

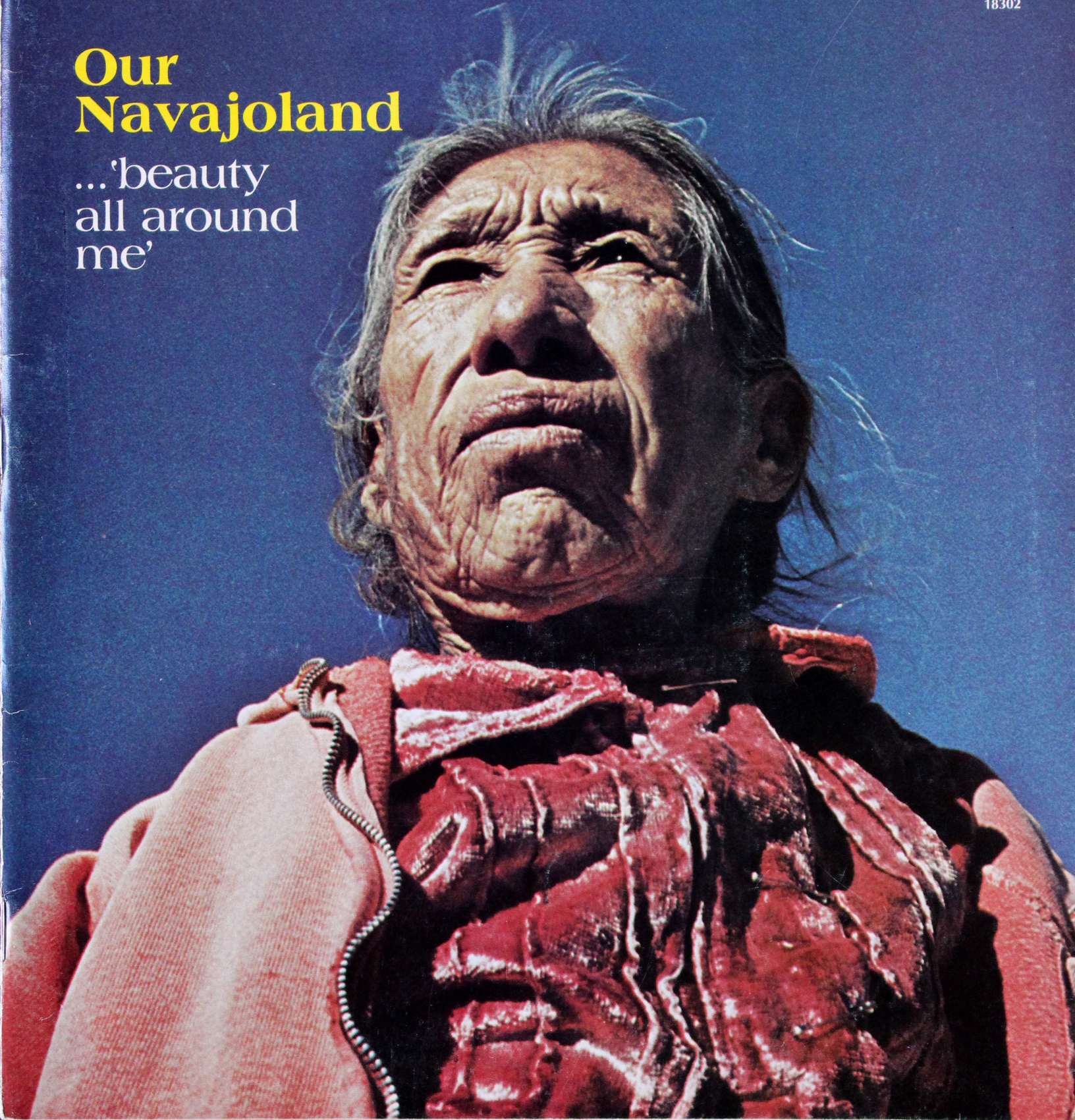
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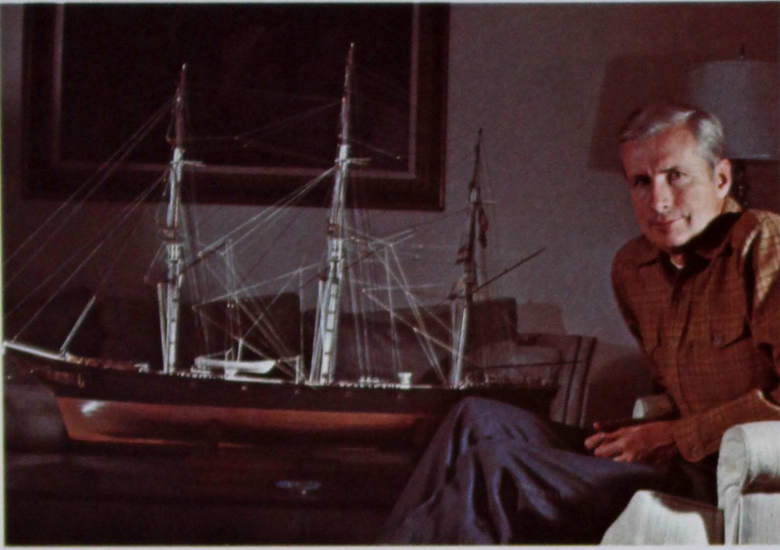
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Our Navajoland

... 'beauty
all around
me'





Wilson Hurley, with a ship model he designed and crafted.



Wilson Hurley

A Window on Western Skies

By Jess Price



"I was unhappy in my profession and really had no future in any other profession that I was qualified in—engineering and as a military pilot. When you're in your 40s, for example, you have at most 10 years left for flying jet fighters. I had really come to a point where I had to face up to 'What do I want to do with my life?'"

"I wanted to be a painter and always had, so I started painting full time."

Wilson Hurley paints the West. Not cowboys and Indians, but the land as God made it and man has modified it. Regarding his easel as a window on the world, Wilson tries to capture what he sees to show others his view.

"Perhaps people who paint and write are basically insecure," observes the lanky artist (somehow you don't think of painters being six-feet-six). "It's possible we are not sure our judgment of the world is sound, and we need reassurance by exposing it to others for corroboration."

Wilson had known since childhood that he wanted to be a painter, but getting there wasn't easy. He had tried it once before. It hadn't worked for several reasons, one being his father's lifelong disapproval of his artistic bent.

Wilson is the only son and one of four children of the late Major General Patrick J. Hurley, Oklahoma oil man, President Hoover's secretary of war and ambassador to China in the mid-'40s.

"We moved to New Mexico in 1935 when I was 11 and it was about that time I discovered I wanted to be an artist," Wilson says, his brown eyes intense as he recalls his days of growing up in Santa Fe. "Dad was horrified. But when I was about 12 or 13, Mother took me to Taos and I got to work in the studio of Jack Younghunter. And I met Joe Bakos, from whom I learned about watercolors and stretching canvas. I got to wash his brushes and, when he had time, he'd take me with him while he worked."

But for General Hurley's son, art could be only a hobby. After high school at Los Alamos School for Boys — this was before the Manhattan Project took over its site in the Jemez Mountains — it was West Point for the gangling young man.

There Wilson soaked up engineering and became one of a handful of

cadets to win wings in the Army Air Corps. Flying became his second love. He has flown a variety of planes, including jets.

After a tour in the Far East and Stateside duty, Wilson was no closer to his dream of brush and palette, except that he had become an accomplished Sunday painter. At his father's urging, he studied law at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. He returned to New Mexico in 1954, worked as an engineer at Sandia Base, then went into law practice in Albuquerque.

Though his practice and some related bank dealings were successful, "I used to look at the pile of folders on my desk in the evening and wish I didn't have to face them in the morning," he recalls.

In 1961, against the advice of family and friends, Wilson quit law and tried to become a full-time painter. Inside of a year, he was back at his desk, chagrined and still frustrated. But in 1965 he made that final break. A lot of people have tried that, but Wilson is one of the rare ones. He made it stick and has never been happier.

"He was an excellent attorney," says long-time friend, fellow attorney and flyer Jim Womack. "In fact, Wilson is one of those unusual guys who does everything well — he was a good engineer, a good lawyer, a good flyer, and is a good painter."

Womack and Hurley became friends in the mid-'50s when Wilson joined the "Enchilada Air Force," New Mexico's Air National Guard. They served together in that unit in Vietnam in 1967-68. (Wilson quit flying three years ago because a preoccupation with aviation seemed detrimental to his painting career.)

Wilson says he paints what he wants to paint. Mostly, he wants to paint landscapes in the rugged mountains and river valleys of the West — though he does portraits, seascapes, aircraft in flight. His Vietnam months produced vivid scenes.

As an artist, he is largely self-taught, which involves rigorous self-discipline. When he painted as an amateur, Santa Fe artist Theodore Van Soelen, then Doel Reed of Taos, regularly critiqued his work, but there's been no study at an art school or in a master's studio.

Friend and mentor John Meigs, himself an artist, says Hurley has "evolved a unique approach and style that perhaps reflects at this



The Passing Storm I

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. S. E. Camp, Post, Tex.

time the feeling for the Western landscape shown earlier by Moran and Bierstadt." Meigs, of San Patricio, is well-grounded in Western painters, being the author of the recently-published *The Cowboy in American Prints*.

Meigs believes Hurley's years as a pilot gave him a special vision of the landscape, "He puts in atmospheric factors that you often are not aware of."

What makes Hurley's landscapes unique, says Meigs, is a feeling of an elevated viewpoint, the flyer's

angle. "The sky is a very important part of Wilson's paintings." Meigs adds that, while other contemporary painters also concentrate on the vast skies of the Southwest, their approach is earthbound.

"At the moment," Meigs says, "Wilson's regional following is extensive and it is growing. I believe that he possibly is just around the corner from much wider recognition."

"You know, there are many facile painters who can reel off a commendable picture. But when you have an intelligent mind like Wil-

son's coupled with artistic talent, the door is open to the possibility of much bigger things."

As for the artist himself, he realizes that, for having been a professional a relatively short time, he has made good, perhaps even exceptional progress. But he wants to keep improving.

"It pleases me that I can look on something I did two years ago and see how I could improve it. If I ever get to the point where I can't do that, I'm in trouble. All I want to do is paint the best I can."

