

## Inter-space Becomes Inner-space

Wilson Hurley's Newest Triptych

BY M. HAL SUSSMANN



*Wilson Hurley, SUMMER SKIES, OKLAHOMA, oil/canvas, 60 x 50; 60 x 96; 60 x 50, Midwest City Library, OK*

On the day Wilson Hurley's triptych *SUMMER SKIES, OKLAHOMA* was dedicated, a driving rainstorm punctuated by bursts of thunder and lightning rattled the windows. Inside the two-story atrium of Midwest City Library where Hurley's landscape paintings span some 21 feet it was perfectly dry. Yet the experience of that storm was very much present, captured in three large "windows" that look out to what all Oklahomans know so well—thunderheads rolling across the prairie, driven by intense winds that drench the land with inches of moisture before moving on.

The story of how this Albuquerque, NM, painter came to create what has become a main attraction in this newly built state-of-art library is a fascinating tale of economic recession contributing to the arts!

Midwest City is a planned community of some 62,000 residents 40 miles south-east of Oklahoma City, founded in the early 1940s as support to Tinker Air Force Base. The new library in the heart of the civic complex is a branch of the Oklahoma County Metropolitan Library System. Long before a bond issue was voted on for building the complex, the executive direc-

tor of the county library system had proposed setting aside money for art. Simultaneously the Junior Service League began a fundraising program that resulted in \$15,000 to enhance the building.

All this happened when the energy industry was booming in Oklahoma. When it went bust, deflating building costs along with it, Midwest City found itself in the enviable position of having \$75,000 in surplus funds, which the mayor and the city council members determined should go towards developing the cultural side of the community. According to Avis Hemmer, branch head of the Midwest City Library, the decision was an acknowledgment of the "cultural maturing of our town. We were busy building up businesses and so forth, and the council decided it was time to work on the cultural side, knowing that it would also be a drawing card."

Committees aren't noted for their efficiency or effectiveness in selecting art. In the case of the Midwest City Library Public Art Committee of twelve, appointed by the mayor and council members, however, there was cooperativeness and near unanimity in the selection process. "There were numerous meetings about the type

of art that should fill the space," says Walter Gray, liaison art committee member of the Metropolitan Library System. "We discussed tapestries, ceramics, sculpture and paintings."

According to the art committee report published in October 1987, the decision to select a representational piece had two facets: "The general public is more receptive to realism than to impressionistic or abstract work. [And] to maximize longevity and initial public acceptance, while at the same time minimizing maintenance and execution costs, the committee has identified a representational painting as its first choice."

The long, narrow recessed wall necessitated innovation and planning. Among the many artists reviewed, Wilson Hurley's cloudscapes found immediate response. An art committee field trip to meet the artist and view his art at the June 1987 National Academy of Western Art exhibition at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City left members impressed not only with Hurley's painting skills but with his professionalism.

Hurley was equally enthusiastic when he got a look at the 10-by-25-foot wall he was being asked to fill. "It is a highly



visible public space with good viewing from the street, even at night. There were no restrictions on subject matter beyond representing the spirit of Oklahoma. I thought of Oklahoma skies immediately—it was right up my alley."

Hurley agreed to take on the commission with one provision. The preliminary drawings and finished product could be reviewed for acceptability **prior** to Hurley being paid! "No one wants to buy a pig in a poke," says Hurley of his unconventional approach. "The secret of the art profession is that nobody has to buy a painting. Unless you can paint something someone wants, you fail."

With architectural renderings in hand Hurley started out with a mural idea. But it seemed too heavy for the space. "I'd like to take credit for the triptych," he explains, "but it was one of the council members who suggested it." Years ago, Hurley had done a triptych "with ears," as he calls the small side panels, that didn't work. The idea of trying again was appealing and he studied the great triptychs of the past, exploring how to achieve a better balance. Ultimately he settled on three panels, the larger center piece measuring 60 by 96 inches and the side wings, 60 by 50 inches apiece, with a span of 24 to 26 inches in between the canvases. In September his sketches were accepted and he started on the canvases themselves.

"The most exciting thing about the way the paintings worked together," says Hurley, "are those spaces in between. The viewer becomes a participant in the work by filling in the spaces for themselves—you always create a more beautiful painting in your mind than what the artist can achieve."

Hurley's commission agreement stipulated that the artist frame, ship, unpack, hang and light the paintings. The museum would set up the security system and a railing. The artist concedes that he was on pins and needles while the city council members reviewed the paintings set out on the floor in a large room in late February 1988. "People kept wanting to stand back to see the overall effect—I took that as a good sign."

The finished works were unanimously accepted for purchase by the Midwest City Council February 23. When Hurley went to install them, however, the architectural plans had misled him, leaving him only enough space to allow 12 inches between each panel. "I learned that you always measure the space yourself," says

the artist in retrospect. "Fortunately I had planned for some variance in the space and, though the spacing is still shy, it works."

**C**omposition is Hurley's strong suit and to carry off three paintings of one scene, he designed the work with what he calls "compositional anxiety." The horizon lines would not meet if the paintings were flushed up to one another and there is a slight asymmetry in the wings. The image reads from right to left, climaxing in the left "interspace" before the storm moves on.

The landscape, says Hurley (who is a native Tulsan), is one he imagined rather than actually saw. "I call these kinds of paintings 'passion pieces.' The cottonwood, blackjack, squall line, summer grasses and Indian blanket were drawn from life in numerous sketches done on the North Fork of the Canadian and other areas. But the event itself, the scene, is something out of my imagination, compressed to fit into the space more as you might remember it rather than the way you saw it."

Hurley likens the composition to a musical ensemble: "I wanted to begin with Edvard Grieg's *Peer Gynt Suite* on the right, move to Ludwig von Beethoven in the middle and Richard Wagner at the left. It was a challenge to orchestrate them as complementary and to make sure that one didn't dominate the other."

That Hurley has succeeded in conveying the "spirit of Oklahoma" echoes in Avis Hemmer's description of viewer response. "We take time to stand in the lobby and look at it at different times of the day—it changes dramatically depending upon the light pouring in from the skylights above. Most people see it as a place from somewhere in their past or close to their heart. 'It looks just like western Oklahoma,' says one. 'That's just how it is at the lake,' or 'I've seen that so many times on the prairie when the wind blows the leaves so that they flutter and sparkle in the patchy sunlight....'"

Hurley would enjoy such response, for as he says, "I'm pleased that it is in a public spot and looks well. That is what every artist paints for—not to be put in a back closet but to be seen. If I could not expect to have my work seen where it communicates to others, I would quit pretty quickly. I'm not selling my name, I'm selling my images." **SWA**