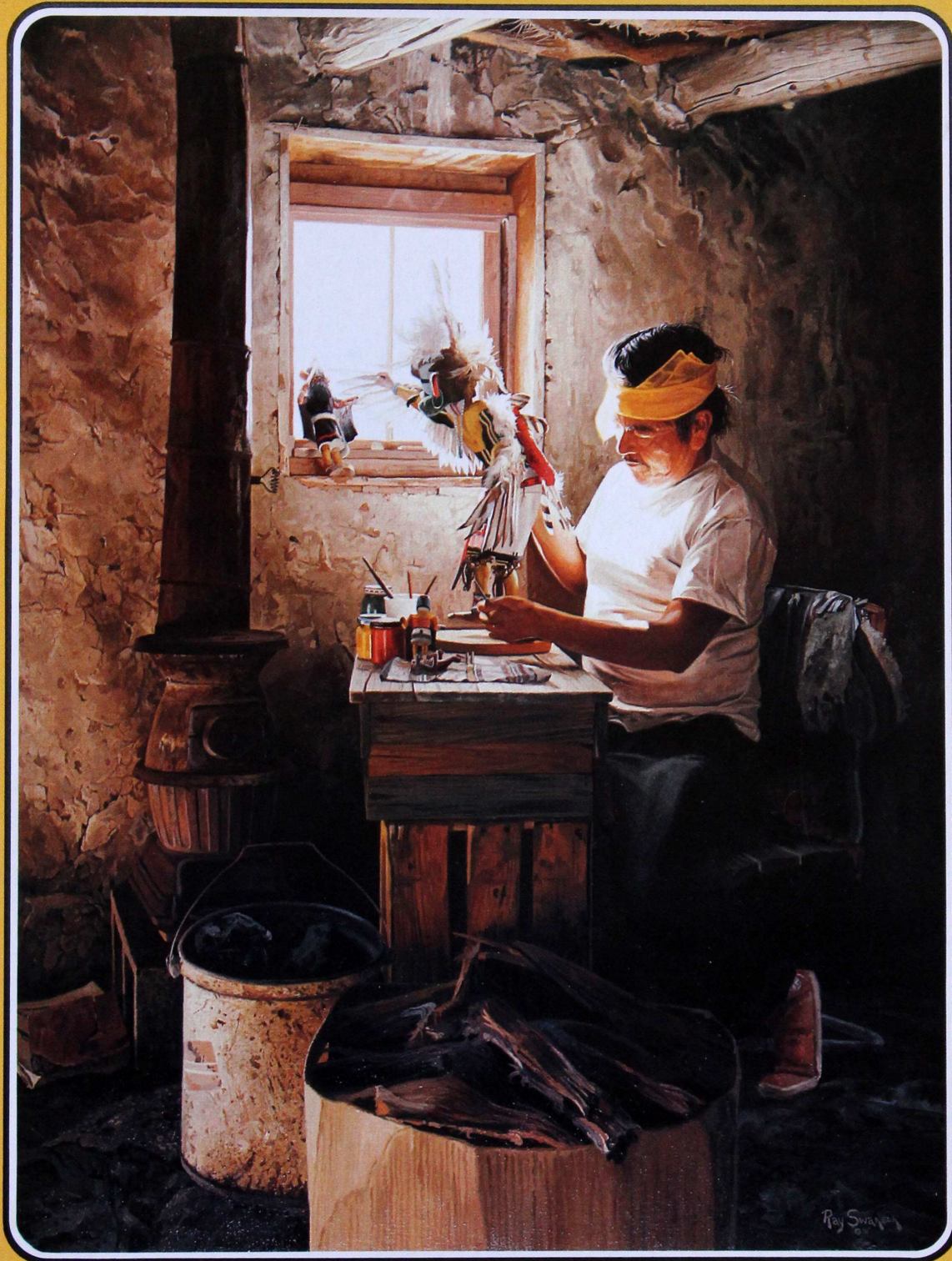


VOL. IV, ISSUE FIVE \$2.50
JULY/AUGUST 1981

art west

art of the west and western heritage



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WILSON HURLEY:

Courtesy The Taggart Trust



TRAIL TO THE LIGHT - oil - 48 x 76

La Luz Trail is a footpath that leads from the parks on the west side of the Sandia Mountains up to the crest. In late summer it is common for thunderstorms to arise from an east wind striking the crest and being deflected upward. This is a view up La Luz Trail about noon on such a day.

by KATHE McGEHEE

The middle-aged, Sunday painter emerged from the auditorium with her eyes sparkling and face glowing. "Listening to him is like being in church," she told her companion as they swept by.

The woman had come to a seminar at the 1979 Kalispell (Montana) Art Show to hear the Guest Artist and Judge, Wilson Hurley, speak about art. Her reaction to that seminar was not unique. Many other artists, collectors and dealers who had packed into the room to hear him speak came away with a new respect for the art profession and an awe of this eloquent and dedicated artist.

Wilson Hurley has a definite charisma. I had felt it at a reception when I met the grey-haired, 6-foot 6-inch Westerner with the ramrod straight posture. The audience at the seminar had felt it as they listened to him speak in his "eloquent drawl" about a few of his own firmly held beliefs: that an artist must paint what he sees; that the artist must have empathy and respect for his subject; and, that it takes perseverance, intelligence and integrity to become an accomplished artist.

I became more aware of Hurley's charisma that afternoon, when he and his wife, Roz, sat down to talk with me before they left Montana to return to their Albuquerque, New Mexico, home.

grandeur with charisma

Courtesy The Taggart Trust



WEST FROM CEDAR RIDGE - oil - 50 x 80

This is the Grand Canyon as it extends west of O'Neill Butte. In the spring, the Tonto Plateau is covered with a fresh green. The high sun mutes the brightness of the cliffs.

The artist was tired. He had just spent three full days attending the many social activities surrounding the art show. With local artist, Michael Coleman, he had traveled through nearby Glacier Park for an impromptu sketching trip. He had given up much of his rest time to meet with local artists who sought his advice and comment on their art. Later, I would find that each one of these artists had been left with a special inspiration, a private word of encouragement, that made them want to redouble their efforts.

Wilson was unimpressed by some of the art he had seen. He was particularly critical of the works of would-be historical artists, who

“paint subjects they have never seen and for which they have no real feeling.” He said the result is romanticized and trite because the artist is attempting to express a legend, “a Hollywood dramatization” of something that may never have existed except in the imagination.

Despite his weariness, Wilson’s conversation ranged over many subjects: his own careers in the military and law, world affairs and the need for national military preparedness, his art career and the important role his wife, Roz, has played in that career, providing encouragement during the early years, “quality-controls” in the recent successful years, and sound business advice, always.

To each subject he discussed, Wilson brought an outstanding knowledge of facts, a well-thought out and articulated opinion, a sense of concern that left me remembering our conversation long after that autumn day had faded.

Charisma is almost impossible to define. In Wilson Hurley's case, it is made up of elements of eloquence, humor, caring, and an undeniably intellectual approach to life, to painting, to any problem. It leaves an impression of integrity, intellect and respect. Yet, it is more. It is the same intriguing quality the viewer finds in a Hurley landscape or still-life. It is all the qualities that allow this artist to convey the vastness of a flat, hundred-mile panorama, in which distance is discernible only by the subtle, atmospheric coloring or the immensity of a desert storm.

Hurley paints in a realistic style, but what he conveys is emotion. He has said that all a painter can try to do is capture nature, perhaps rearranging the composition a little, and then add his own feelings—a special view of the world he sees.

Hurley has had a life-long interest in painting and a love for the New Mexico landscape that began in his youth. Yet, when he began his career as a professional artist fifteen years ago, he took the same scholarly approach to mastering his technique as he had applied to his earlier careers in the military and in law. In

fact, in 1977, when Wilson had an exclusive exhibit of thirty-five paintings at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, he added his own comments in a special section *A Look Back To Science* included in the catalog.¹ In the comments which accompany the color plates, Hurley explained the special feeling he had for the scene. In his conclusion he wrote:

"It seems to me that although we have had a great number of accomplished and original painters in the past century who have expressed themselves representationally, we have not advanced the theoretical or scientific basis of this type of painting since the nineteenth century except in the field of materials.

"Who knows but that the additional facts and rules we can derive from modern science will let us take another step forward in the great search for visual truth."

There was a time in the 1960s and earlier 1970s when an astute collector passing through the New Mexico art galleries might have acquired one of Wilson Hurley's paintings for as little as \$800.00. That was, however, fifteen years ago, when Hurley had closed his law practice and begun his third career—as a professional artist. It was at a time when he was mastering the techniques of portraying light and relative size and composition. It was before that first exhibit of the National Academy of

1. *Wilson Hurley, An Exhibition of Oil Paintings*. Lowell Press, Kansas City, Missouri, 1978.

RED CLOUD AND F-100 - oil - 8 x 30

This is a miniature color study for a proposal to the National Air and Space Museum to go on a wall twenty feet by seventy-five feet. The museum wanted about twenty airplanes depicted on the wall to supplement their display. Thus this was not accepted.



Courtesy The Taggart Trust



98 MILE RAPID, GRAND CANYON - oil - 30 x 48

Western Art (NAWA) in 1973, when the charisma of Wilson's work won him the silver medal in oil.

In the intervening years, he has won two gold medals in oils at the NAWA exhibits, in 1977 and 1978, and another silver in 1980. He received a Trustee Gold Medal for his outstanding contribution to Western art from the Cowboy hall of Fame in 1977, at the time of his one man show. Since then Hurley's paintings, when they are available, have sold for more than \$30,000.00

This success story, which could be considered phenomenal for its brief time span, could be expected of Wilson Hurley. In all his endeavors, he works, he studies, he thinks and he succeeds.

Wilson Hurley was the only boy among the four children born to Patrick J. and Ruth Wilson Hurley. Although he was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1924, the family moved to Leesburg, Virginia, in 1929. Wilson's father, who attained the rank of Major General and served as Secretary of War in the Cabinet of President

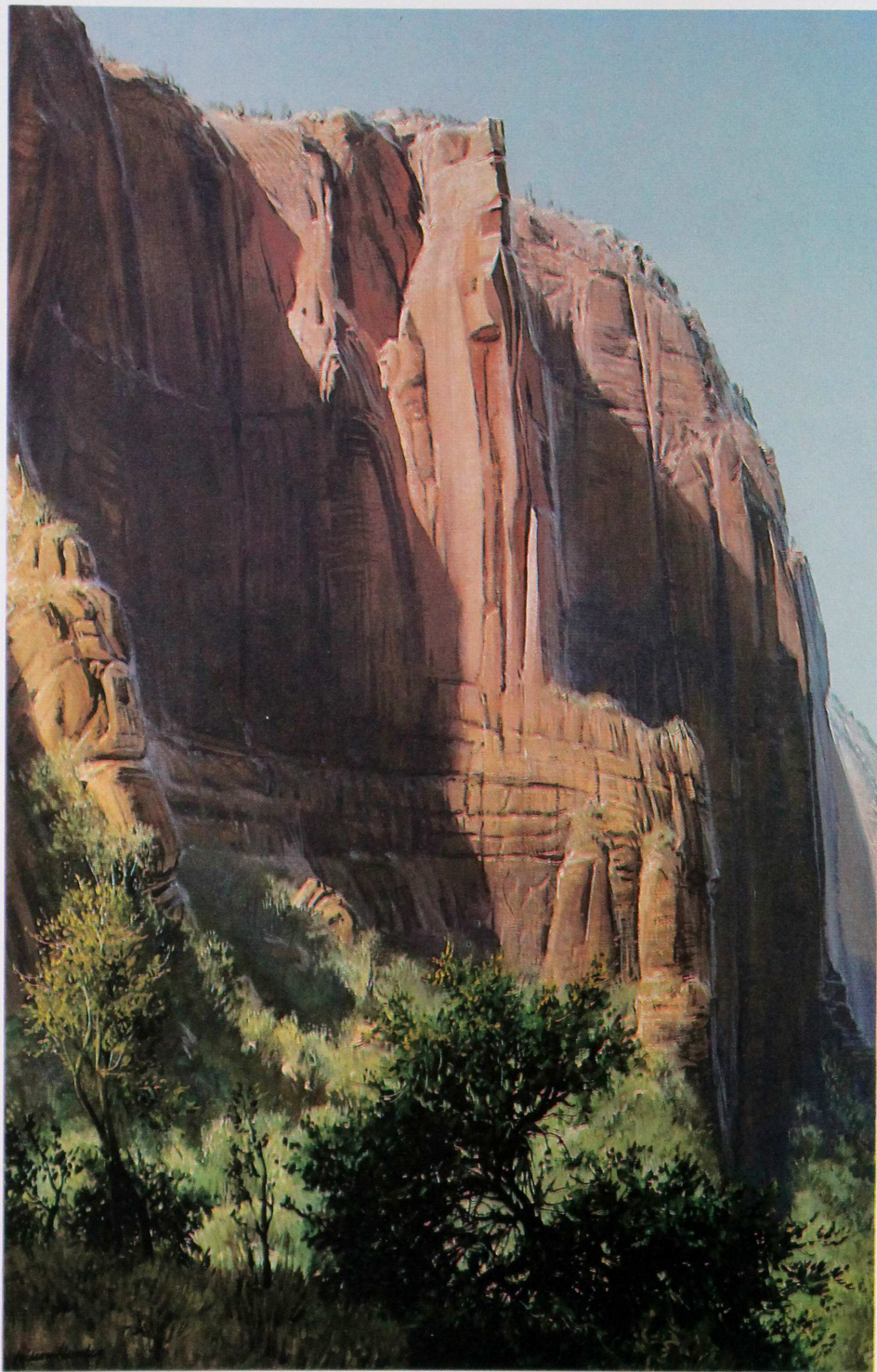
Herbert Hoover and personal aide to President Franklin Roosevelt, steered his son firmly towards a military career. In 1936, when the Hurley family became part-time residents of New Mexico, Wilson was enrolled in a boys' school which offered scientific and formal academic training.

At age 18, Wilson entered the United States Military Academy at West Point, receiving his commission as a Second Lieutenant and his wings in 1945, just as the war was ending. Wilson spent his overseas tour of duty with an Air-Sea Rescue Squadron stationed in the Philippines.

While his father encouraged his military and political career, Wilson's mother encouraged his early penchant for drawing. She took him to the museums of Washington, D.C. and the East Coast. In New Mexico, she made sure he was acquainted with John Young-Hunter, in Taos, and Theodore Van Soelen and Joe Bakos, in Santa Fe. Later, when Wilson was stationed overseas, she sent him

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Courtesy The Taggart Trust



FLUTED WALL, ZION - oil - 36 x 24

This painting of the west wall of Zion about mid-day shows the dramatic texture of the red stone of the bottom half of the wall. It frequently spills in long vertical prisms, giving a chiseled appearance to the rock.

Courtesy of the artist



THE GRAND CANYON OF THE YELLOWSTONE - oil - 60 x 96

Courtesy The Taggart Trust



THE QUIET WATERS OF ZION - oil - 32 x 40



APPOLLO - oil - 48 x 48

It is a sad fact of history that no artist painted Columbus during his lifetime, nor did anyone even sketch the little caravel, Victoria, when she returned to Spain, the first ship to circumnavigate the globe. The Apollo Program launched the greatest voyages of discovery in our history. I hope I have helped commemorate them.

painting supplies. Wilson sketched the broad panoramas seen from the cockpit and painted the planes, ships and equipment around him.

Despite his continuing interest in art, he was persuaded to enter law school when he returned to the States in 1949. He graduated from law school and was admitted to the bar in 1951. The following year, he was admitted to the New Mexico bar and practiced in that state for thirteen years. He also maintained his interest in aviation and military affairs as an officer in the New Mexico National Guard. He flew 150 missions over Viet Nam and received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

In 1958, Wilson left his legal career to pursue another career in science and engineering. At that time, however, he was married and raising a family which included five children. Bowing to pressure, he returned to his legal practice within a year.

Despite his success and accomplishments, Wilson was not satisfied. The break was to come in 1964. One incident he recalls was when he asked himself, while drafting a will for a terminally-ill client, "What would I do with

the rest of my life if I knew it was limited?" The answer which came to him was, "Paint one really good picture."

The decision to paint full-time and to leave his law practice engendered a divorce and a separation from many familiar ties. At the same time, it opened new areas of study, experiment and observation.

While in the Philippines, Hurley had painted ships and airplanes. When he moved to New Mexico, in 1952, he had become intrigued with the challenges of painting the light on the New Mexico landscape. Although he had painted a few landscapes which included people or animals, these were quickly eliminated because he felt that they detracted from the impact of the scene. He has said that he "wants to paint a view of Mt. Moran, not a picture of someone viewing Mt. Moran."

In the late 1960s, while Wilson was gaining reputation as a regional painter of the Southwestern scene, he met Rosalyn Roembke. Although she was busy with her own career at the University of New Mexico, she found time to provide Wilson with encouragement, advice

and assistance. They were married in 1969 and Roz took over managing the business aspects of her husband's growing career.

Today, Wilson Hurley is incorporated. Yet Roz is still his adviser and manages the business side of his successful career. As Wilson said, "The difficult point in an artist's career is not that early point at which nothing sells, it comes later, when everything is sold, almost before it is painted." It is Roz, the petite lady with the soft voice who is Wilson Hurley's "quality-control," examining each painting with a critical eye and making sure nothing leaves the studio until it lives up to Wilson's—and her own—high standards.

Despite their relatively late start in the art world and in their life together, the Hurleys have had phenomenal success. Looking back, both are philosophical about the past. Different circumstances might have made them different people—maybe better, maybe worse.

But neither of the Hurleys is prone to look back; they live in the present with an eye to the future. I have mentioned the elements of humor, intelligence and inquiry in Wilson's charisma. Add enthusiasm and the quest for new knowledge.

In his previously mentioned article, *A Look Back to Science*, Wilson discusses a special effect he discovered while working on a painting of the explorer Magellan's ship *The Victoria*. Of that discovery Wilson Hurley wrote:

"I have discovered another astonishing thing. Whenever a small truth is revealed to me and I rush home to incorporate it in my work, I overdo it. Then I survey the work of others, and to my surprise most have been doing it all along . . . It seems that my capacity to understand the nuances of painting grows as I master one part of it after another. If I am not prepared for the next step, by performance of the previous ones, I seem unable to progress. And when I progress it has to be the result of a new understanding, not an accident . . . For me, at least, the search of the science of how we process visual information gave an orderly array to many peculiar effects and helped me experiment with some guidance and hope for improvement instead of making endless alterations hoping one would solve the problem.

"As a result, of course, I am ready to attempt to paint *Victoria* again. Armed with my new knowledge, I wonder what new and fascinating problems I will uncover this time." ■

Wilson Hurley

