

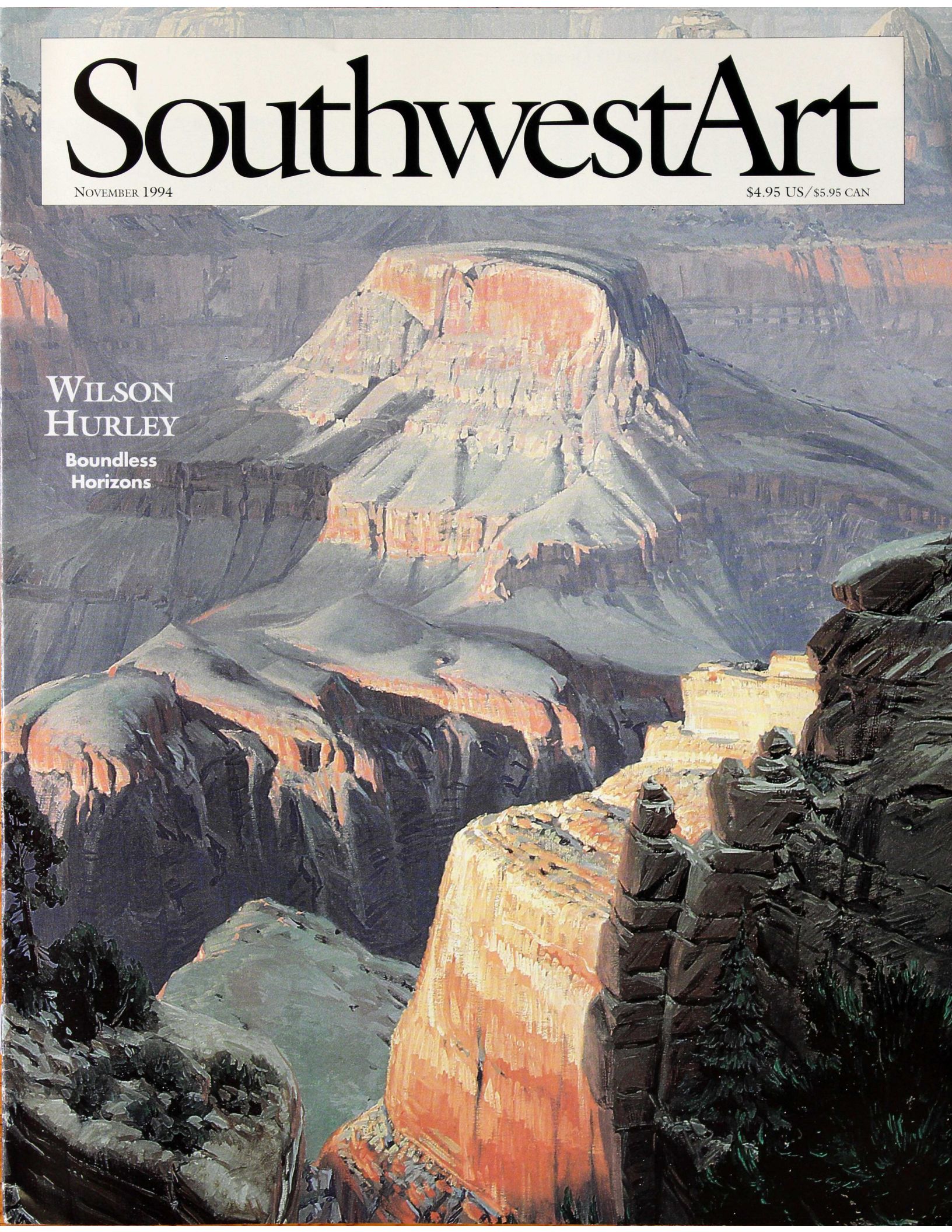
SouthwestArt

NOVEMBER 1994

\$4.95 US/\$5.95 CAN

WILSON
HURLEY

Boundless
Horizons



Wilson Hurley

Windows of the West

By Karen Klinka

Wilson Hurley is known for his sophisticated use of color and light and his mastery in depicting the atmospheric effects of sweeping landscape vistas. His oils of the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone Falls and the mountains surrounding his Albuquerque, NM, home add brilliant flashes to museum and private collections across the nation [SWA JUL 88, AUG 85].

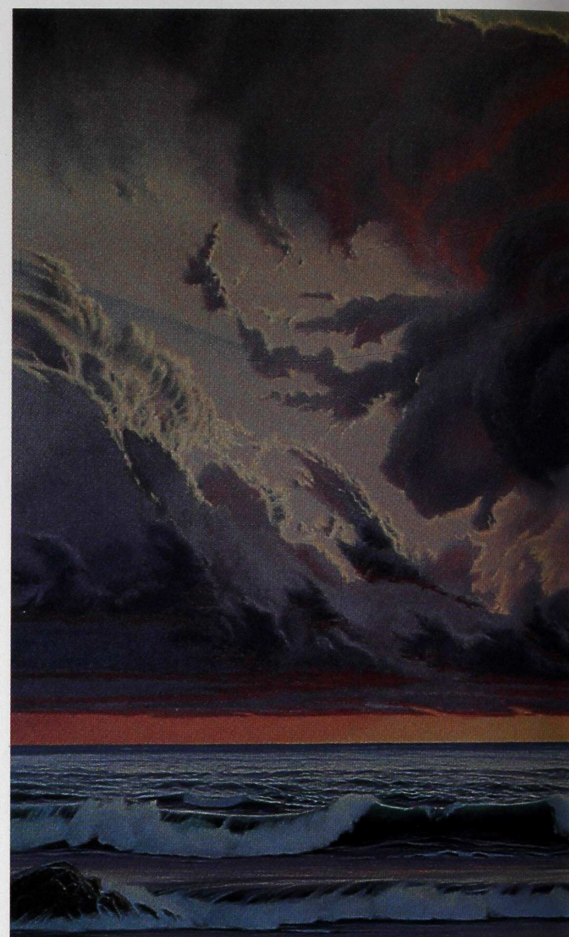
Now, all of Hurley's artistic savvy has been called into play in the commission of a lifetime. Selected by the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, OK, to create five murals for the hall's new addition, Hurley is in the process of painting what he describes as landscapes depicting the diversity and beauty of some of the West's most scenic panoramas. At the same time, the paintings are

intended to convey the transcendent feeling of freedom that those vast, empty spaces have engendered in Americans and in visitors from around the world.

It's been no small task.

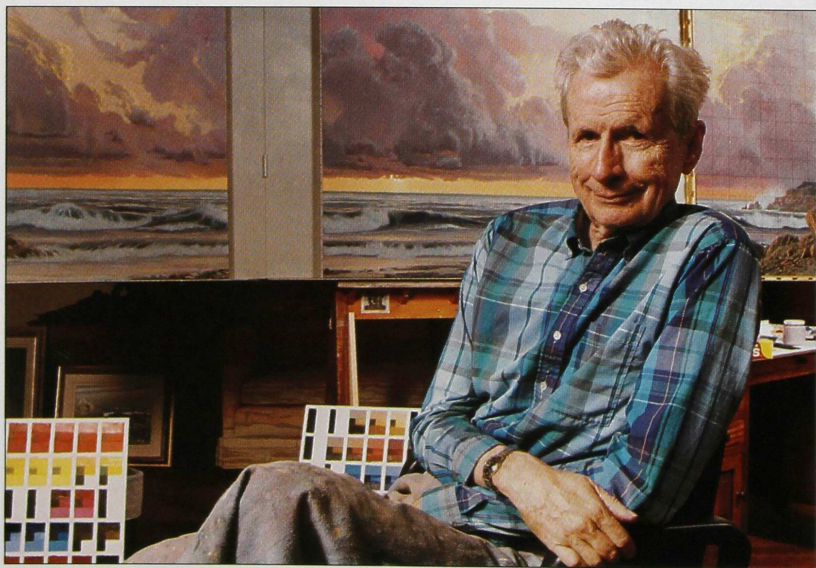
The sheer size of the murals certainly helps Hurley deliver his message. He has chosen to do each mural in a triptych format that sprawls across nearly 50 linear feet of wall space. Each center panel measures 16 by 16 feet and is flanked by two 16-by-10-foot wing pieces. One triptych will be placed at each corner of the hall's new banquet facility, changing the configuration of the room, says Hurley, from a rectangle to an octagon. The fifth mural will hang on the west wall of the room, opposite the stage.

Though the murals address five



different locations they relate to one another by time of day—all are at sunset—and by a common horizon line 4 feet from the bottom of the canvas. "The goal is to unify the room while opening it visually and psychologically. I want the paintings to catch people unaware and then transport them to these beautiful places. Each painting should create the same excitement as looking out a huge window."

Hurley calls the space where the paintings will be installed "my room." The second part of a four-phase, \$30-million expansion project tripling the size of the museum, the room was in fact modified at Hurley's suggestion. He relates how hall officials asked him to paint one large work to counterbalance the room's planned wall of windows. Hurley advised them to





spend their money elsewhere because “no painting can compete with the view from a window.” Shortly thereafter, the architects redesigned the room and Hurley was commissioned to paint the “windows of the West.”

NCHF Executive Director B. Byron Price says that Hurley was tapped to deck the walls because his landscapes always pack a “visual wallop”—a fact well-proven by the popularity of Hurley’s *Los Alamos Country*, which was accorded the hall’s Prix de West purchase prize in 1984 and which measures, by comparison to the murals, a mere 40 x 76 inches! Although Hurley and NCHF officials decline to say how much he is being paid for the triptychs, sources close to both say the price tag is around \$2 million.

ABOVE: CALIFORNIA SUITE TRIPTYCH, OIL, SIDES 16 x 10 FEET, CENTER 16 x 16 FEET.

BELOW LEFT: WILSON HURLEY TAKES A BREAK FROM WORKING ON THE CALIFORNIA SUITE TRIPTYCH. BEHIND HIM IS THE 48-INCH-HIGH MODEL, THE THIRD PANEL OF WHICH SHOWS THE 1/4-SCALE GRID HE USES TO TRANSFER THE IMAGE TO THE LARGER CANVAS. IN THE FOREGROUND ARE HIS COLOR CHARTS. PHOTOGRAPHED BY JIM ARGO, *THE DAILY OKLAHOMAN*, © OKLAHOMA PUBLISHING COMPANY.

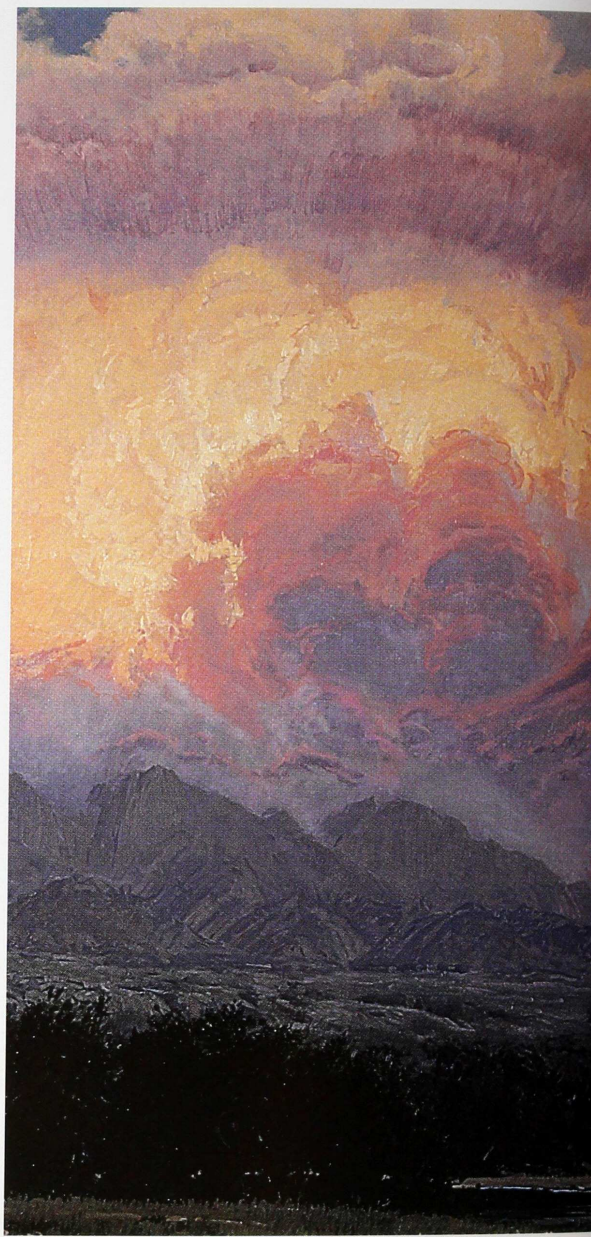
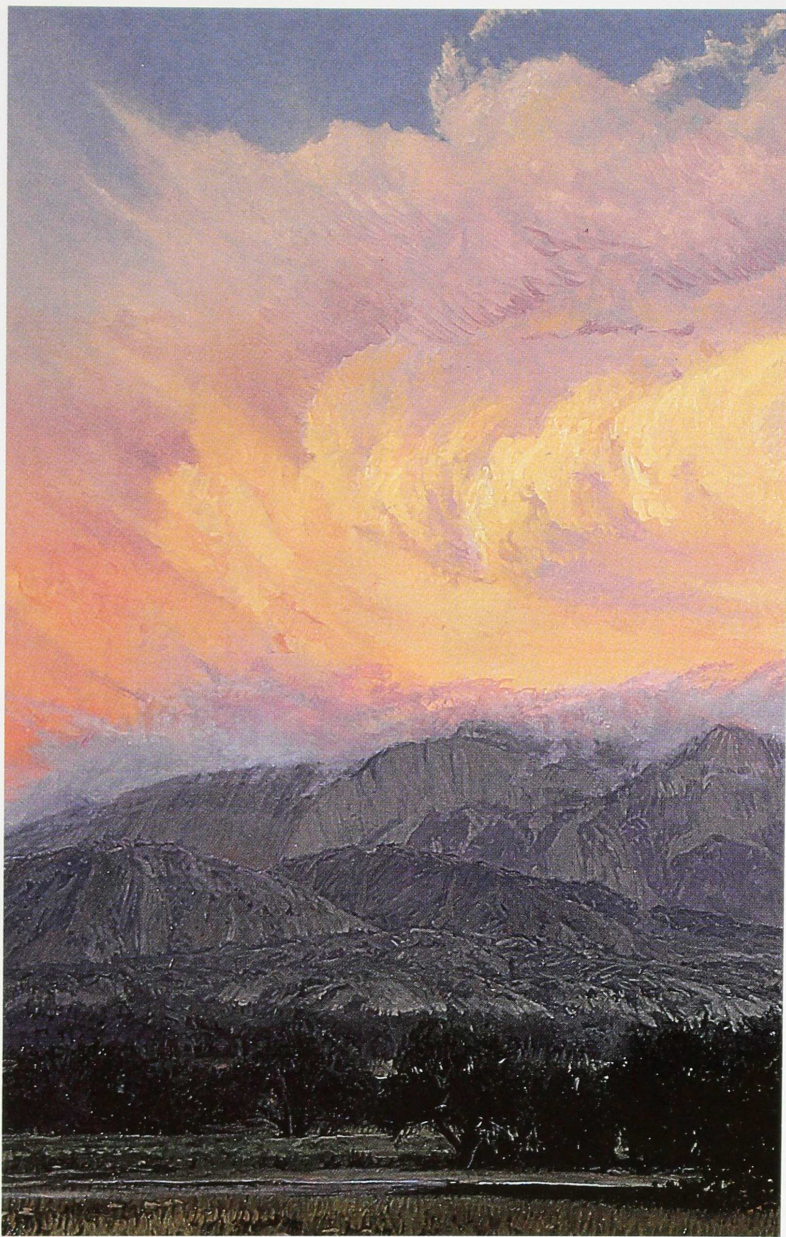
Size has always been Hurley’s forte. And although he claims to have needed a “nudge” to accept the project, he quickly adds that “in my wildest dreams I hoped to do a project one-fifth this size. I haven’t touched the ground since we sealed the deal three years ago in September 1991.”

When he began, Hurley estimated that it would take four years to finish the 15 panels—and so far

he’s on target. The project initially triggered three research trips to Europe and several others around the United States to see, in Hurley’s words, “which murals worked and which did not.” By learning from precedents, Hurley approached his design with the eye of an artist, the analytical strategy of an engineer, the caution of a banker and the dogged thoroughness of an attorney.

Small wonder.

As a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Hurley [b1924] was trained in engineering. He also has a law degree from George Washington University and served as a pilot at the end of World War II and as a forward air controller in South Vietnam. For a time he also worked as a practicing attorney and



as a banker, but he chucked it all at age 40 to paint full time.

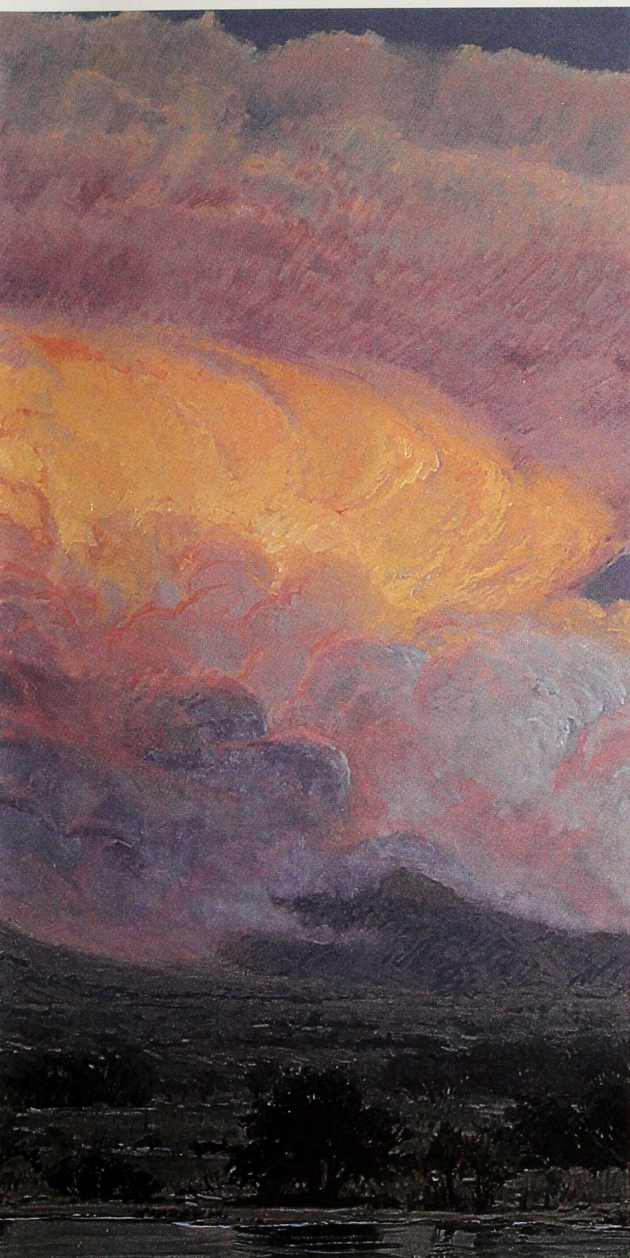
Before he touched the first dab of paint to his murals, Hurley went to an art supply store and bought a 4-inch brush. Friends and fellow artists kidded him about using a roller or mop to spread the paint across his canvases. So far, however, Hurley says he hasn't used anything but hundreds of small paintbrushes. He's consumed as many hours speculating on the science of how human beings process visual infor-

mation—up close for the artist painting the landscape and at a distance for the people who will view it. "You have to do your homework or you are headed for disaster," he explains. "The landscapes will be seen at a distance of about 100 feet, but I'm painting them at arm's length. Planning is critical."

At 6-foot-6 inches, Hurley is an imposing figure in most settings. But in his cavernous, parquet-floored studio, just one triptych panel dwarfs the artist. Each canvas

is so tall that Hurley is not able to see the entire panel as he paints it. He uses a series of rollers and pulleys to hold the canvas snug against a specially constructed easel and rolls the canvas up as he finishes a section.

Calling the murals "suites," Hurley hopes to evoke some respective state pride in the cycle of western landscapes. The NEW MEXICO SUITE was the first to be completed and depicts the granite cliffs of Hurley's beloved Sandia Peak.



The view includes a thunderhead towering over the distant mountains and the Rio Grande meandering across the foreground. The CALIFORNIA SUITE is a dazzling seascape showing the Pacific Ocean at Point Lobos, and the ARIZONA SUITE shows the Grand Canyon from Cedar Ridge. Though Hurley has painted the canyon many times, he admits that the mural has been the most difficult canyon painting so far and that he had to trash the first panel.



ABOVE: NEW MEXICO SUITE, MODEL, OIL, SIDES 48 x 30, CENTER 48 x 48.

"There's a saying that if you know it's right but it looks wrong, then it's wrong. And if you know it's wrong but it looks right, well, it's right," Hurley says, searching for words to explain the setback.

Although Hurley's paintings look like literal translations of sites, they usually require rearranging geogra-

phy for the sake of art. The same is true for the murals. "I had a set of common horizons for all the paintings, but when I began the Grand Canyon panels I was painting the horizon of a hole in the ground. That problem had me cornered for five months." The artistic solution was for the Grand Canyon to be a transition from the "up top" landscapes of New Mexico and California and the "down in" suites that will come from Wyoming's Yellowstone Valley and

Utah's Monument Valley. Such artistic hurdles have had to be met throughout the process ... and Hurley doesn't kid himself about the hurdles yet to come. Paraphrasing the late Robert Lougheed, he quips, "There are so many mistakes a person can make painting representationally that no one lives long enough to make them all."

Perhaps the most important mistake Hurley has been reminded of is thinking that the only thing involved in working on a huge painting is enlarging the components of a smaller painting. Exactly the opposite is true, he says. "You don't paint everything bigger; there's just as much painstaking detail in the large canvases. Without the detail, viewers would not get enough visual information to keep the artwork interesting. The result would be a flat, boring billboard." The trick, he contends, is to simplify some elements while giving the impression of details.

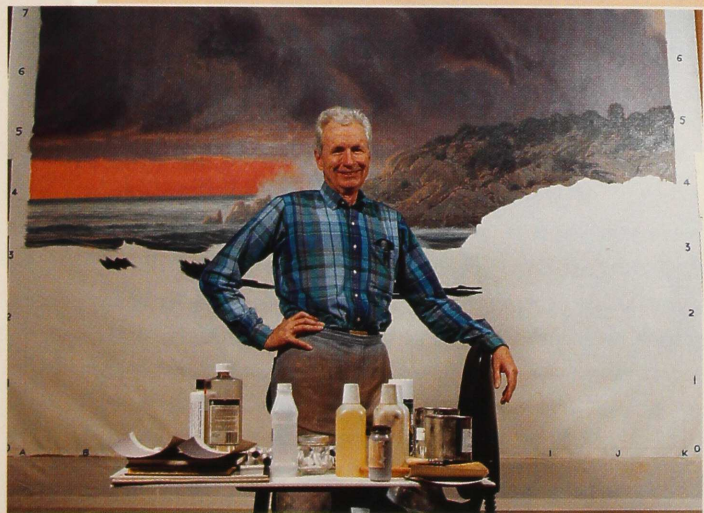
Over the years Hurley has created on-location paintings for use in replicating colors and tonal relationships of the landscapes. He also takes black-and-white photos

of certain details to augment his memories. Once back under studio lighting, he mixes all the colors for the enlarged version before beginning to paint. He has maintained that same approach in painting the triptychs, with a few "adjustments" such as the size of his "sketch," which was done at a quarter-scale or 4 by 4 feet!

Other wrinkles in the project included ensuring that the cadmium orange and titanium blue paints used on the first panel matched those on canvas 15. Hurley determined how much paint he would need and bought it in bulk. Next, he was confronted with saving specially blended hues that might be needed to do touch-ups once the canvases were mounted in their permanent home. An array of jelly and mayonnaise jars proved useless when, after a year or so, Hurley noticed this his custom-mixed paint stash was beginning to dry out. The solution was locating the same metal tubes in which manufacturers package oil paints. Shaking his head, Hurley says, "This has been as much a research and development project as a painting project."



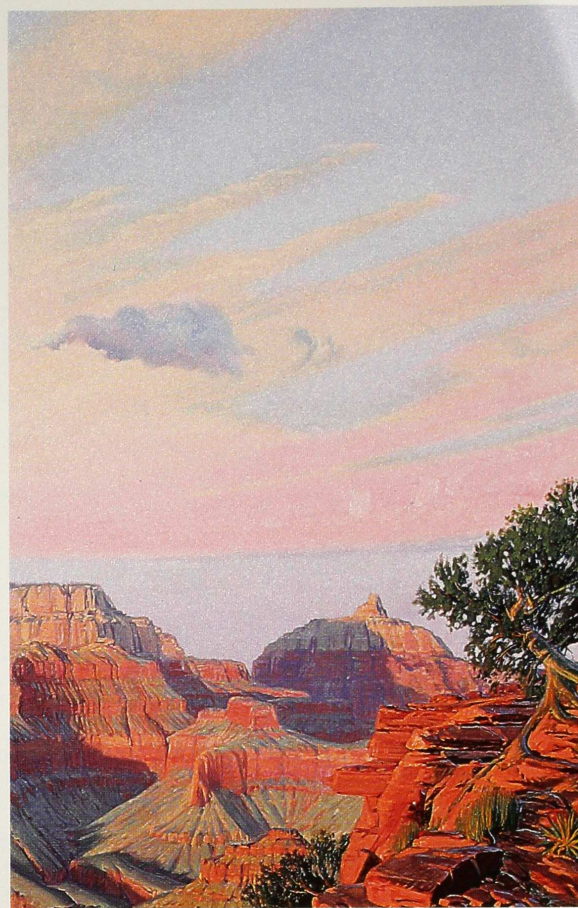
Just as he explored the past for lessons about how to create his murals, Hurley has likewise considered the future and how to ensure that the murals will survive long past his own demise. From the



THE BIG UNVEILING

On November 9, the National Cowboy Hall of Fame unveils three of the five triptychs that Hurley created for the new Sam Noble Special Events Center. Named after a respected philanthropist and civic leader, the center will be the setting for a gala black-tie dinner and performance by country and western singer Vince Gill, who will be accompanied by the Oklahoma City Philharmonic.

It's a "snazzy affair" that costs \$500 per person. You can attend at no charge if you sponsor a chair in the new center for \$5,000 or a table for \$10,000. For information contact the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, 405/478-2251, 1700 NE 63rd St., Oklahoma City, OK 73111.



beginning he has worked with Dr. Duane Chartier, an art conservator from Culver City, CA. "We thought in terms of paintings and materials that will last for a century or more," says Hurley. "In some cases we simply had to invent a new way of doing something." An example is the difficulty of transporting the canvases from Albuquerque to Oklahoma City. Each triptych center canvas weighs 700 pounds, while each side tips the scales at 400 pounds. Crating a framed canvas was too costly, and the bulky canvases are too large to ship by means other than a truck. So Hurley and Chartier devised a container to transport the rolled canvas. Once empty the container is sent back to Albuquerque to be filled with the next painting.

To mount the paintings Hurley and Chartier used a heat-sensitive

ABOVE: ARIZONA SUITE, MODEL, OIL, SIDES 48 x 30, CENTER 48 x 48.
BELOW LEFT: WILSON HURLEY STANDS OVER 6 FEET TALL, AS CAN BE SEEN BY THE FOOT MARKERS ON THE SIDE OF THE CANVAS FOR THE WING PIECE OF THE CALIFORNIA SUITE. PHOTOGRAPHED BY JIM ARGO, *THE DAILY OKLAHOMAN*, © OKLAHOMA PUBLISHING COMPANY.

adhesive glue to affix the canvases to large sheets of rigid, aluminum-honeycomb material. The value, says Hurley, is that the mounting system is lightweight, making the triptychs more portable than historical murals painted on plaster. Just as important, the system is reversible. "We know it works because one of the paintings was glued on crooked and had to be taken off and reglued to the aluminum back," Hurley crows.

During the past three years, various friends have asked Hurley

how he thinks the triptychs will be received in the art world and what future generations will think of them. "Fifty years from now someone will probably say, 'Well, he didn't think of this, that and the other.' But that's the risk and the challenge of art. If I worried about it, I probably wouldn't be able to paint another stroke."

And then he adds: "A painting shows a view of the world that's been passed through another's mind. Love is not cadmium orange. There's no color you can mix, there's no line you can draw, that will put feeling into a painting. But if you go to the canvas with love and joy in your heart, somehow it comes off on the canvas."

PHOTOS COURTESY THE ARTIST, THE NATIONAL COWBOY HALL OF FAME AND JIM ARGO, *THE DAILY OKLAHOMAN*, OKLAHOMA PUBLISHING COMPANY.