

INSIDE | WILSON HURLEY & CURT WALTERS

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Wilson Hurley

The Virtuoso of Vistas: THE MAN BEHIND THE LEGEND

BY MICHAEL SCOTT-BLAIR

When he was a 42-year-old attorney in Albuquerque, N.M., Wilson Hurley's secretary, Connie, asked him, "If you only had 18 months to live, what would you do?" "In retrospect," says Hurley, "it was probably the most important question anyone has ever asked me." His response was, "I would paint." So he closed his law office and took to the easel.

It was a remarkable step for Hurley, whose powerful father, Patrick J. Hurley, the secretary of war under President Herbert Hoover and later a U.S. Army brigadier general, had told him repeatedly that artists were homosexuals, and he should do "manly" things—a view strongly supported by frequent dinner guest and family friend, Will Rogers. But with a graduation from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point behind him, plus service as a fighter pilot in Vietnam and 150 missions as a forward aerial spotter for artillery, Hurley had absolutely no doubt about who he was and finally, it was time to paint—time to take his place among the most noted and respected artists in the nation's history.

Looking west from the veranda of his home in the foothills of the Sandia Mountains, Hurley painted *Sun Rays in the Valley* (oil, 45 x 72"), showing the view of the city of Albuquerque and the Rio Grande Valley.

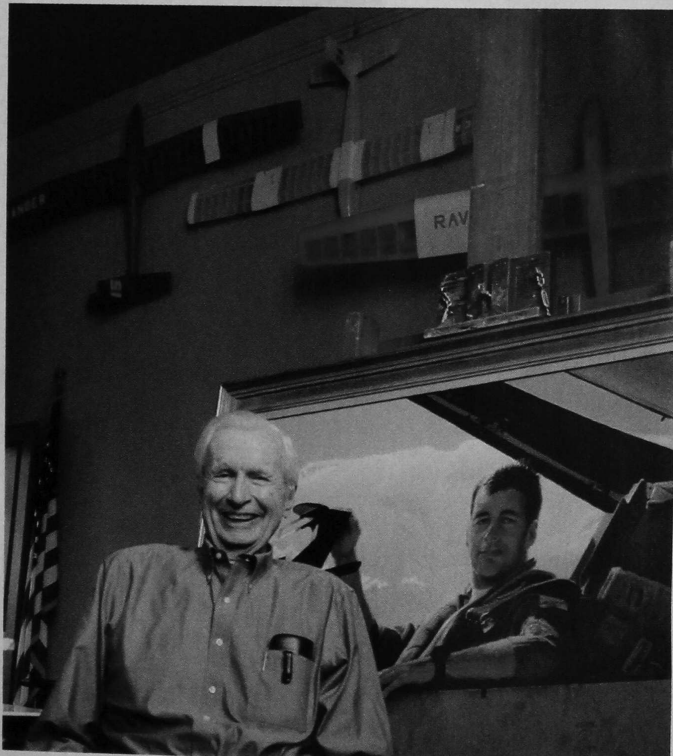


Photo by Michael Scott-Blair

Wilson Hurley, a lifelong flyer and former fighter pilot, painted this portrait of fellow aviator Capt. Thomas Wheeler, an F-16 pilot with the New Mexico National Guard, for the American Association of Aviation Artists, as part of a series that focused on the union between man and machine. In the background are some of the many aircraft models, built by Hurley, which decorate the walls of his studio in his Albuquerque home.

With Hurley you can have a wonderful conversation about art, for sure. But you can have an equally wonderful conversation about science, politics, flying, literature, atmospheric pressures, space flight, homosexuality—in fact, almost any topic is within the intellectual scope of the 84-year-old, 6-foot-5-inch giant of the art world. Bring his name up in almost any knowledgeable group, and generally people will give a brief nod of their head, adding, quietly, “brilliant man, truly a brilliant man.”

Actually, an “elegant” man was more the word that came to mind as he, and his wife, fellow artist Rosalyn Roembke, played host in their beautiful home perched on the shoulder of a foothill on the northeast side of Albuquerque. The Sandia Mountains rear up to more than 10,600 feet immediately next to the home, and the full expanse of the Rio Grande Valley spreads out before the huge living room windows that look straight into the setting sun. The tasteful home is decorated throughout with examples of both their own works, the works of artist friends, and a rich array of carefully preserved antiques.

Mother Fosters Love of Art

Hurley was born in Tulsa in 1924 and has always considered himself an Oklahoman, even though he has lived most of his life in New Mexico. He grew up in Virginia and in Santa Fe, N.M., and has loved art as long as he can remember—a love fostered by his mother, but vigorously opposed by his father. “My mother was a remarkable woman with perfect pitch and a phenomenal memory. She went to a Sergey Rachmaninoff concert in Philadelphia and when she got home her father (a U.S. Navy admiral) asked what she had heard, and she sat down and played what Rachmaninoff had played. By the way, she couldn’t read a note of music, but she could play anything.

“One time I went downstairs at night and I was playing Wagner. As I hit the final chords, there was applause behind me and I found that the entire family had come down to listen—that is, except Father, who came down later and was appalled to see that it was his son playing the piano and not one of this three daughters.” It was his mother who took young Hurley to galleries and museums, and made sure he spent time with artists John Young-Hunter, Theodore Van Solen and Josef Bakos.

“She would take me to concerts by Madame Schumann-Heink (operatic contralto, 1861-1936) and America’s favorite singer, John Charles Thomas (1891-1960),” recalls Hurley. “When I was 7, she took me

to a showing of *Peace and Plenty* by George Inness (landscape artist, 1825-1894), and I cried at the beauty of the setting sun coming through the elm trees in the Delaware Valley. All that year I tried to make light come from a drawing in that way.”

Determined to keep Wilson’s mind on “manly things,” Hurley’s father had him attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where he earned an engineering degree, and George Washington University, for a law degree. “I remember whilst at law school, I was driving my mother home and we were stopped



Spring Morning at Juan Tabo Park (oil, 68 x 45")



Hurley's wife, Rosalyn Roembke, is also a prolific painter, who focuses on still lifes, such as *Majolica and Silk* (oil, 18 x 16").

at a traffic light on Connecticut Avenue in Washington, D.C., when a very attractive lady crossed the street. The guy behind honked at me because the light had turned green and I was still staring at the young lady. At the supper table that night, my mother said to my dad, 'Oh Pat—the cutest thing—Wilson is starting to notice girls.' My dad gave me a look of utter relief, but good heavens, what with West Point and then the Air Force, I was 25 before I had my first date and I was as dumb as a guy in junior high!"



Hope (oil, 24 x 30")



A man of many interests, Hurley is fascinated by outer space. *Olympus Moons* (oil, 48 x 48") shows the 29-mile-high volcano on Mars viewed from about 2,000 miles off the surface.

like Virginia to fatten them for market. We had 1,000 acres of grass and charged \$1 a month for each head of cattle. I remember my mother coming into the house one day, putting her little notebook on the table and announcing that we had made 936 bucks that month, and in 1936, that was a ton of money."

Gets His Start as a Military Pilot

On graduating from West Point, Hurley, who has a lifelong love of flying, joined the U.S. Air Force in time for the end of World War II and was sent to pilot a Catalina Flying Boat around

Indonesia with some Australians, finding crash sites and recovering any crew remains for proper identification and burial. He mustered out of the Air Force and joined the Air National Guard at Kirkland Air Force Base in Albuquerque, but was called back to duty for the Vietnam War.

"I got a phone call and someone asked if I would like to fly an O1 in Vietnam," says Hurley. "I had no idea what an O1 was, but I said sure. I heard the guy on the other end laugh as he turned around and said, 'I found one.' I learned that an O1 was a forward spotter aircraft, guiding in artillery and other strikes. I was flying a little Cessna and they didn't even give me a parachute because I had to fly too close to the ground for it to be of any use. I did 150 missions in five months. At the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis (October

The family fortune was lost in the stock market crash of 1929, but fortunately, Hurley Sr. had bought Belmont, a 1,000-acre estate with a "beautiful 18th century home built by Ludwell Lee on a hill near Leesburg, overlooking the Potomac," says Hurley. "Somewhat perversely, we benefited from the Dust Bowl years because the cattlemen out West couldn't feed their cows, so they sent them to places



Storm West of the Malpais (oil, 36 x 48")

1962), I was one of those flying a little F-80 jet at the time the Russians had a huge bomber in Cuba called the bear. If any of them got through, we were supposed to ram it with our F-80—become kamikaze pilots—but fortunately it never came to that."

In the early 1960s, Hurley was building a law practice in Albuquerque, painting whenever he could, and flying with the

Guard. "I was looking in the mirror, brushing my teeth, and reflecting on the conversation with my secretary when I decided I only had one life and it was time to devote it to painting. A lot of misfortune attended my decision. I got divorced and I was disinherited. My National Guard flying pay put food on my table, a roof over my head, gas in my car and little else. I was painting, painting, painting, and getting rejected, rejected, rejected. I thought that if I kept the prices low, my pieces would fly out the door—they didn't.

"I had done a piece on the coal mining town of Madrid (on the eastern slopes of the Sandias), and I was trying to sell it for \$75. Finally, a friend of my mother's bought it, and she promptly sold it to a guy named John L. Lewis. I called her and said, 'Roberta, this is personal as hell, but how much did you get for my painting?' She said 500 bucks! 500 bucks! I went straight home and jacked my prices up to 500 bucks for a 24 x 30", 750 bucks for 24 x 36". I immediately started selling, and was picked up by a small gallery in Lubbock, Texas. Actually, it was an office furniture and supply house; they were remodeling a lot of banks in small Texas towns, and I was doing a lot of foyer pieces for them."

Paintings Evoke Memories

Today, Hurley has more than 1,000 of his paintings scattered throughout museums, galleries and private collections around the world, and some remarkable memories to go with them.

"I was painting the Grand Canyon from Moran Point and I fell asleep. Suddenly Thomas Moran (1837-1926), beard and all, was standing there and said to me, 'You know, you're painting a



November Cottonwoods at Algodones (oil, 16 x 16")



Summer Afternoon on the Mummy Cave, Cañon del Muerto (oil, 32 x 40")

spot of sunlight across the canyon at Vishnu Temple.' I said, 'Yes sir,' and he said, 'Don't put sunlight across the canyon. It detracts from your composition.' I woke up and kinda laughed about it, but when I looked at the painting, I said to myself, 'You know, he's right.' So I left it in shadow and the painting won a gold medal!" (Hurley's work has been likened to that of Moran, an English immigrant who became known as America's foremost landscape artist and the 'Father of the National Parks' after his early works caused Congress to establish the park system.)

"In 1976," Hurley recounts, "I got really sick for a couple of weeks and was in bed when the doorbell rang. I opened the door to find the entire board of directors of the Whitney Gallery in Cody, Wyo., on the doorstep. I was in my jammies, for Pete's sake. They went into my studio, where I had the centerpiece of the *View from the Mojave Wall* and they asked how much I would take for it. I didn't want to frighten them off, so I said \$16,000. They left, and I went back to bed. A few minutes later

they were back to buy it, and I was immediately cured. They told me they had been on their way to buy some works from (fellow Albuquerque artist) Morris Rippel, but they spent all their money with me. Morris called me a turkey for a while, and I'm not sure he's forgiven me to this day."

Hurley's signature work will probably be *Windows to the West*, a series of five triptych (three-panel) paintings, each measuring 16 feet high by 40 feet wide, which encircle the top of the high walls inside the Sam Noble Special Events Center at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. It is a huge work that dominates the hall, which can seat 1,500 people, and depicts five distinctive landscapes of the American West: the Lower Falls of

Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, the Pacific Ocean at Point Lobos, Calif., the Sandia Mountains of New Mexico with the Rio Grande in the foreground, the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and Utah's Monument Valley. Each painting is at sunset with a common horizon around the room, and they



Winter Cottonwoods at Sunset (oil, 21 x 32")



Field Study: Oaks in the Arroyo (oil, 12 x 23½")

are all painted with a single light source—Point Lobos.

The work took more than five years, from 1991 to 1996, with Hurley employing up to 27 people in the process. The engineering challenges of getting it into place almost matches the artistic feat of creating it. Hurley painted it in his studio, which has 12-foot high ceilings—painting it at shoulder height and gradually rolling the panels up over rollers near the ceiling. "I never saw the finished panels until they were in Oklahoma," says Hurley, whose artistic and engineering talents were truly tested by the monumental work. One thing he stresses is that they are paintings on canvas, not frescoes or murals, and they can be removed from their frames and rolled up for transporting, if desired.

Good Art Comes from the Heart

For Hurley, emotion is what defines a good painting. "Bob Kuhn has a clear emotional contact with his animals; Howard Terpning is emotional about the Indians he portrays. You can't fake it. It comes from the heart. There's a new guy, Tim Cherry, whose sculptures always show a sense of humor that makes me chuckle. You evaluate art emotionally as well as intellectually," he says. An art student, he has read the writings of Matisse, Picasso and many others. "They would write about a new painting they were going to do and when you read their ideas, it sounds interesting. But when you see the results, for example, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (Picasso, 1907), it does not speak with any emotion at all—it is not good composition. It is not well executed; it fails. In fact, it's downright ugly."

Were there any good artists around at that time? "Yes, a few, and John (Singer) Sargent was a very good one," Hurley says. "Roz and I were at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and there was a sitting portrait of James Whitcomb Riley by Sargent that damned near jumped out and said 'Hi' to me. The canvas opened up and grabbed you, but Sargent had to feel that in his heart before he could get it onto canvas. (Riley, the Hoosier Poet, "When the frost is on the pumpkin ..." 1849-1916).

Recent medical challenges have slowed down Hurley's speech

pattern, but cannot quell an irrepressible quiet laugh that accompanies many of his memories—except for one. "My father wanted me to get into politics, God help us all, and I did not have the emotion to be a good lawyer—I was always dealing with angry people and I didn't like that. I was at my desk when a doctor buddy came in who had just been diagnosed with lung cancer, had 18 months to live, and he wanted me to write his will. I asked him what he was going to do and he said he was going to spend the time he had left with his family, he had been too busy to get acquainted with them. When he left—this is before machines—my secretary came in, using shorthand to take down his will as I dictated. She got tired and we took a break. We both lit up cigarettes, and I said, 'Connie, if you were faced with that what would you do?' She said she would travel.

"And then she asked, 'What would you do ... ?' " WA

Images courtesy of the artist, unless otherwise noted.



NCM photo by Jerry Hymel

Hurley's signature work may be *Windows to the West*, a series of five huge triptychs, each measuring 16 feet high by 40 feet wide, which surround the special events center at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City.