

W. von der Weiden



Douglas Wiltraut's meditative American scenes celebrate the natural rhythms of life and the passing of time.

PATINA

OF LIFE

By Meredith E. Lewis

Paintings of rich, rural scenes pay tribute to the grit and strength of Douglas Wiltraut's subjects, their environments and their homes in a manner akin to Regionalism or the American scene painting movements of earlier eras. Here, romantic conceptions of farm and yard, child and worker are cast in dramatic sunlight with a quiet and reserved beauty. We see signs that Thomas Hart Benton has been here—and Winslow Homer and Andrew Wyeth, too. In the dappled sunlight we may think of Vermeer and perhaps of Velázquez, influences Wiltraut is quick to point out.

Nevertheless, the artist's greatest inspirations, we see, lie far closer to house and home, and draw heavily on his own memories. "Many of these paintings have ties to my early childhood, particularly to the function of the backyard," he explains. "The backyard was the Mecca, the hub of all family social activities, and I've attempted to portray the backyard as a symbol of family life."

While the tenets of Regionalism, in part, expressed anxiety over the growth of cities in decades past, Wiltraut's concerns reflect more personal, contemporary issues. "There used to be an affection for the backyard and for all the activities that took place there—celebrating birthday

parties, hanging wash, playing with the dog, cutting the grass and planting the garden," the artist says. "All these things, coupled with the images of the backyard hammock, the sandbox, the swing set, the slide, the wading pool and the tree house, provided so much to fuel the imagination. The sad thing to me is that all of it, except in the most rural areas, has disappeared and been replaced by the sterile suburban yardscape, where you can't even have a shed or hang the wash."

Inspiration

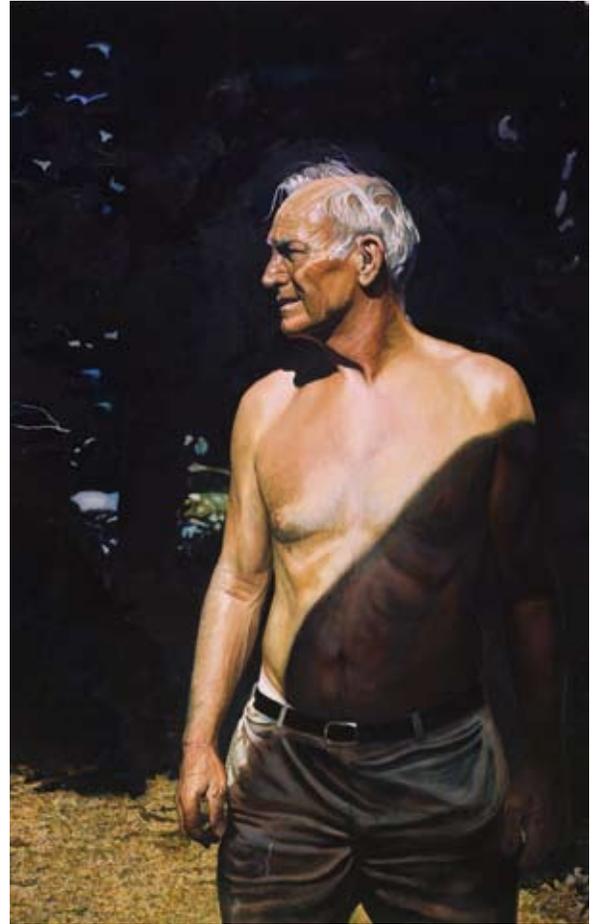
Sheds, wash tubs and wash lines—ubiquitous requirements of earlier eras—flavor many of Wiltraut's most compelling paintings. If the artist never had the opportunity to paint a portrait of his grandmother, he pays homage to her spirit in the meditative composition, *Tools of the Trade* (opposite). Depicting a life through household objects at rest, Wiltraut recalls his grandmother's tenacity and her vivid presence in his childhood. "I used to walk to my grandmother's house from grade school to eat lunch," he remembers. "She would prepare all sorts of old-world dishes for me: breaded noodles, milk rice and homemade goulash. ... I would watch her at the sewing machine, pumping away at the treadle, and this painting of a wash mop and dish towel encompasses all of these memories for me."

Intrigued by what he refers to as "the patina of life," the artist often paints pictures that celebrate the proof of time's effects. "I'm intrigued by the passage of time," he says, "and the evidence of that passage on people or objects." In works such as

Reward "I'd been searching for this image for over two years, and after a chance turn on an unfamiliar road, there it was," says Wiltraut. "*Tools of the Trade* [watercolor on paper, 40x30] is really a portrait of my grandmother, whom I never had the chance to paint, and a tribute to the role of all the housewives of her era."



A Character “‘You can call me Reds, you can call me the red baron, you can call me anything you want,’ was what Reds said to me the first time I met him,” says Wiltraut of his inspiration for *Reds* (egg tempera on paper, 57x40). “The local historian, he knew about everything that was going on, as he didn’t miss a trick from his perch on the front stoop of his house. I’ve done more paintings of him than of any other person.”



Pride Family Man (watercolor on paper, 56x36) portrays the artist’s father, a hard worker who raised a family of five children and built his house with his bare hands. Here he stands, taking a break from having just applied a fresh coat of paint to the house, says Wiltraut.

Cracked Rib, *The Silent Ax* and *Mare’s Tail* (on pages 46 and 47), retired objects assume primacy in their respective compositions, while *Gutted* and *Bone Dry* pay homage to vacant structures beyond the point of usefulness.

If the figures shown in *Reds* and *Family Man* (above) seem similarly timeworn, there is perhaps in these paintings an even deeper feeling of reverence, of respect. Rather than fearing the passage of time, as many of us do, Wiltraut embraces it. “Most people don’t enjoy getting older,” he says, “and they realize as they do get older that time starts to go by more quickly.” By celebrating the wisdom and life experience that comes with age, the artist manages to achieve quiet compositions that resist melancholy. “There’s a beauty to the passage of time and the effects it has on objects and people,” Wiltraut says. “Timeworn textures,

a face with a story to tell, the patina of life are all things I like to portray. The passage of time is something we all have to deal with. I almost always paint these objects and people in a strong, raking sunlight with elongated shadows, which results in what I refer to as a ‘special visual moment,’ a moment when the ordinary is elevated to something memorable.”

Process

Although he usually paints scenes infused with sunlight and dramatic cast shadows, Wiltraut prefers to paint at night and deep into the dark

Found *Looking at the Moon* (watercolor on paper, 39x28) is a portrait of the artist’s friend Bob during one of their marble digs. “He’s looking through an Akro Agate moonie marble; hence the title of the painting,” says Wiltraut.



Richard L. Williams



Ghost House The home in *Gutted* (watercolor on paper, 21x29) was located near one of the places Wiltraut goes to collect arrowheads. The windows had been removed prior to the demolition of the house. “I loved the color of the rust on the tin roof,” says the artist. “I always hate to see these old houses disappear.”



A Tribute In *Cracked Rib* (egg tempera on paper, 48x48), Wiltraut pays homage to one of his favorite painters, Winslow Homer, and one of his favorite places, the Adirondacks. “This pair of snowshoes—a visual reminder of the days of Homer’s hunting guides—were taken out for their final hike by a friend during the ‘blizzard of the century,’” says Wiltraut. “Fortunately, the snowshoes suffered the cracked rib, not him.”



Social Commentary “With *The Silent Ax* [egg tempera on paper, 17x22], I tried to make a statement about my feelings regarding the cutting of the world’s forests,” says Wiltraut. “This ax head had rusted from disuse, and I thought if all of the world’s axes had fallen silent, perhaps the forests could still be saved.”

morning hours when distractions are few. Like his subjects, the artist spends his days out-of-doors, savoring and observing nature and the land surrounding his Pennsylvania home. Amateur archeology, arrowhead collecting, hunting for lost marbles in trash heaps and long walks, Wiltraut says, serve as his *plein air* study and prepare him for his night work in the studio. “N.C. Wyeth used to stress to his children the importance of being outside and doing the tasks of life—digging in the garden, chopping and stacking firewood, and picking fruits and vegetables from the orchard and garden,” he says. “All of these activities are needed for the artist to bring soul to the easel. To me, sitting at the easel during the day is counterproductive.”

In order to paint light at night, Wiltraut uses a sketch or a photograph to record the shape of a cast shadow. He doesn’t see working this way as a hindrance, since the lighting situations he paints are fleeting anyway. Very often, the artist says, he brings objects he’s painting into his studio to create a modified version of his scene indoors to work from, and he uses “instinctive composition” to design his paintings. “When something looks right,” he notes, “it usually is.”

For works that contain figures, such as *Family Man* or *Looking at the Moon* (on page 45), Wiltraut begins with the face and skin. “I try to get the facial area fairly close to what I want it to look like before proceeding to the other areas,” he says. “If the face doesn’t turn out right, what’s the point?” Using the English watercolor method, Wiltraut brushes a clear passage of water over the chosen area of skin first before applying a single color to this newly wet spot. After the color dries, a second passage of clear water and a second color are introduced to the same area of the paper. This process continues, layer by layer, until the desired pastel-like skin tone results, he says. Textures and details are added later to these layers with dry-brush techniques.

Although he sometimes employs a background wash first, Wiltraut usually works around the near-finished figure with a wet-on-dry approach. “When the background value is established to the darkness that I want, I will then go back to the face or figure until I bring the face and background into balance,” the artist says. “Because I love to depict a strong sunlight, my ‘balance’ really is an exaggeration of the values, because



Glimpse Into the Future “During the climb in gasoline prices, this long-empty heating oil tank seemed to symbolize what the world will eventually be facing: a situation where the oil fields will be depleted,” says the artist of *Bone Dry* (watercolor on paper, 20x29).



Look-Alike “The coil of barn rope in *Mare’s Tail* [watercolor on paper, 38x28] was a recent auction acquisition tossed up over the backyard wash pole,” says Wiltraut. “As I came around the corner of the house, the frayed ends were blowing in the wind and reminded me of the horses at the nearby horse farm across the river.”



At Rest “*Setting Son* [drybrush watercolor on paper, 26x39] is a portrait of our son sitting on a cool, stone doorsill after an afternoon of playing all day at a family picnic,” says Wiltraut. “While he sat there, he watched the sun set over the Lehigh River.”

it’s that exaggeration that ‘brings the sun out.’” Believing that dark passages without detail can flatten rather than enhance a painting with a cast shadow, Wiltraut takes extra care to include intricate detail work in his shadows. “It’s critically important to include details within the shadowed areas to create an illusion of reality,” he says. “When you peer into a dark shadow you can still see things.”

Meaning

Wiltraut, who also works in egg tempera, notes that he achieves his paintings with the aid of extreme tunnel vision, choosing to work on one painting—and one painting alone—until that work is complete. Patience is also important, he says, noting that he spent two years searching for the perfect composition that would become *Tools of the Trade*. “If you’re patient with your



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overwhelmingly express reverence—and wonder—at the space, time and place of their subjects. In *Setting Son* (at left), we see a young boy—the artist’s son—at rest on the cool, front stoop of a relative’s home after a long day of outdoor play. As the sun casts his face in a healthy glow, we can’t help but notice the shadow gaping behind him from the open front door—and the interior adult world waiting beyond it. A painting as much about growing up as it is about the pleasures of childhood, the work tempts us to see here a portrait of the artist himself as a young boy and the breadth of time from present to past.

From time to time in Wiltraut’s paintings, we get the feeling that we’re looking at a lost world, or perhaps at a world that is being lost, and in the process discover it all over again. In *Looking at the Moon*, a painting about “lost and found,” an outdoorsman delights in reclaiming a precious relic of childhood, a simple but striking marble. This portrait of Wiltraut’s friend Bob also celebrates the artist’s own collecting instincts and the value he places on everyday treasures. “Nature was a major passion with my family,” he says. “Camping trips exposed us to every facet the woods and streams had to offer.”

Describing his boyhood, Wiltraut recounts collecting everything from fossils in the Dakota Badlands to bottle caps—his first experience with color—to agates on the shores of Lake Superior and butterflies in the Carolinas, and the moment of discovery always gave him a special thrill. “There was never a shortage of exposure to the magnificence of Nature,” he says. “It opened my eyes, and I drank it in.” 

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imagery, a lot of times fate will reward you,” he says of the road trip that accidentally yielded the composition. “On that particular day, fate gave me that image.” Wiltraut also notes the importance of the choices any artist makes when creating a new piece. “There are many different avenues you can go down when you’re beginning a painting,” he says. “There are so many different ways to get to an image, but the image you offer is the only image people see.”

Be it a still life, an architectural landscape or yardscape, or a portrait, Wiltraut’s paintings



To see more of Douglas Wiltraut’s poignant paintings, visit the online gallery of his work at www.artistsnetwork.com/article/wc-wiltraut-gallery.