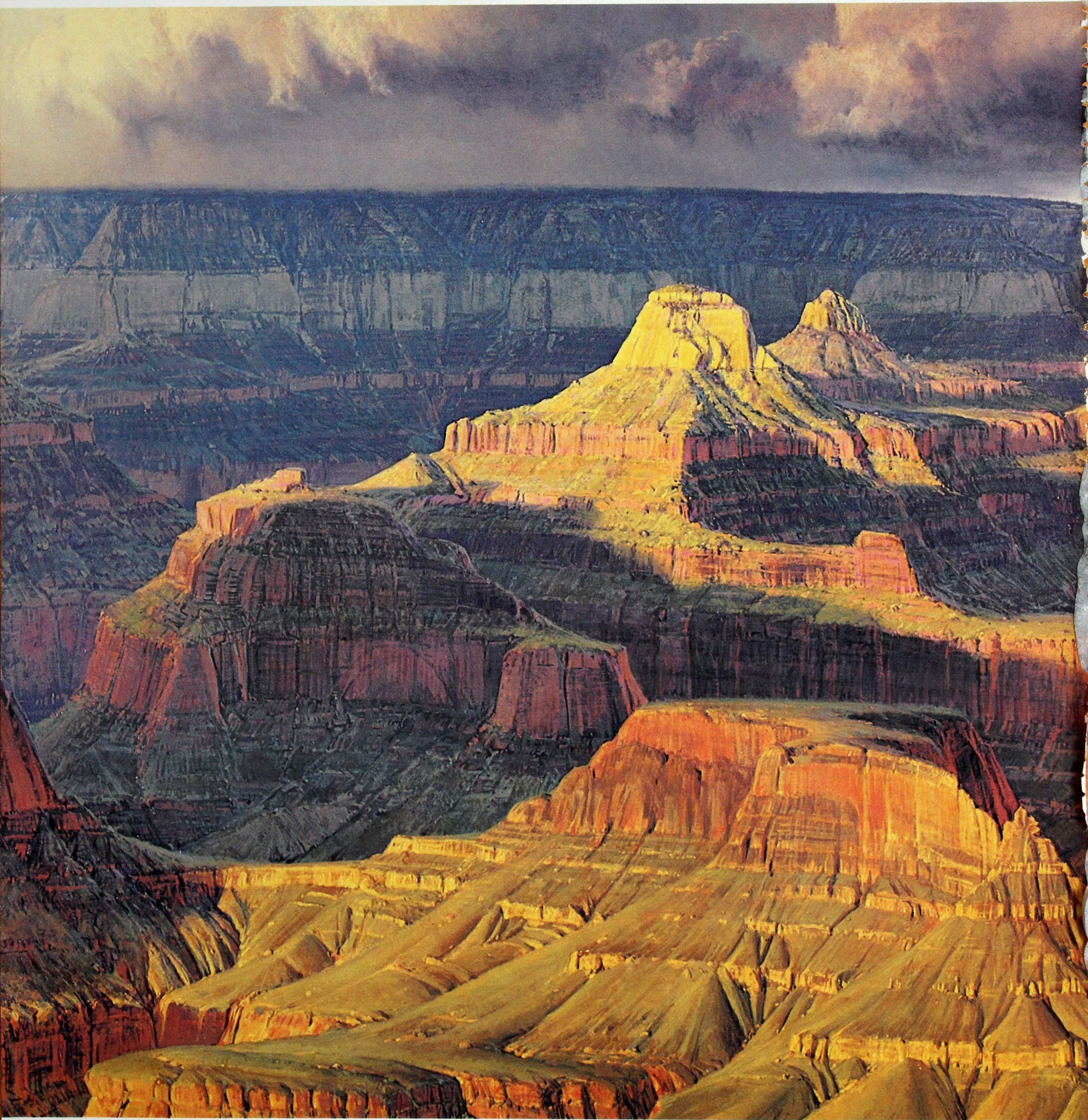


# WILSON HURLEY...



*Photos courtesy the artist and The Taggart Trust*



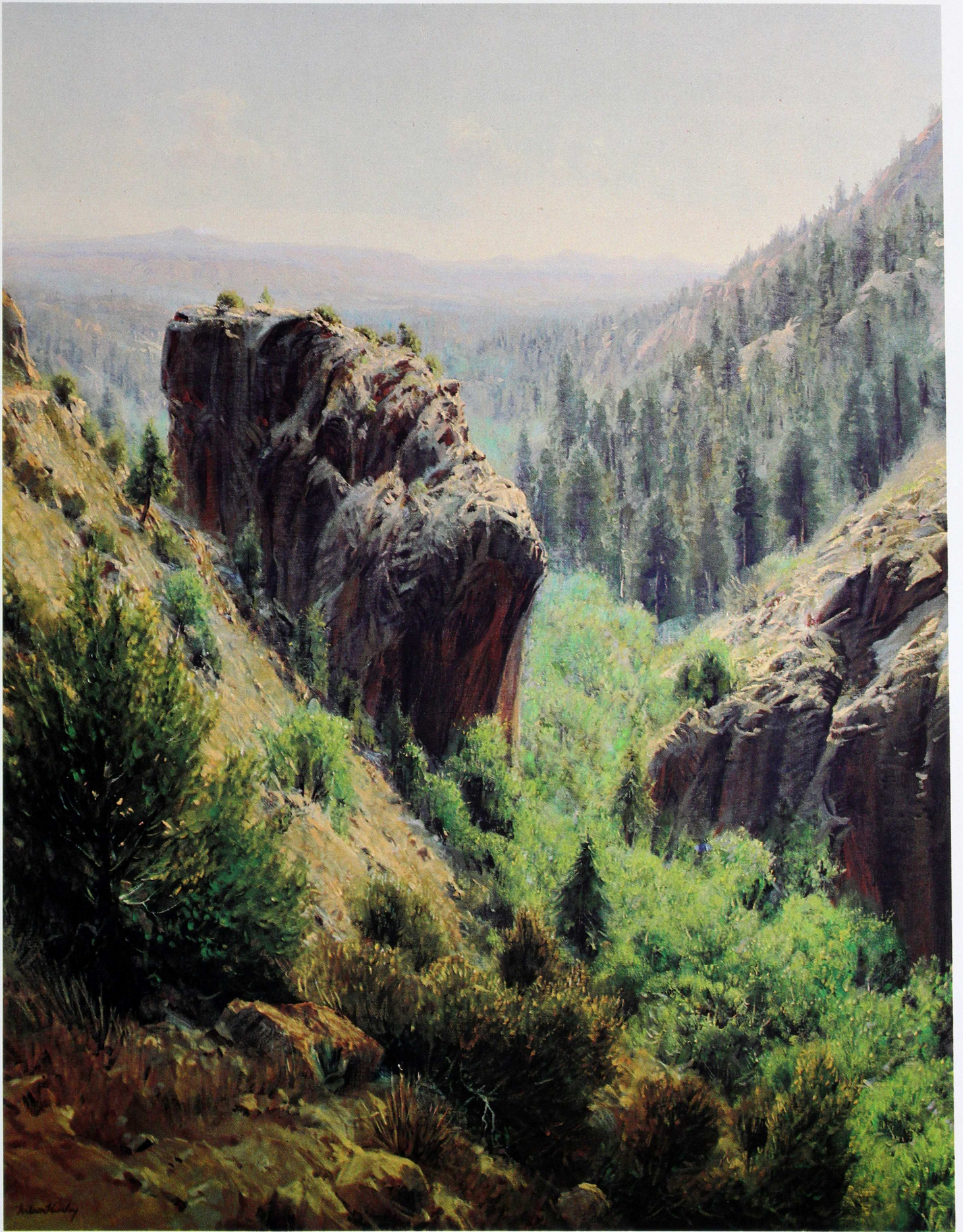
# THE MIRACLES OF CREATION

by Byron B. Jones



Wilson Hurley, *BUDDHA TEMPLE FROM HOPI WALL*, oil/canvas, 60 x 96, Collection Valley Bank of Nevada







*"If a man ain't nothin' else,  
then he is an artist.  
It is the only thing  
he can claim to be  
that nobody can prove  
he ain't."*

Will Rogers

says Hurley, "and this is what I try to communicate in my paintings."

Yes! art is beauty, but it is also poetry, and a Wilson Hurley painting has a touch of both.

"You get a different frame of reference from flying," Wilson says. "You have a better idea of the scale of the world and all its features. It has been a tremendous influence on my art.

"Conventional art education starts with still life," he explains. "It progresses to life study within a room and finally outdoors for a look at a woodland stream or small hill, at most a hundred yards away. Later, a few may paint objects several miles away. Being a flyer, I have a larger perspective and it is not uncommon for me to paint an object that is ten miles high and thirty miles wide.

"And clouds I love. Their beauty is constant yet always changing. I have flown in typhoons; I have flown in hurricanes; I have been in weather all over the world. It all has had a beauty of its own, sometimes awesome, sometimes frightening."

But there is nothing that has the

majesty of a Kansas squall line in April, Hurley maintains. Lost in one while flying an F-100 at 47,000 feet and fearing his wings would be pulled off, he recalls pounding along great corridors of clouds so gorgeous in their amber and white, and so full of electrical displays, he forgot to be scared.

"I only had thoughts of what a pity it was that no earthbound human could share such beauty," he remembers.

Wilson is determined to communicate through his art something of the grace and splendor of this 'other' world known only to the pilot and the angels.

"It is sad how many people go through life with their eyes on the ground, seldom seeing the beauty about them, much less the beauty above them.

"Skies can be gorgeous," the artist says, "but skylines offer the most difficult challenge. There is no frame of reference, thus no scale. Your effect has to come from the mountains and canyons created by the clouds, and by their varying density, color and light. Some say, why not put in an airplane, but then it becomes a picture of the plane, and the attention of the viewer goes to it."

Just as Hurley maintains an intimacy with the heavens above, so it is with the nature of our land.

"I spend much time in the field with my painting," he says. "It was my training."

And it was in the field I first met Wilson Hurley, having followed him across the Rio Grande, past a remote Indian pueblo and into a rugged mountain canyon, entering along a narrow, ancient stagecoach road cut high up into the sheer walls of a cliff.

He had chosen to set up his easel at a bend in the trail which permitted, from that height, an unobstructed view back toward the canyon mouth. A stream, trees, rocky cliffs and shadows filled the foreground, while beyond, the wide open valley of the Rio Grande stretched out to the mountains on the far horizon.

The eagle was in his aerie, ready to paint.

"I love the perspective I get from an elevation such as this," he said, beginning a running commentary as he went to work. "My field trips are mainly to record true colors. There is no other way to do this accurately, not even with a camera."

I watched him rapidly complete a pencil sketch. As he mixed his paints and took up his brush, he continued:

**D**ad agreed with Will Rogers," laughs Wilson Hurley, diplomat's son, West Point graduate, Air Force pilot, lawyer, artist. "Even though he had a great appreciation for art, he was still of that old school which believed painting was not a manly profession. He would have preferred my going into politics or the diplomatic service, or at least concentrating on painting horses, which he dearly loved."

But it was not to be. Wilson's years of flying had made him too aware of the beauty of the world and, since painting relates to both awareness and beauty, his destiny lay with his art, his first love and a consuming passion since age seven.

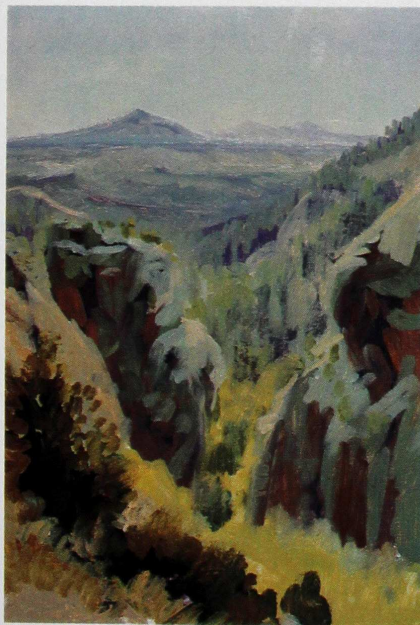
"There is a long-remembered line from Emerson that I pretty much live by," Hurley will tell you. "He wrote that beauty should be welcome in every fair face, in every fair sky, in every fair flower.' I am constantly thrilled at the miracles of nature throughout this world of ours."

The jungles of Indonesia, the pearl-like beaches and blue lagoons of the South Pacific, mountainous Mindanao and her deep purple shadows, Pearl Harbor when the fleet is in, the green, green valley of the Shenandoah, the outback of Australia, each in its own way, each in its turn, has been an inspiration for this globe girdling artist-pilot.

But it is the American Southwest that gives him his greatest pleasure—and which he calls home.

Here, billowing white clouds tower above forested mountain peaks, and thunderheads and rainbows are soon followed by dust devils skipping playfully across the desert; here, monuments and spires send their lengthening shadows marching across the land in daily salute to the brilliant sunrises and radiant sunsets.

"This land is truly 'a joy forever,'"



*From field study to finished painting.  
above: A field study (oil/panel, 18 x 12)  
accomplished while Jones accompanied the  
artist into the Cochiti Canyon. left: The  
completed painting COCHITI CANYON,  
oil/canvas, 46 x 36.*





Wilson Hurley, *AN EVENING IN LATE SUMMER*, oil/canvas, 48 x 40

*right:*  
Wilson Hurley, *OUT ON  
THE PANHANDLE PLAINS*,  
oil/canvas, 40 x 44



"It was Robert Loughheed who first insisted I had to get out of the studio and paint from nature. Just back from Viet Nam, he told me first of all that my colors were not true. It was a shock. By then I had been painting for years. At first I fought it. The camera is so convenient, a Kodochrome slide so beautiful – but its color is wrong."

After a brief interruption while a forest ranger investigated our presence at that unlikely spot, Hurley took up the thread of his conversation.

"Color photography is now so common most people think it is a true reproduction. It is not. As I look at you and your white shirt out in the sunlight, my pupils contract to a pinpoint; as I shift my eyes to a shadow behind you, they dilate. A camera focused on the same scene must use an f-stop for this purpose, but it is fixed and will not vary from foreground to background. Using an average setting will cause the shadows to develop too dark or the lighted areas to be burnt out. If the f-stop is set for either shadow or light, the other will not be true.

"In addition," he continues, "the camera's colors are arbitrary and there are only three. The eye sees all the spectrum. Painting from a slide, therefore, tends to produce a caricature of reality."

While he talked, the beautiful, varied and delicate colors of a New Mexico landscape were taking on substance beneath his brush. Even in rough form, the master's touch was apparent.

"This is to be merely a color study," he explains. "Back in my studio it will be used as the absolute guide. I am taking some color photographs, but they could as well be in black and white.

"The color camera does not have going for it what we have out here today using our eyes," he points out. "You will notice in the foreground those shadows are almost black to your eye and as they

move to that farther cliff they become a kind of purple-blue. Continuing out, they go into a lighter grey-blue and by the time your eye focuses on them along the distant mountains of the horizon they are almost sky color. The camera is inclined to miss these nuances of darkness in shadows. It can't see the difference between this near cliff and that intermediate one. They would appear as a single block of land on even the best slide."

As we stood admiring the ever-changing colors of the canyon, two vaqueros approached, on their way into the forest looking for strayed cattle. The riders were introduced to Wilson Hurley, it being explained that he was an artist. Swinging out of their saddles, they



moved in for a closer look at his work, glancing back and forth from the painting to the canyon beyond.

"Bueno," said one.

"He is surely of this land," said the other.

High compliments coming from those who live close to nature.

After the vaqueros had ridden away, Hurley laughed, though obviously pleased. He explained: "You should have heard the little old lady tourist at Yellowstone Park when I was painting the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. She had watched me silently for some

time, finally she said: 'That's pretty good. You ought to try to make a living doing it' "

Routine to the pilot, but perhaps unique to the artist, is the use of contour maps.

Hurley maintains there is a weakness in many paintings stemming from the fact that the overall shape of the subject was not known.

"From a distance," he says, "observation is limited to a single plane, from one angle. Additionally, a camera gives only surface detail, and in many cases – actually most cases – there is no resolution. For a person trained in its use, however, a contour map can give an accurate view from the top of a far off object and an idea of the shape of its far

side. This is a great assistance when working on places like the Grand Canyon."

But the most innovative of all Hurley's painting aids is his use of a radio controlled model airplane mounted with a camera.

He is at present in the process of designing a slightly larger plane than the one now in use, planning to mount a better camera with a faster shutter speed.

"The plane will have flaps instead of ailerons," he explains, "and there will be spoilers sticking out of its wings so it will roll at low

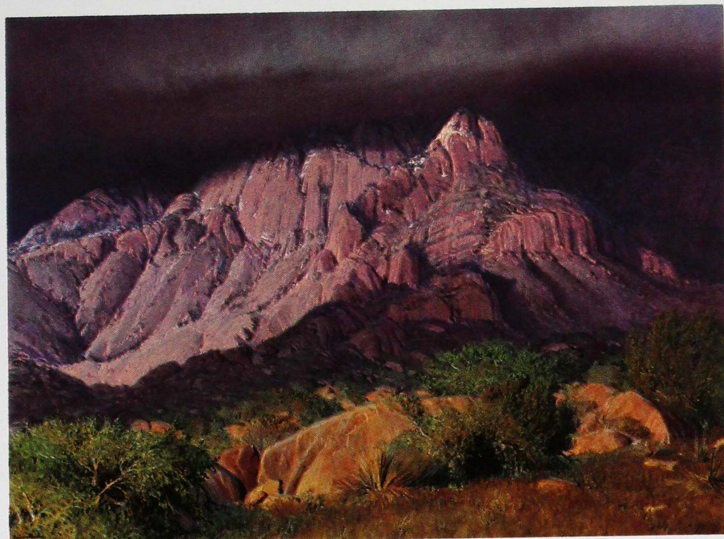
air speeds and can be kept in control, allowing it to get into and out of tight places. I will be able to send it up to fly over cliffs and around pinnacles, putting it into banks and rolls so as to obtain pictures from all angles and sides."

Hurley admits this is not absolutely necessary to the painting of a fine landscape, but insists it gives him a better 'feel' for what he is trying to capture.

"I have more confidence in proceeding with the painting of the near side of a hill if I know what is on the far side," he will tell you.

Throughout Wilson Hurley's early





Wilson Hurley, *TOWER RIDGE, SANDIAS*, oil/canvas, 40 x 54, Private Collection



Wilson Hurley, *END OF AUTUMN*, oil/canvas, 42 x 72, Private Collection



Wilson Hurley, *RED WALL*, oil/canvas, 36 x 60, Private Collection



years he was fortunate to have the friendship, counsel, and teachings of some of New Mexico's finest artists.

While attending Los Alamos Ranch School for Boys on the spot where the 'atomic city' of Los Alamos was later built, young Hurley was taken under the wing of John Young-Hunter of Taos.

"My art education started early," Wilson recalls. "I was thirteen at the time. He taught me proper ratios, how to stretch canvas, how to clean brushes, basic painting techniques, the whole bit."

Later, Josef Bakos, one of Santa Fe's famous *Cinco Pintores*, began taking him along on outdoor painting trips; then Theodore Van Solen took on the task of critiquing his work.

"This association with Van Solen continued for fifteen years between leaves from West Point, overseas assignments, and the law practice I took up after resigning from the Air Force," Wilson recalls. "Glaucoma finally took

its toll on Solen, ending his art career. He was a great man as well as a great artist."

Later, there was Doel Reed, and finally Robert Loughheed.

Many wondered what value Wilson Hurley, a representationalist, could get from critiques by an abstract artist such as Reed.

The answer was design.

"Even though Doel simplifies the world he sees," explains Hurley, "his

sense of design is tremendously powerful. He is a master at using the whole surface of a canvas and making it a strong work."

Wilson Hurley's training was varied, thorough, and exciting and his paintings reflect it.

"I felt there was something to learn from all schools of art if it came from a master of his craft," he says.

In addition to landscapes, artist Hurley has done a variety of subjects, including horses, people, and even the galaxies and nebulae of the heavens. He was commissioned by NASA to paint the Pioneer-Saturn encounter as well as

the recent space shuttle launching.

"Nobody did 'La Victoria' when Magellan's flag ship returned home," Wilson points out. "Everybody was too busy painting Leda and the Swan doing something. No one did the ship of Columbus, or even his portrait, until after his death. I am glad I have contributed something to the historical record."

"A space launch is an unforgettable sight," he continues, "and that of the space shuttle was the most exciting of all. The TV cameras took the viewer in too close for a proper perspective. I was set up two and a half miles away with my easel, and the sun was behind the launch pad. Suddenly, there was the shuttle standing on a thousand foot column of white flame and the ground was shaking from the supersonic shock waves. At about 30,000 feet there was a skein (coil) of cirrus clouds that was pink in the dawn light; the vapor cloud created by the rockets cast its shadow on this ceiling. As the ship got closer, this cirrus ceiling was lit up by the flame trailing from the

riedly gathered together in a haphazard manner.

"I plan to do a Grand Canyon piece for the end wall; the wing areas will display various paintings showing details of the canyon. From these I may graduate to the Grand Tetons, Canyon de Chelly and other interesting parts of the West. There will be little sections coming out from the walls to break up the room into smaller alcoves. In the center I may let myself go with something more out-of-the-way; perhaps some distant nebula, or maybe an aerial dogfight; I might paint storms, the night, or even the wind."

So, for the next two years, artist-pilot-innovator Wilson Hurley will continue traveling the West he loves, painting the beauty of the land and the heavens as he finds them.

"Many ask what I see in this country that attracts me so," Hurley smiles. "They insist it is an empty land where nothing ever happens. I tell them I find a poem every day."

For those with eyes for seeing, it can be so, for this is a land where nature itself is a poem; where the coyote's evening lullaby is the sweetest in all the world, and the beginning of each new day is a never-ending thrill for the lucky few who experience the desert's eerie light men call false dawn, where at noontime, when all the world pauses, and even the desert shadows rest, one can delight in watching a cactus wren



Wilson Hurley, *MORNING THUNDER*, oil, 42½ x 66½, Collection NASA Art Program. The artist's depiction of the April 12, 1981 Space Shuttle Columbia launch from Kennedy Space Center.

rockets.

"It was an artist's dream."

Neither Wilson's life nor his paintings have been dull or boring. At present, the artist is busy with field trips and location work in preparation for a May 1983 one-man show at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It will not be an ordinary show. Nothing that Hurley attempts is ordinary.

"I will have plenty of wall space, a whole room 100 feet by 25 feet, and plenty of time to prepare," Hurley enthusiastically explains. "I will be able to give the show continuity. This is too often missing when paintings are hur-

defend her nest, or perhaps a blacksnake glittering and glistening as it slides into a rift in a cottonwood tree, while a little grey hawk hangs aloft in the air seeing all. At night, there are moonflowers to be watched as they uncurl in the soft velvet light, and white maned falling stars as they emblazon the sky. At dawn, a fawn may be seen slaking its thirst in cool content.

Nothing ever happens?  
... only the  
miracles of creation. ■