

Isn't It Grand

*By Wilson Hurley
Profiles by Vicki Stavig*

There are as many responses to the Grand Canyon as there are people. For example, I have seen a van drive up to the rim with license plates showing it has traveled thousands of miles. The doors open, the family piles out—grandma, the kids, and the dog. Maybe one child runs to the rail, looks wide-eyed over the rim. They all turn their backs to the canyon and have their pictures taken. They pile back into the van, close the doors, and drive away.

Others spend their lives covering the canyon and learning it as they learn the features of their homes: hiking its many trails, shooting the rapids of its river, and bathing under Vasey's Paradise, Elves Chasm, or Deer Creek Falls. Fortunately for us, some of these people have been painters.

Probably the foremost painter, who lived at the canyon, was Gunnar Widforss. Another, spending less time, but studying it until he began to understand it, was Thomas Moran. Since then, the number of painters of the canyon has grown remarkably, and the canyon commands of each of them attention and comprehension. As it slowly rolls beneath the sun from dawn to dusk in every season, it is as changing as the sea. Ninety-three million years of erosion through more than 30 distinct layers of the earth's crust, down through the dark Paleozoic granite, have carved an infinite variety of shapes.

Yet through it all, there lies a basic symmetry so that every band of rock is exposed in its proper place throughout the canyon, although the buttes may stand 30 or 40 miles apart. Each stratum erodes differently and exposes its individual tints, while the terraces turn green and brown with the seasons.

With all this, the weather interacts: Storms form down in the canyon, clouds flow over the lips, mists and ice, snow and rain forever changing its appearance. To paint the canyon is a limitless goal. □



Earl Carpenter

"I was a normal kid who liked to draw on the walls in the livingroom," says Earl Carpenter. Today, the Arizona artist's medium is paint, and his primary subject is the Grand Canyon.

"The first time I saw the Grand Canyon," says Carpenter, "I wasn't greatly impressed with it. I saw it like so many tourists, who jump out of the car, run up to it, look at it, say 'Is that all there is?' and jump back in the car."

About 12 years ago, however, Carpenter's impression of the canyon was changed through the works of Thomas Moran. "I learned a great deal from Thomas Moran and tried to follow in his footsteps—the technical end of it," says Carpenter. "He was a master of technique and visual concepts. A lot of artists, myself included, went to the Grand Canyon with a topographical map in mind and became fairly successful, but it wasn't enough. I'm just beginning to scratch the surface of it after 20 years. It's taken a great deal of time, of living with the Grand Canyon and becoming a part of it to really nurture this feeling to a fineness where you can learn to describe it on pigment."

"I'm very excited about the breakthrough I've made recently. It's only the past two years that I feel I'm really saying something about the canyon. I'm putting myself into it. It's gone from more of a topographical statement to an emotional statement. The Grand Canyon is so inspiring and overwhelming that you want to paint it the way you see it. It takes a great deal of practice to be able to translate it into your own emotional terms."

"It's difficult to describe the Grand Canyon in words, because I just learned to do it on canvas. A lot of people, including myself, if taken from the canyon would not know what to do with themselves. It gets in your blood."

"Right now, I'm trying to convey how I feel about the canyon rather than what the canyon is. I'm trying to put my experiences, my knowledge, and my emotions all into one painting. Every painting I do is the finest painting I can do."

On the Bright Angel, oil, 36" by 48"

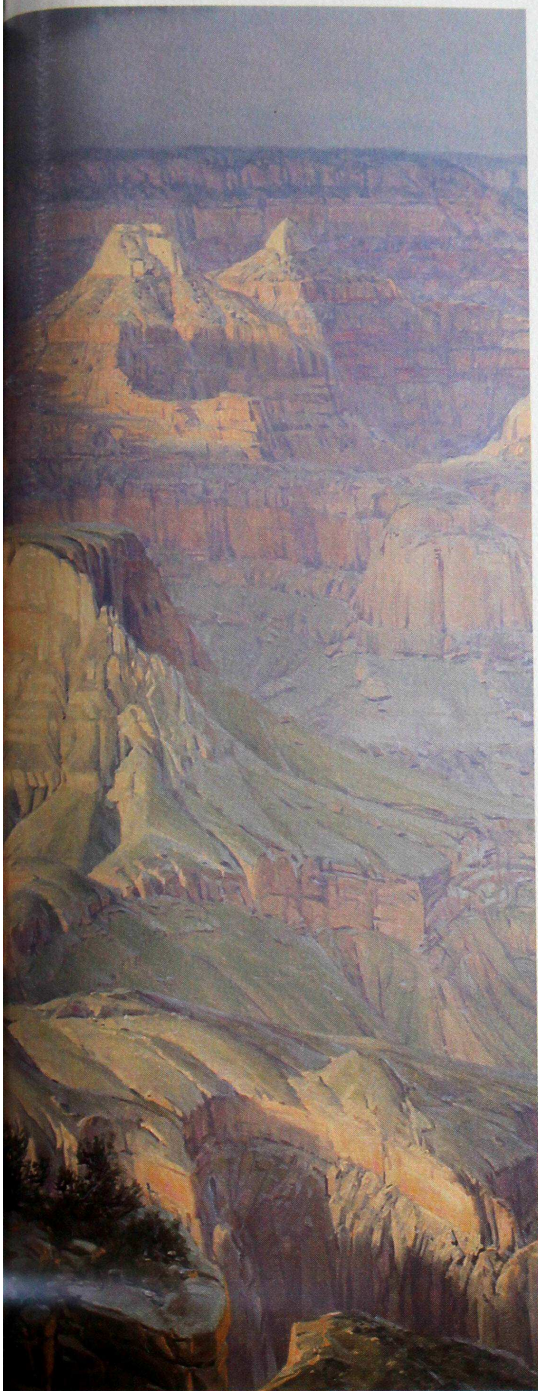
"This particular painting is hanging in Barry Goldwater's front room. I'm honored to have it in his collection. The former Senator from Arizona is an avid photographer of the Grand Canyon."





Passing Time, Eternal Beauty, oil, 72" by 118"

"This piece hangs in the Gene Autry Museum in Los Angeles and was painted from field sketches done from Maricopa Point."



Wilson Hurley

"My dad was a good buddy of Will Rogers, who said at one time, 'If a man claims that he is an artist, it's the only thing he can claim to be and nobody can prove he ain't.'" No one, however, would even attempt to prove that New Mexico artist Wilson Hurley isn't an artist; his art proves otherwise.

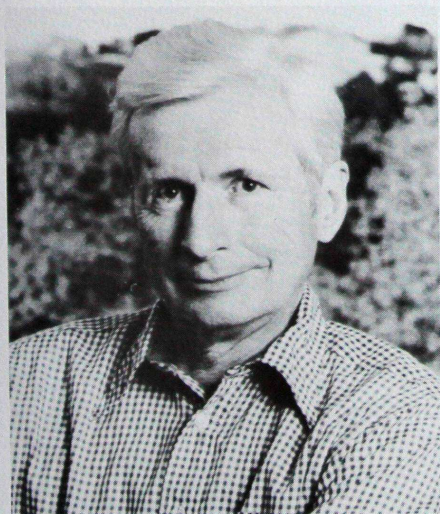
Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Hurley was raised in the East, where his father, Patrick, served as Secretary of War under President Hoover. Although Hurley's love of art was born in his early childhood, it was to take him several decades to be able to devote himself to it.

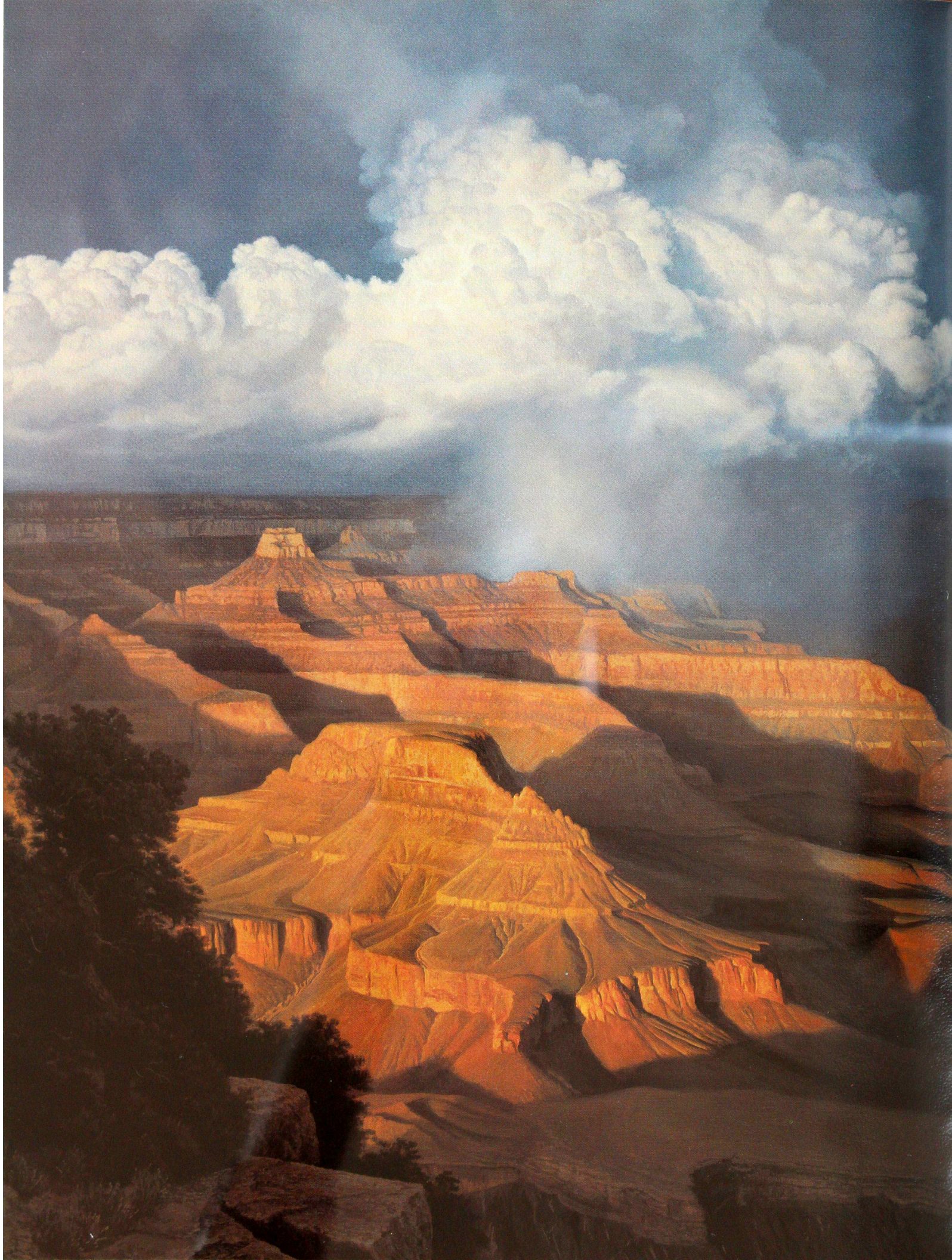
After being graduated from West Point, where Hurley drew cartoons and illustrations for *The Point* magazine, he served in the Air Force, then earned a degree in law, which he practiced for several years before turning to engineering. Finally, he chucked it all and decided to pursue his real love—painting—which he had been doing on the side for many years.

Hurley made his first serious attempt at painting the Grand Canyon in 1969 and has since completed at least 50 paintings of the canyon. "The Grand Canyon's appeal for me is emotional," he says. "It makes me feel glorious. It grabs me by the throat."

"I find that the wider the canvas, usually the better I get. What happens is, when you first start trying to paint the canyon, you try to paint the whole thing and you overload. As time goes by, you say, 'No, I'm going to just paint the vignettes, the little alcoves, the precious and unique parts of this thing.' Every rock, every growth, has a personality to that locale. So you do these little studies.

"There is a tremendous random beauty there of all that erosion and then beneath the randomness there is order. There are about 30 layers, each with its own properties of eroding, and the yellow rock up top is succeeded by what they call the Herman shales, which are just filled with a red iron oxide. These things are washed down, and they are what make the red wall. It starts turning a grayish yellow because the paint is being weathered off the thing. You see the shapes, but you also see what the uniform rules of the canyon are. It's like the sea—it's never the same. The canyon, like the sea, has to be seen in context. You have to understand what's going on."





John Cogan

A geophysicist-turned-artist, Houston artist John Cogan worked for Shell Oil Company for two years before deciding to make his avocation his vocation. Within two years, he was selling everything he could paint. Today, his Grand Canyon paintings provide a thrill for art aficionados throughout the country.

"The first time I saw the Grand Canyon I was 10," says Cogan. "After I had been married a couple years, I went out and saw it again. There was a wonderful world of different colors, shades, and shadows. As I watched the shadows change during the day, I thought, 'Wow, this would really be a neat thing to paint,' because there was so much going on. I started going back quite often, incorporating what I saw and felt in my paintings.

"My science background helps me in that I'm very aware, especially of light—how it falls on various objects. I'm aware of the different shades of color and how they're formed. I'm more aware of what's happening in the physical world, almost without thinking about it. I think about things in a different way. For instance, when a shadow is cast, I think about if there is light being reflected back into that shadow. I can think through where the light is going to be, where it's going to fall, and what it's going to do, especially if I'm changing the sky.

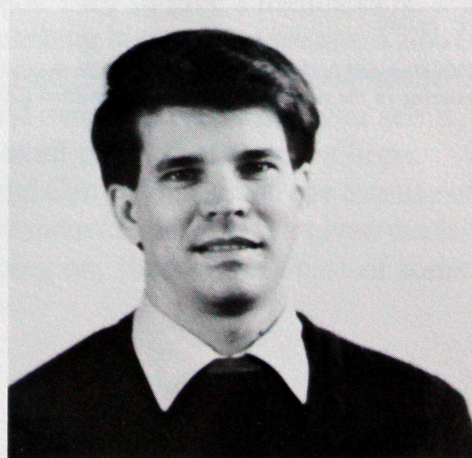
"For me, the appeal of the Grand Canyon is that there is so much nature concentrated in one place. I live pretty much in the city and just see little bits of nature. At the Grand Canyon, all of your senses are getting a maximum dose of nature. There are mountains in this huge canyon and all sorts of vegetation, interesting clouds. It's almost an overdose of nature. You can't think about anything else. The day-to-day world is gone, and all you've got is this huge dose of nature staring you in the face.

"The canyon is pretty during the middle of the day, but you don't get the colors or depth you do in the evening or morning, when the colors are much more intense and beautiful. During the middle of the day, it's a lot of browns and grays. You also get some interesting interaction between the clouds and the canyon, especially if a rainstorm goes through the canyon.

"You can't help but be impressed. You can't help but feel spiritually moved by it. When I go out there and look at the canyon, I feel kind of a spiritual peace. Here's something I can look at, and it's been here for millions of years, and it will be here for millions of years to come, whether man is here or not."

Evening of Creation, acrylic, 40" by 30"

"It is sometimes tempting to view the Grand Canyon as a completed piece of art—finished, signed, and ready for framing. This is not the case, for the canyon is always in the process of creation, its walls and buttes being continually sculpted by the wind and the rain. Here it is the rain: A small thunderstorm plunges into the depths behind Buddha Temple and Cheops Pyramid, catching the last kiss of evening's light."





Grand View, oil, 24" by 36"

"From Grand View looking east is the Great East Wall, with the Colorado meandering below. Looking north across the canyon is the Great North Rim. Beyond, shimmering in the sunset light, are the Vermillion Cliffs. Then, of course, to the west as far as one can see, is the whole canyon, fading into the sunset."



Ralph Love

Born in Los Angeles and raised in southern California where he still resides, Ralph Love is a retired minister who didn't get serious about his painting until he was about 30 years old.

"I've been painting the Grand Canyon since the fifties," he says. "I was impressed with the bigness of it. It seemed like there were such endless possibilities—the magnitude, the mystery. It's something bigger than I am. It just gripped me so I could not let go of it. In 1975, I did a one-man show of Grand Canyon paintings in Sedona. It was a sellout, and since then my Grand Canyon paintings have sold so well I can't keep them.

"One of the difficult things about painting the Grand Canyon is getting the perspective. It's about eight miles across and one mile down. I guess I've been fairly successful at it. One time a gentleman from Utah came to look at my paintings of the canyon. He liked one very much and wanted to buy it, but he was worried because his wife got dizzy from heights. She told him to buy it anyway.

"I've gone to all the different spots to paint. Some spots are good in the morning, and other spots are good in the afternoon. I've done several paintings of the east wall; one is hanging in the Boulder Museum. I've painted just about every place on the canyon. The north rim is entirely different. You have sun coming from the opposite direction. The reds are so red, especially in October. You get those red sunsets, and it just gives you goosebumps.

"I stay pretty close to the subject and yet I do take artistic license. I try to convey the feeling, the emotion. I'm not trying to give an exact picture of the canyon; that can be done with a camera. I try to give a feeling of its immensity, that there is something bigger than we are. I also try to have opposite emotions. Sometimes you look at the Grand Canyon with fear and awe and yet, when you see it, you feel that everything is all right, that there is hope.

"The Grand Canyon has given me a sense of belonging to something wonderful and big. It's given me faith that things will keep going on, that we're a part of something big and here to stay."



Richard Iams

Richard Iams was born in West Virginia, got a masters degree in painting at Marietta College in southeast Ohio, and eventually ended up in Tucson, Arizona, where he has been for the past 10 years. That move coincided with his tackling the Grand Canyon on canvas.

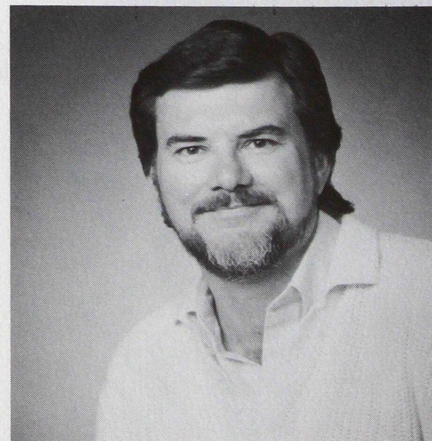
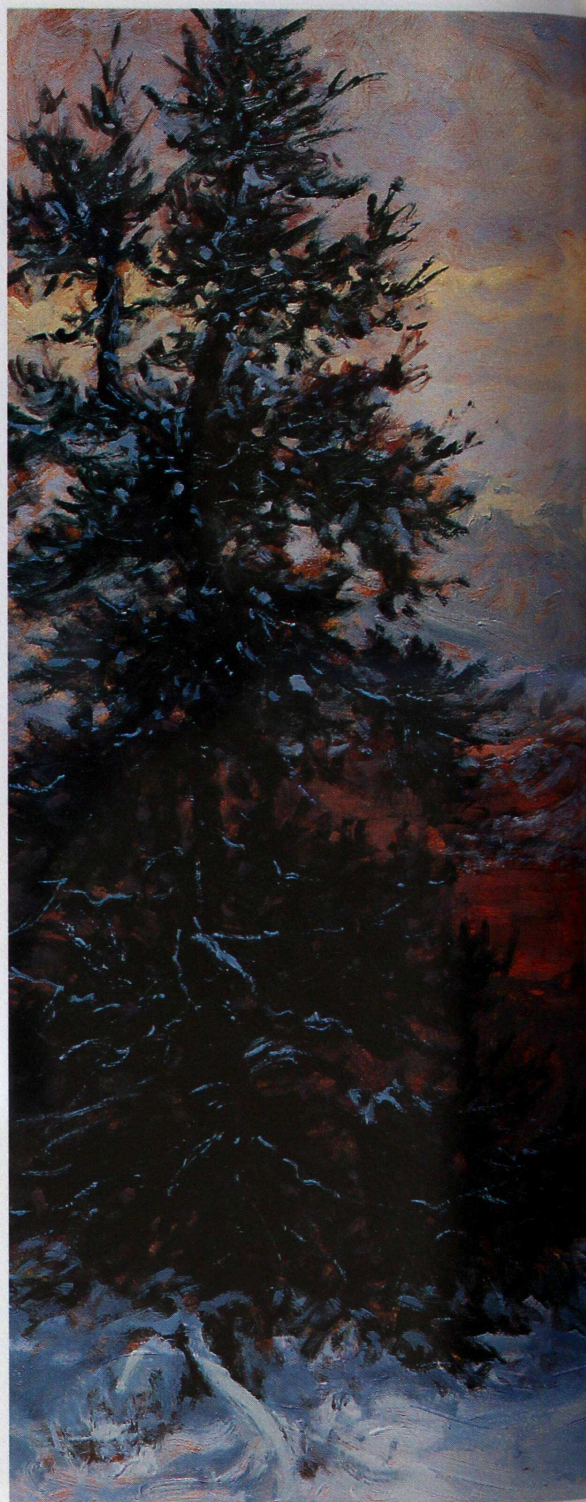
"We go to the canyon three to five times a year, to the north and south rims," he says. "Most people don't get to the north side, but it's actually a more intimate view because the features are up closer to you. I love the geology of the place. Being on the rim of the Grand Canyon is almost like being on top of a mountain.

"The air changes constantly; so does the weather. One winter morning, we got up early and went up to the rim. We looked down into the canyon as the sky was just getting light. It was completely clear, with stars out, and the canyon was filled with a river of clouds coming from the east. We were standing to the west. It was like a river flowing down and filling the entire canyon. It was amazing. We've also seen thunder snowstorms with lightning—a white blizzard with lightning flashing behind it. It was like being behind a white globe. All kinds of interesting things happen atmospherically up there, and that's what appeals to me the most.

"The most difficult thing about painting the Grand Canyon is putting that much information and size onto whatever given board I'm working on. My paintings run a little big sometimes, but even that isn't enough size to do the canyon justice. Once you start painting the canyon, you don't stop; you keep going back to it. When you first start out, you feel like there is so much to say and so little time that you kind of blast at it until you get what you want. You start to understand it.

"It's like anatomy, like learning the human body. Once you learn the structure, you can make it do what you need it to do compositionally. I keep coming up with new ways of looking at the canyon. It's become an old friend. Once you get to that sort of friendly relationship with a place, then you can start to do some things that are more personal.

"There are so many things that one does to respond to that place. If you can convey a sense of being there on the rim, or down inside, or wherever you're standing, I think that's enough. One of the most rewarding things I've had happen is to be at a show and see people walk in the door, look at one of my paintings of the Grand Canyon, freeze, and then take a step back. It's the realism. They get the sense of being there, that if they get too close, they'll fall in."





West of Mather, oil, 27" by 40"

"This piece is a view looking east from just west of Mather Point on the Grand Canyon's south rim. A bitter cold February day, with much dry powder snow blowing off the rim, combined with the heavy low clouds of a canyon winter, gave a wonderful misty half-light, as well as a hundred subtle light/dark, warm/cool contrasts."