

# OKLAHOMA

September/October 2001

*Today*

## Leaves *of* Gold

THE WILSON HURLEY TRIPTYCHS

MASTER OF MUSIC: JIMMY WEBB

THE JOHNNY BRIGHT INCIDENT

oklahomatoday.com

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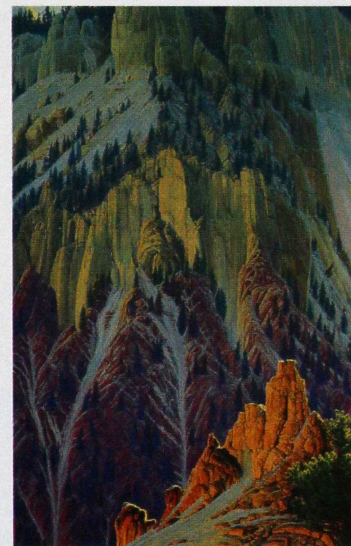
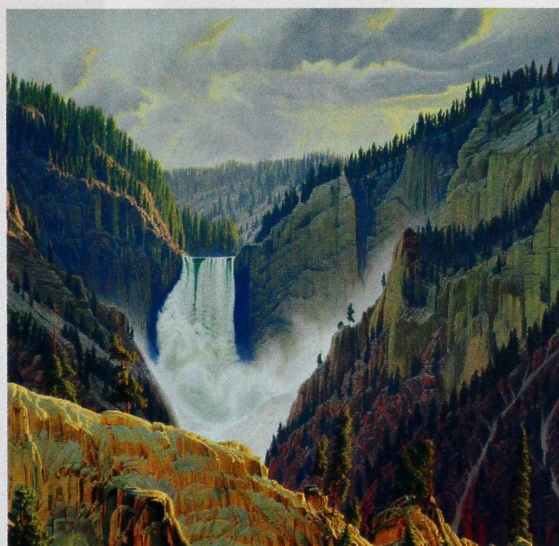
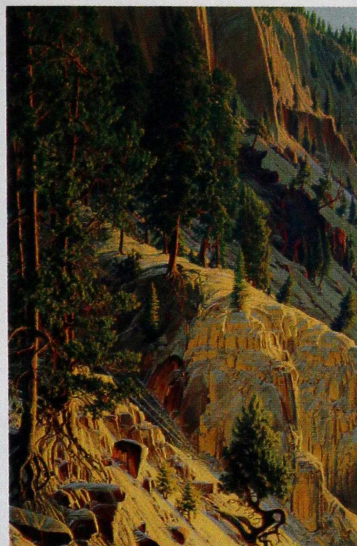
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Gather leaves and grasses,  
Love, today;  
For the Autumn passes  
Soon away.  
Chilling winds are blowing.  
It will soon be showing.

—John Henry Boner (1845-1903)



# Westward Expansion

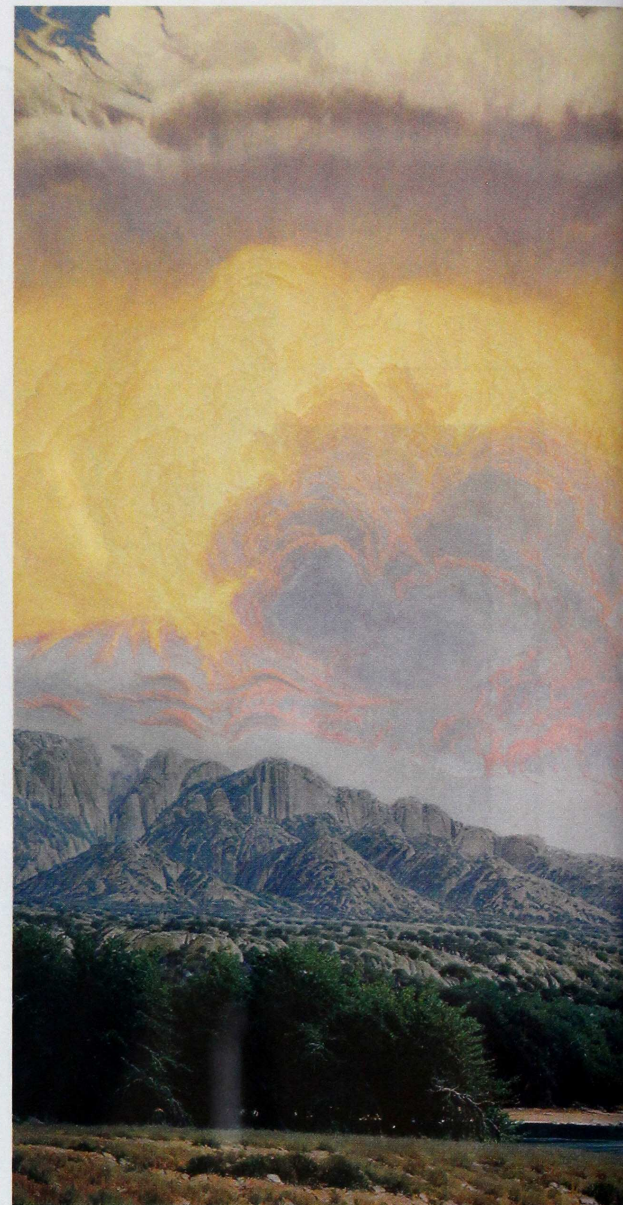


TEN YEARS AGO, THE NATIONAL COWBOY HALL OF FAME—NOW THE National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum—had the foresight and wisdom to commission a series of paintings by artist Wilson Hurley. They gave him freedom and space; he returned a singular vision. The completed work, a breathtaking perspective of America's West, manifested itself in five individual triptychs, each with the same angle of western light, each at sunset. The *Wyoming Suite*, above, depicts the Lower Falls of Yellowstone and demonstrates the genius and nineteenth-century sweep of Hurley's modern brush. Now, five years after their installation, the fifteen panels—collectively called *Windows to the West*—make up what many regard as Oklahoma's most significant work of art. They have become the centerpiece to the Oklahoma City museum and Oklahoma's personal artistic masterpiece.

by Louisa McCune

The five Wilson Hurley triptychs—*New Mexico Suite*, *California Suite*, *Arizona Suite*, *Utah Suite*, and *Wyoming Suite*—are massive in size and scope: Each consists of a sixteen-by-sixteen-foot center panel flanked by two sixteen-by-ten-foot side panels.

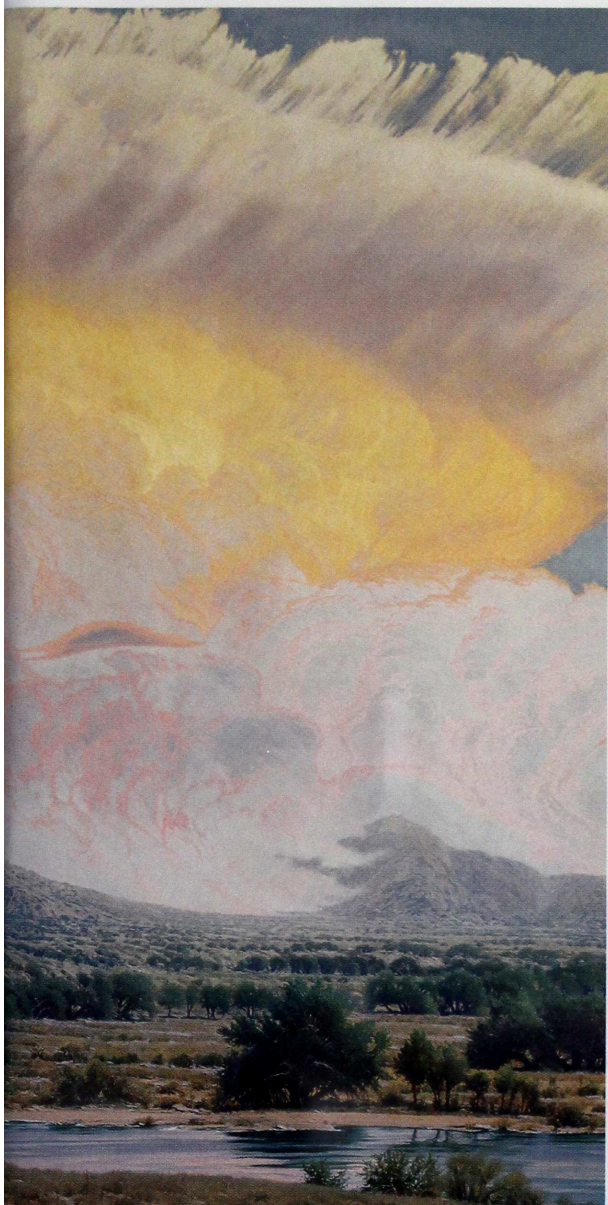




**W**ILSON HURLEY IS OFTEN AND EASILY compared to the likes of Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt, landscape painters whose works from the mid to late 1800s defined a rugged romance only the American West could provide. But it was to the great muralists working in sixteenth-century Europe that Hurley looked for inspiration, both to their failures as much as their successes.

“The old fresco mural painters had it rough,” says Hurley, who made a pilgrimage back to Europe in October 1991, just weeks after receiving the museum’s commission. “They had to do their cartoon, pounce it on a smooth, plastered wall, and then get up there with a scaffold, mix their colors, and trowel it before the whole mess set up.” While abroad, he studied the geometric perspective involved in viewing large works. He evaluated the effects of





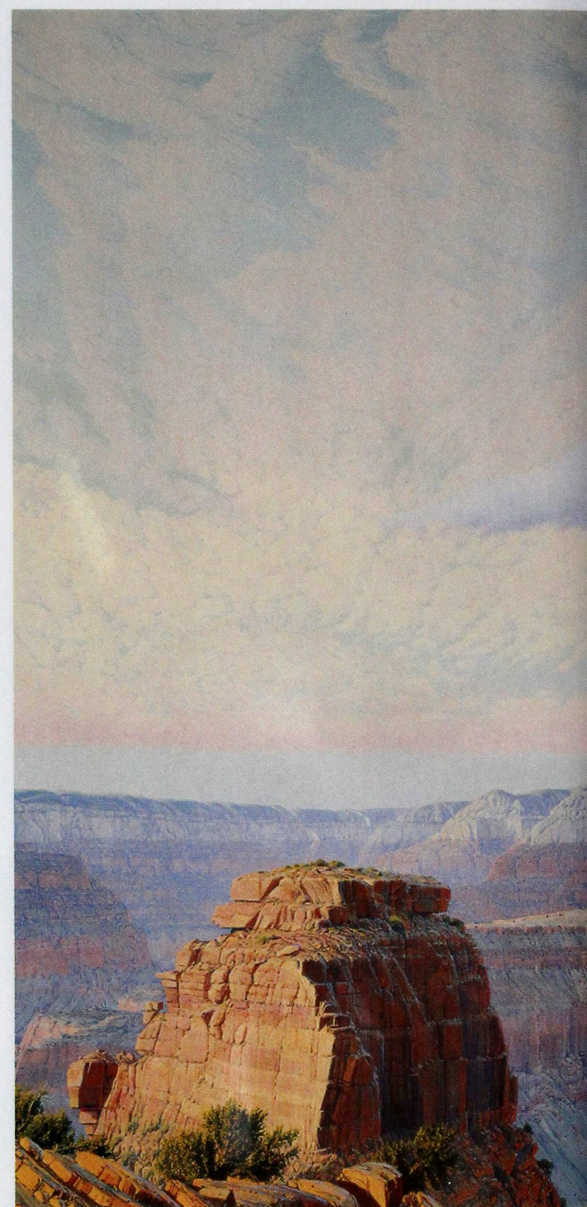
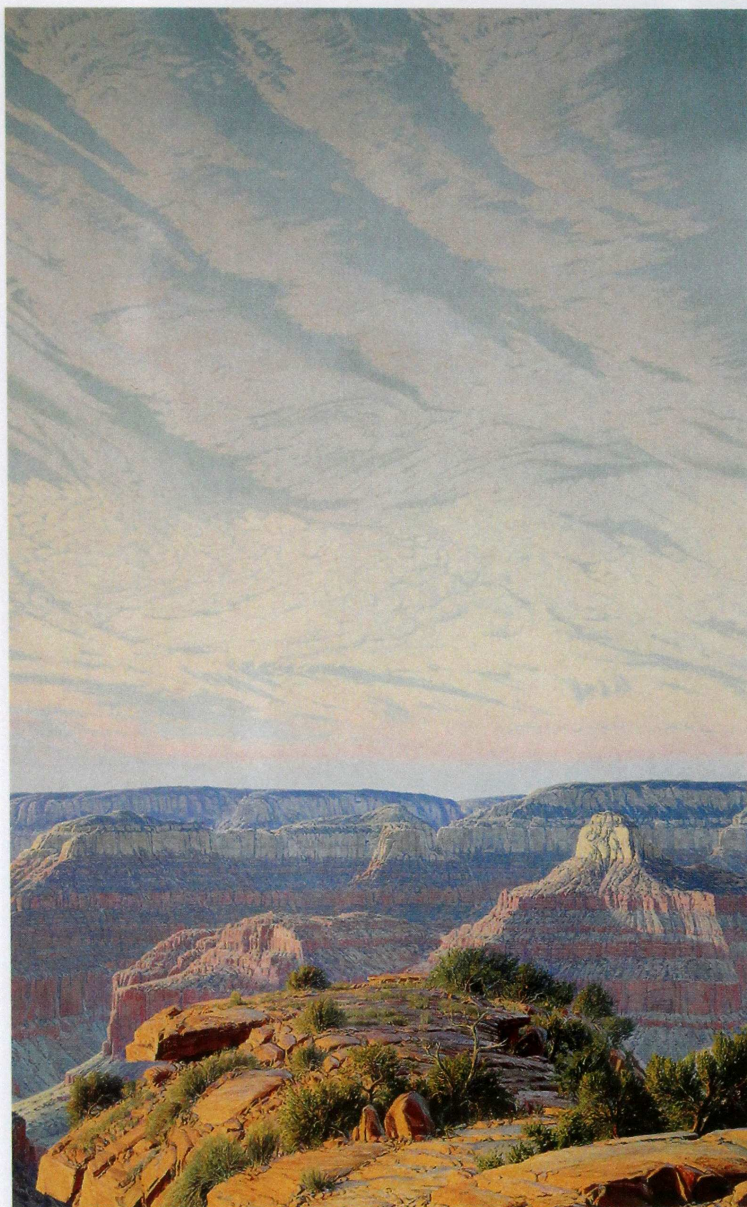
lighting and investigated the long-term wear of surfaces. In France and Italy, says Hurley, “I saw the folly of committing a work irreversibly to a wall.”

A former military engineer—as was Michelangelo—Hurley often has referred to these murals as an exercise in research and development. Of paramount importance to him was proper planning. The project would take five years, and much of that would be at the easel.

But how could an easel accommodate the mammoth canvases? How, too, would the panels be transported from Hurley’s Albuquerque studio to the Cowboy Hall of Fame?

Hurley started on the answers close to home with the *New Mexico Suite*, above. This view of the Sandia Mountains, a rugged area of scrub brush and cactus, is less than a mile from the artist’s home and studio.





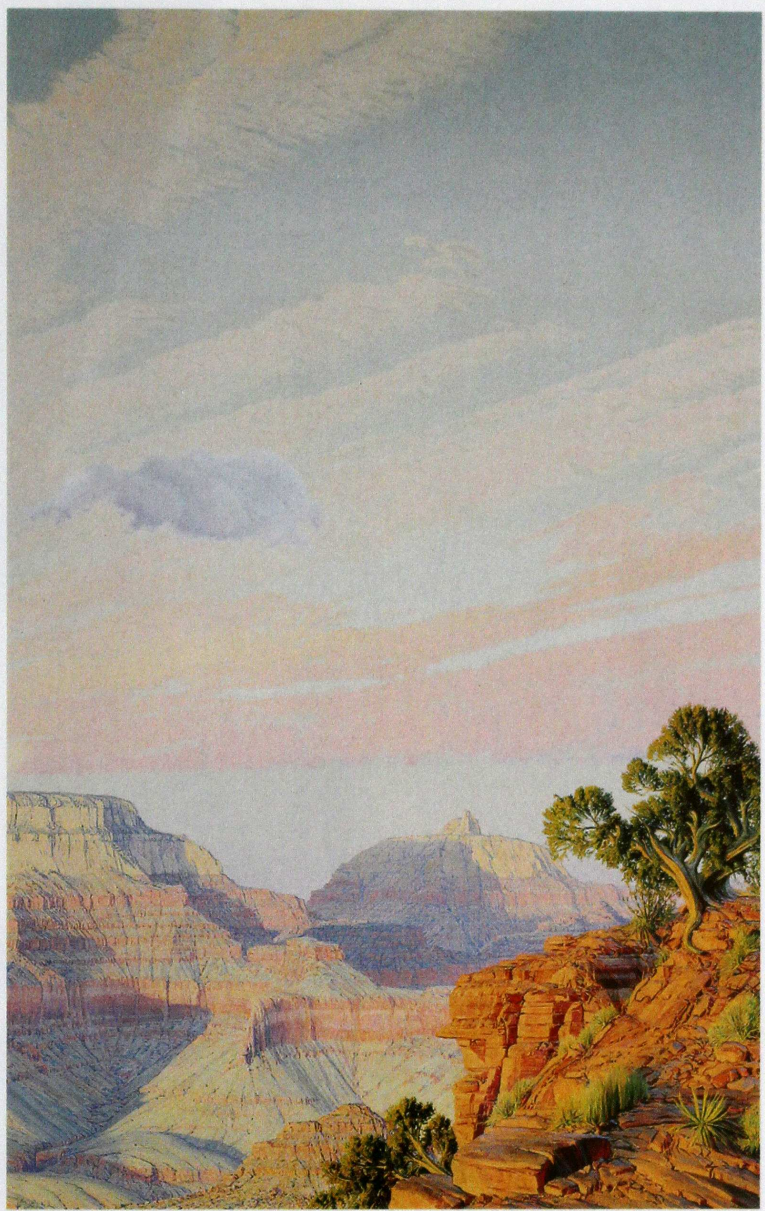
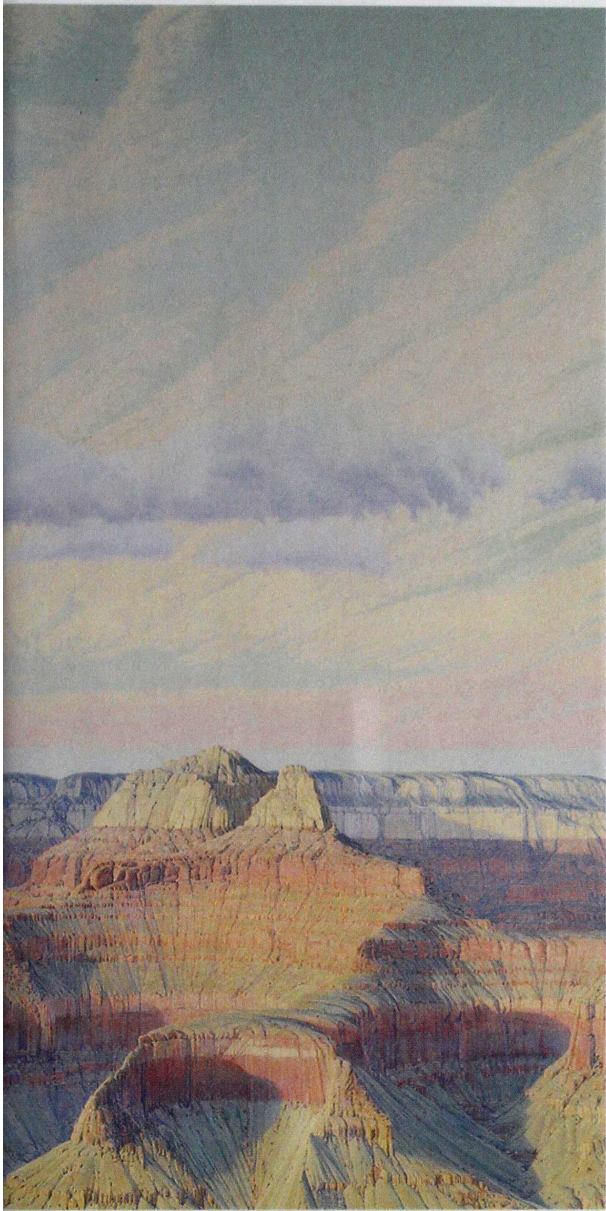
THAT AN OKLAHOMA-BASED COMMISSION AS large as this one—estimated around \$2 million—went to a New Mexican is not so unusual, given that the museum has long honored the western states (including Arizona, its Grand Canyon depicted here in the *Arizona Suite*) and that this particular man is very nearly an Oklahoman himself.

The third child of General Patrick Hurley, secretary of

war to Herbert Hoover and ambassador to China under FDR, and Ruth Wilson Hurley, Wilson Hurley was born April 11, 1924, in Tulsa. He was there just four years before moving first to Virginia and then Santa Fe, where he spent the majority of his formative years. After high school, Hurley attended West Point, graduating as both pilot and engineer.

A distinguished military flying career segued into a le-



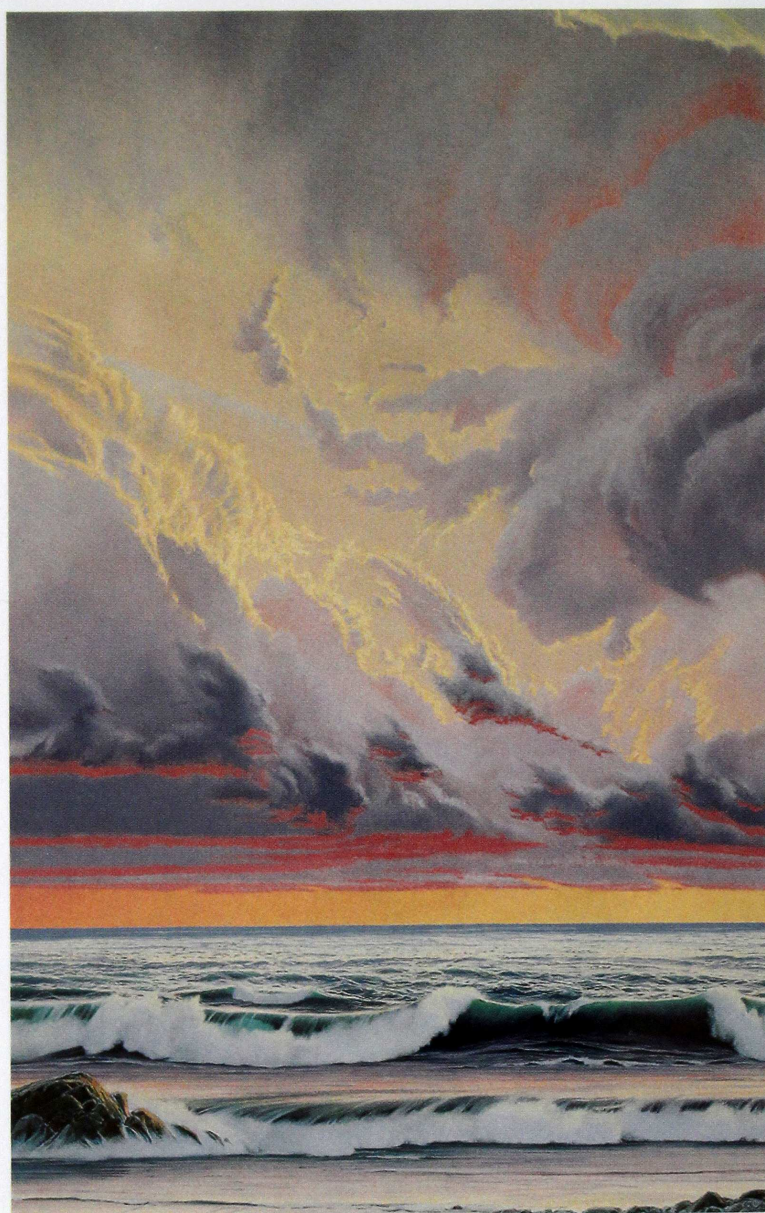


gal one when Hurley graduated from Washington, D.C.'s George Washington University Law School in 1951 and practiced law for the next fourteen years. It wasn't until Hurley entered his early forties that he left the law and identified himself first and foremost as a painter.

The Cowboy Hall of Fame and Tulsa's Gilcrease were among the first museums to showcase Hurley's work. In fact, the state was a natural for him. "Although I had

been away, I was still accepted as a member," says Hurley. Not only was his father a pal of the Cherokee Kid ("I remember Will Rogers coming to have supper with us"), but the Hurley family had deep connections to the Choctaw Indians: About 1880, his grandparents came north of the Red River to work as tenants on Choctaw land, literally off the boat in Galveston from Waterford, Ireland.





**H**URLEY SOLVED HIS EASEL DILEMMA BY ENLIST-  
ing the expertise of Santa Fe conservator  
Steven Prins. Prins designed a manually operated con-  
struct, vaguely resembling a weaver's loom, where  
Hurley would stand, painting at shoulder height.

Witnessing the effects of war, the elements, and abandon-  
ment on centuries-old European murals, Hurley also felt the  
work should be removable. But any linen canvas more than

six feet in height with standard supports eventually begins  
to wrinkle. With Dr. Duane Chartier, Hurley perfected a  
sterile, aluminum support, noncorrosive to the canvas. "We  
used a temperature-sensitive glue that can permit resealing  
the surface if any sags or bubbles appear, or removal of the  
canvas if necessary."

A five-year project stands to make color consistency an-  
other problem. Because the work is painstakingly designed





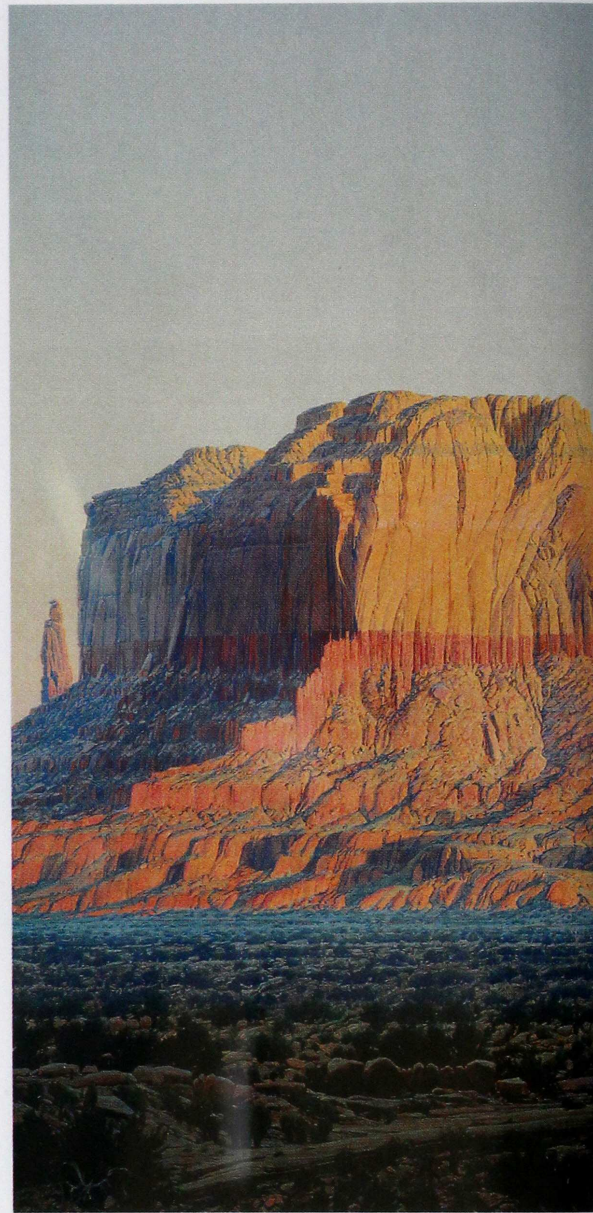
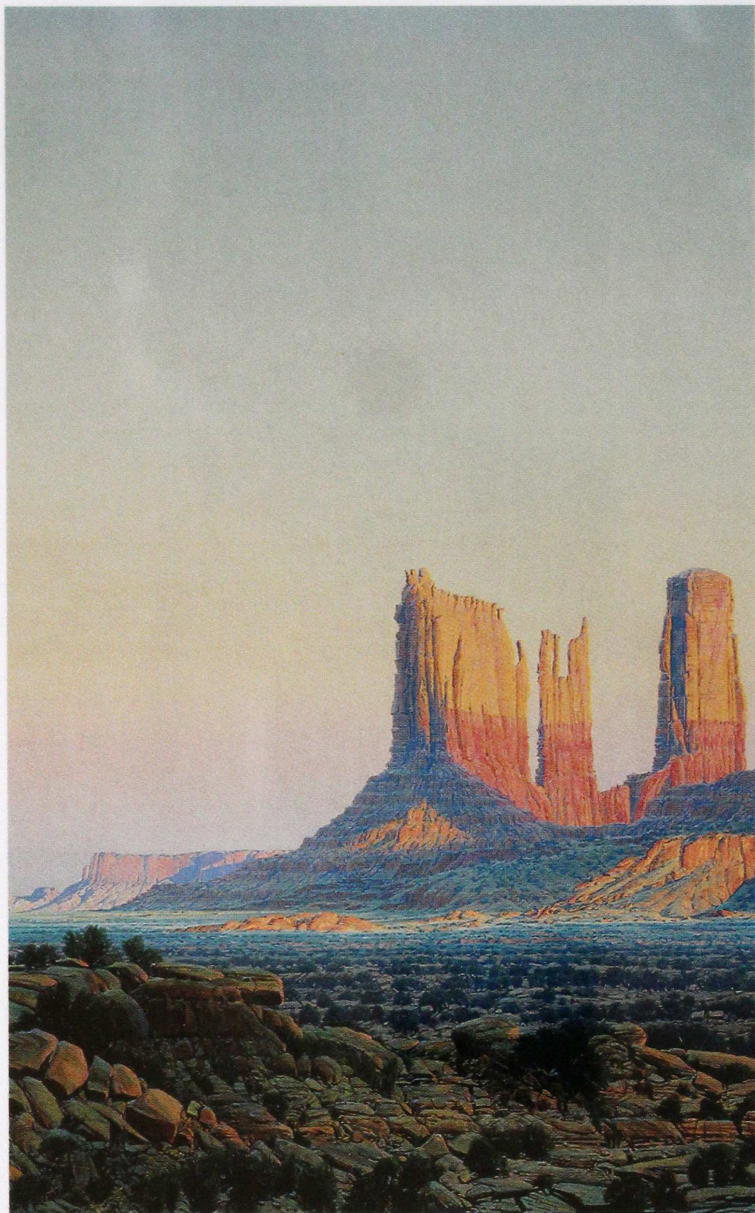
to be viewed as a whole, colors like those at Point Lobos near Carmel in the *California Suite*, above, should have similar tones to, say, Monument Valley, depicted in the *Utah Suite* (next page). Because Hurley shipped each panel to the museum in a specially designed tubular container upon completion, he wasn't able to calibrate color—the match already had been sent to Oklahoma.

The artist at last determined a simple method of en-

suring seamless color: He filled empty paint tubes with mixed paint and attached a recipe label to the exterior of the tube.

Hurley's strategies paid off on July 12, 1996, when he completed the *Wyoming Suite*, the last triptych, and again November 8, 1996, when the installation was officially complete. The artist—never the prima donna—met his contractual deadline four days early.



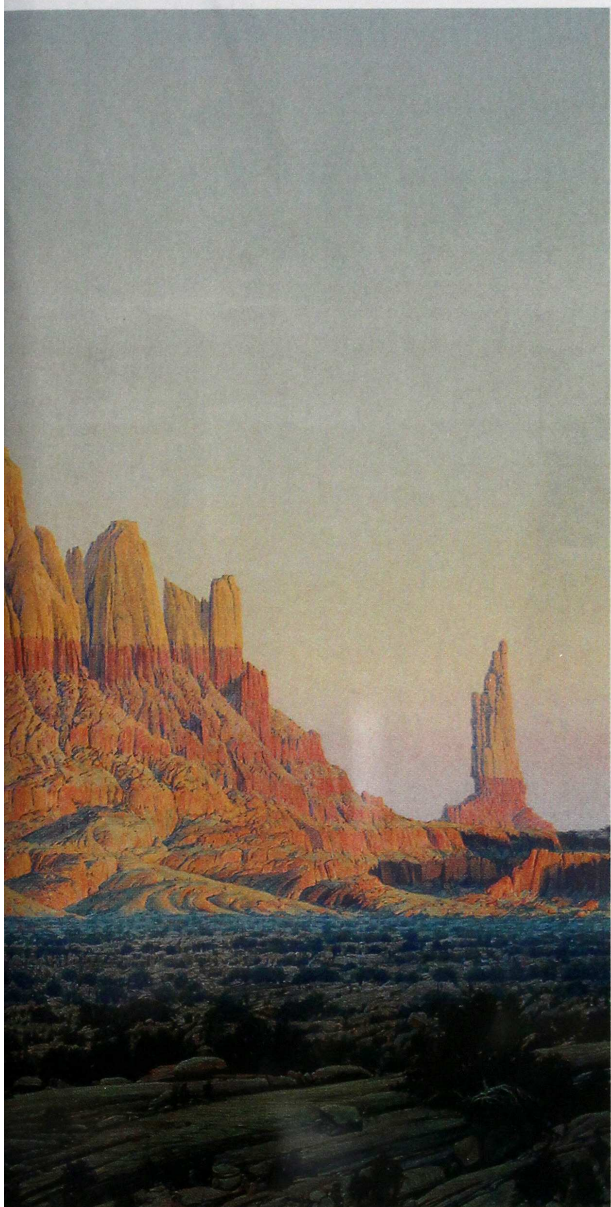


TODAY, AT AGE SEVENTY-SEVEN, HURLEY SAYS he and his wife, Rosalyn, lead very “quiet” and “pleasant” lives, comprised mainly of work-filled days and book-filled evenings (from Thucydides to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle). He consigns his paintings to galleries, declining to sell from the studio, as many artists do, and he makes it a point to stay off boards, saying that “one of the worst things you can do is say ‘yes.’”

Creating an average of thirty-five paintings a year, the Hurleys begin the typical day at their home studio with breakfast and newspapers. “About 10 a.m., my brushes are wet,” he says. He paints until he gets “stupid,” i.e. tired, generally after about six hours at the canvas.

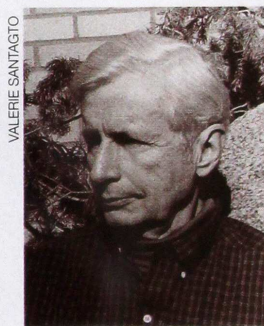
Hurley is not a vogue artist working in today’s insular art world. “What I am doing is not in the mainstream,” he says. “What I do appeals to people in their hearts and





minds, and that's not what is in fashion." In his favor, however, is the viewer's visceral response: "Human spirit," he says, "is fairly constant." Contrary to many modern artists whose works emanate solely from the id, Hurley cares passionately about both the correctness of his brush and the emotions evoked in himself and the viewer. "The more spirit I have, the better the work," he says. "And it shows."

*The Windows to the West triptychs are located in the Sam Noble Special Events Center at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. They are on view to the public, except during special events. 1700 Northeast Sixth-third, Oklahoma City; (405) 478-2250 or [nationalcowboymuseum.com](http://nationalcowboymuseum.com).*



VALERIE SANTIAGO

**Wilson Hurley is currently at work on landscapes for the Oklahoma State Capitol, scheduled for completion in 2004. The first painting, of Muddy Boggy near Atoka, was completed in July. Hurley says he will be traveling frequently to Oklahoma, conducting field studies at Little Sahara, the Kiamichi Mountains, and the Roman Nose area for the remaining three paintings.**