This is an absolutely gorgeous place,” Wilson Hurley says in a tone that permits no contradiction. “I don’t think there’s a more beautiful site in the whole world. Albuquerque is a breathtaking city.”

From their new home in the Sandia Mountains, Wilson and Roz Hurley have a magnificent view of the city that the artist praises so highly. From the vistas of Sandia Crest above to the Rio Grande Valley below, the couple has come to appreciate the city as much as a fine painting, and like a fine painting, the city inspires each time it is seen.





Roz Hurley's good taste is evident in the interior design of the house.

When they thought about building a new house, the Hurleys knew they had to create a place that would highlight the city as well as Hurley's heroic-scale oil paintings. They worked out the basic scheme for the house and found the perfect lot in Sandia Heights North. Then they turned to George Pearl to design it.

"For simplicity and directness and design, George Pearl is fascinating," Hurley says, one artist praising another. "We wanted to have a good showplace for my work, and George understood what we wanted."

The result of the combined efforts of Pearl and the Hurleys is 6,000 square feet of compatible dwelling, workplace, and art gallery, completed one year ago.

The main elements of the house include its placement, taking advantage of sunrise, sunset, and a 360-degree view; its dun-colored brick facade; numerous over-size windows, wood-framed and uncurtained; and decks to the north and west.

Light—light to paint by and light to look at paintings by—is a central feature of the house. On the first floor, the living room, dining room, and foyer have extra-high ceilings, individually controlled spotlights, and molding strips for hanging paintings.

"A painting is painted in natural daylight, and it's supposed to hang in natural light," says Hurley, a lean, silver-haired man, six-foot-plus tall. "In a gallery they blast a painting with light, then the customer hangs it on a dark wall at home and it dies." At the Hurley house, windows light the paintings by day, and at night the lighting system lets each painting "hold its own without dominating the room."

Light also was considered in the choice of the brick, vivid enough to reflect the sunshine inside but not too yellow; in the use of matte-white interior walls; in the upright skylight over Hurley's portrait of his mother; and in the placement of a six-foot-high window that reflects Sandia Crest to a visitor coming to the front door.

The house is successful in displaying both Hurley's paintings and his city in their best light.

"The greater part of an artist's time is spent in his studio, working without distraction," Hurley says. In the studio of his new house, Hurley has taken measures to reduce the unwanted side effects of natural light. A 10-by-10 foot north window, its sill five feet above the floor, lights the easel from early morning until nearly sunset. Window and easel are placed to keep the left-handed painter's shadow off his canvas. Outside, a wing or curtain wall cuts off glare from the morning sun; inside, Hurley's custom-mixed gray wall paint further reduces glare.

The studio opens into a workroom, large enough for Hurley to stretch and mount his canvases, and then into a garage and loading area. It all looks simple enough, but the level floors, wide doors, and other features elim-



A unique view of the moon from space, 4,000 miles from its surface. The command and service module of an Apollo aircraft appears in the foreground. Using his imagination, geometric projections, maps of the moon, and a model he made of the space module, Hurley painted Apollo in 1970. Former astronaut Harrison (Jack) Schmitt later verified the color and technical accuracy of the painting.

inate many problems Hurley had with his previous homes. "People who paint as I do are in danger of building a yacht in the basement and not being able to get it out," he says.

Other than these custom touches for creating and showcasing paintings, the Hurleys and Pearl "went with permanent materials and no styling—as if we were inventing a house," Hurley says. "About the time we approved the preliminary plans, I began having trouble with my neck, and I was laid up for a long time. From that point on, the taste and control were pretty generally in Roz's hands." Roz and Pearl devised the wood trim that is the major interior ornament, and Pearl designed the simple but compelling stairway.

The Hurleys chose to keep the natural environment around their home. Rocks from the Sandia Mountains, three, even four feet high, in a myriad of gray tones, rounded but not tamed, and the wildflowers and piñon trees that grow between them, make up the landscaping. Pearl and the building crew worked around the rocks, moving walls a few degrees to accommodate some, cropping the top off another, shifting some out of the way and replacing them once the foundations were laid.

A 1945 West Point graduate with an engineering degree, Hurley came to New Mexico to practice law. He had done a tour of the South Pacific as a pilot in the Air Force when he decided to leave the military and go

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to George Washington University Law School. While trying to keep a law practice alive, first in Santa Fe and then in Albuquerque, he was "a Sunday painter" and a pilot for the New Mexico Air National Guard. The law, painting, and flying added up to too many "jealous, consuming" careers, so he gave up the law and lived on his pilot's pay while establishing himself as a painter.

He was nearing his goal when he was recalled for service in Vietnam as a forward air controller supervising 20 pilots. "Sometimes the country was so beautiful, so spectacular, that it was frightening," Hurley says of Vietnam. "The images are still with me."

After Vietnam, Hurley resumed his painting career and remained in the Air Force Reserves while channelling his love for flying into model airplanes. He builds 10-pound planes that can fly up to 50 miles an hour under radio control on their two-stroke, methanol-fueled engines. "With this hobby I don't really miss flying," Hurley says. Then he jokes, "Actually, my painting cuts into my model airplane flying."

To hear Hurley talk about painting is to know where his real passion lies. "Painting is the only method of communication we've devised yet that can unload its message in seconds, without any commitment by the viewer." His paintings are mostly of western landscapes.

To begin a painting, "you conceive the notion" of your subject. "I paint the landscape as it is." Next, "you figure out how



"New Mexico in Late Summer," 40" x 48", by Wilson Hurley

big a project it's going to be," so you can plan your schedule and buy materials. "I've always liked to work big. I think it's because you create a better illusion of reality on a big canvas."

Hurley's planning tools include color slides ("Cameras are great for detail") and field studies. Painting these small pieces (sometimes later framed and sold) allows him to map out a design and mix colors. The field study is then trimmed, if necessary, and marked off in one-inch grids that correspond to six-inch grids on the big canvas.

Hurley keeps to a 9-to-5 schedule, including weekends, and fights the temptation to "fiddle with" a painting at night when he is tired. He sometimes stops to take phone calls or deal with other business, but the goal is "to immerse yourself in the work. You don't want to break your concentration."

"Roz acts as a buffer. When she sees that I'm rolling, she fights to make sure I'm not interrupted. She creates that environment and maintains it—she knows the name of the game is concentration." A few weeks of concentration produces a painting; years of concentration might produce a painter who can "hold your own in a gallery," Hurley says, a full-time painter for 20 years.

The last brush stroke may be put on a Hurley painting several months after he thought it was finished. This fall he made major revisions in a nine-foot-wide depiction of mesas and thunderclouds that had failed to sell. It hung for months in his living

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room while he "decided what was wrong with it."

"The general public is a good judge," Hurley says. "If a painting doesn't sell, it's probably because I've thrown them a curve. When you paint representationally you are in the communications business. You have to paint something that people can have feelings about, so you have to have feelings about it yourself."

"Our purpose as artists is to let people express things emotionally. A painting should enrich the viewer by giving him an experience he hasn't had yet."

The Albuquerque Museum has just made a major purchase of Hurley's "Late Afternoon at La Cueva," a 60-by-96 inch painting of the Sandia Mountains under a cloudy sky. Many of his paintings hang in banks or other public buildings with walls large enough to accommodate them, although he finds homeowners more willing to consider big paintings now.

While he is working, Hurley rarely worries about who will buy a painting. He paints on commission if, and only if, the buyer has the right of refusal. "That way the buyer doesn't feel trapped" into accepting a painting he doesn't like, "and he doesn't tell me what to paint."

Hurley enjoys "breaking away" by trying a new subject or tone, believing that change "makes you a better painter. My business is to see things that excite me that I think might excite you, and to communicate them to you."



Light is a central feature of the Hurley home in Sandia Heights North.