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Wilson Hurley Brings Passion and a Pilot's Eye to Paintings

By Kathy Erbacher

Wilson Hurley gave up a lot to become an artist. But he gained happiness and found his true calling at age 40 when he traded a law career to pursue a love of art he acquired in childhood.

"People thought I was certifiable," he says of his decision to leave his Albuquerque, New Mexico, law practice in 1965. "But I'd always wanted to paint. I'd always been moved by great paintings. George Inness thrilled me. I remember seeing a piece of his in the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a child.

"I think it was way back then that I fell in love with the world, passionately, with the beauty of it," Hurley reflects in an interview at his studio in the Sandia Mountains above Albuquerque. He credits his mother with encouraging his childhood interest in the arts.

"Mom was absolutely a prodigy in music," says Hurley, 81. "She'd take me to the opera. I can remember sitting there in short pants." She also took him to art galleries, including the opening of what later became the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

The family lived in Virginia then, when Hurley's father was secretary of war in the Hoover administration. They relocated to Santa Fe, New Mexico, when he was 11. There, he was exposed to more art—an interest his father discouraged.

Considered by many to be the best living Western landscape painter, Hurley has gained wide recognition for his grand vistas of land and

sky. They include five monumental triptychs, *Windows to the West*, completed in 1996 for the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. The multifaceted Hurley also is a noted aviation and space artist who has done work for NASA.

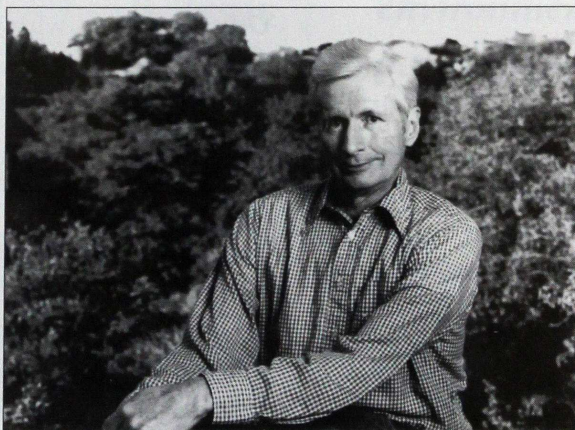
After graduating from high school, Hurley earned a West Point engineering degree and pilot's wings, flew post-WW II air/sea rescue missions in the South Pacific, then studied law in Washington. He moved back to New Mexico in 1952 to practice law.

One day he drew up a will for a doctor who had terminal cancer. The man asked Hurley what he would do if he knew he had only a short time to live. Hurley answered, "Paint." Soon he left his job to follow his heart.

Hurley's former hobby became his vocation. He also continued to fly

fighter jets for the New Mexico Air National Guard, which he joined when he left Washington. He stayed in the Guard because he loved flying and it gave him "walking-around money."

When his reserve unit was called up during the Vietnam War, his art career was put on hold for two years. He flew dangerous forward air-control missions during his 1968–69 tour of duty. While in Vietnam, Hurley corresponded with a young woman, Rosalyn (Roz) Roembke, now an artist in her own right, whom he had dated shortly before he left. He proposed by letter. She accepted and they married soon after he returned from the war.



Portrait of Wilson Hurley, courtesy Valerie Santago.

The couple lived in a small apartment while Hurley painted and Roz worked as executive assistant to a dean at the University of New Mexico. "We were broke but happy," Hurley recalls. Gradually his career took off and they were able to buy a home. "We built this house brushstroke by brushstroke."

A 1976 visit by a delegation from the Buffalo Bill Historical Center's Whitney Gallery of Western Art in Cody, Wyoming, was a turning point for the artist. The group, which included Director Peter Hassrick, bought a large Grand Canyon painting, *View from the Mohave Wall*, for the museum's permanent collection.

"The Whitney [gallery] was one of the first museums to purchase Wilson's art," Hassrick said in a phone interview from his home in Cody. A one-man retrospective at the Whitney followed in 1985, along with many other national exhibitions, commissions, museum purchases, and awards.

Hurley often is compared with nineteenth-century landscape painter Thomas Moran. Hassrick, a leading expert on Western American art, considers Hurley "America's master of Western landscape today. That was the role Thomas Moran played in his day. I think Wilson carries that tradition forward."

Besides emotion and intuition, Hurley brings a scientist's approach to his art. "His mind is very analytical, like his paintings," Hassrick says. Hurley starts most of his pieces as plein-air (outdoor) studies, then finishes them in his studio because of their large scale.

A pilot's perspective is evident in his work. The lanky artist stopped flying at age 45 because "unless you're a Chuck Yeager, it really is a kids' sport." But flying gave Hurley his understanding of the atmosphere. "When I look at the sky I see clouds as three-D objects rather than background pattern," Hurley explains. "We used to dive up the side and above the clouds. We had a ball."

A large oil painting leaning against a wall in his home dramatically illustrates that intimate knowledge. Called *Sunset at Angostura* (*angostura*

is Spanish for the "narrows"), it captures a brilliant skyscape near Algodones, New Mexico, that looks northwest toward Zia Pueblo. The 2005 piece, which Hurley had just finished at the time of this interview, graces the cover of this month's *CSA Journal*.

Hurley takes his work seriously, but not himself. A delightful dry wit punctuates his sharp intellect. At speaking engagements, he talks about artists he admires, rather than himself. "I don't want to put people to sleep," he laughs.

Besides painting, his joys are "Roz, my kids and my grandkids, and playing classical music." He has five children and twelve grandchildren from a previous marriage.

Asked about regrets, he says, "Oh, yes. I have regrets about many things. But I'm glad I've ended up as I have. I am absolutely a happy man because I'm doing what I like to do."

Other museums with Hurley's work include The Gilcrease, Tulsa, Oklahoma; Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum, Los Angeles; Denver Art Museum; Eiteljorg Museum, Indianapolis; and Albuquerque Museum of Art and History. Galleries representing him include Nedra Matteucci in Santa Fe. 🌿



About the author: An award-winning arts writer, editor, and consultant who began her career at The Kansas City Star, Kathy Erbacher has worked internationally and holds degrees in English and art. She lives in Denver.