

An Affinity for Allegory

Jim Carson's grand canvases capture the western narrative in glorious images

By Mark Mussari

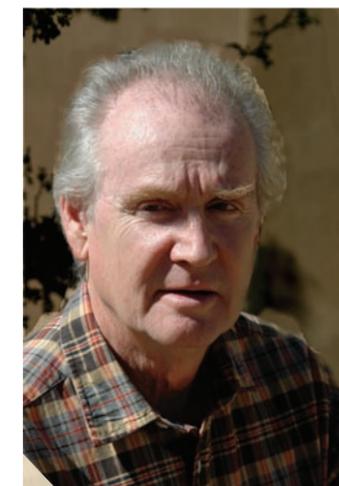
JIM CARSON HAS a confession to make: His art career began with a theft. Born in Little Rock, AR, and raised in Memphis, TN, Carson grew up in a strict religious family that offered little support for his creative side. "I had a passion for painting," explains Carson, "but I had an older brother who was always drawing. Although the family had determined that his brother was destined for an art career, young Jim at the age of 6 stole more than his brother's thunder."

He was in fourth grade and I was in first when he brought home a book on the history of art for a report he was writing," recalls Carson. One night, he absconded with his brother's book. "I opened it up

and flipped to a painting by the French painter [Jean-Honoré] Fragonard, a picture of a woman in stark light, and I was just electrified," says Carson. "I hid the book so he couldn't take it back to the library—in fact, I still have it. In time, Carson's older brother lost interest in art, but the childhood transgression proved to be prophetic. Today Carson is an accomplished western painter, renowned for his mammoth canvases of detailed, highly narrative historical scenes."

Exposure to western scenery came early for Carson. At the age of 12, he took his first trip out west for a stay at the Philmont Scout Ranch in Cimarron, NM, where he spent two months hiking through the Rocky Mountains.

"I immediately fell in love with the landscape," he says. Carson's family kept horses, which also fostered his interest in all things western. "And I watched a lot of B-grade western movies," he adds. "Still, the road to his career



DOSSIER

REPRESENTATION

Mountain Trails Gallery, Jackson, WY; May Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ; Texas Art Gallery, Dallas, TX; Mockingbird Gallery, Bend, OR; www.jimcarsonstudio.com.

as a painter of western scenes was anything but direct.

Excelling in math and science in school, Carson at first pursued studies in molecular physics, ultimately earning a Ph.D. from New York University. Along the way, his passion for art kept resurfacing. "I chose to be in New York City so that I could be closer to the art museums," he now admits. "It was a conscious decision—I wanted to be as close to art as I could get. During his first summer break from graduate school, Car-

OUT OF INDEPENDENCE, OIL, 44 X 64.





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son traveled to Florence to see works by Michelangelo. “I came across one of his pietàs, and I sat there sketching it,” remembers Carson. “It was the first time I drew something realistically.”

While pursuing his graduate studies, Carson also took classes at the Art Students League of New York. After completing his Ph.D. and publishing his dissertation and a number of other scientific articles, he became a doctoral fellow at Princeton University. Still, art continued to haunt him: “Every night I would drive from Princeton back to New York City and paint at the Art Stu-

dents League.” Carson finally decided to switch his career from science to art. He started working as an agent for illustrators and, concurrently, began illustrating covers for western novels.

Within two years Carson had founded his own agency, which he ran for the next 21 years, while he continued to paint at night and on weekends. In 1984, he was nominated for a coveted Spur Award for one of his cover illustrations. “Eventually, I heard about the prevalence of western art in Arizona,” he comments. “So I showed transparencies of my work to some galleries in Scottsdale.” The folks at May Gallery liked what they saw, and Carson began to participate in group shows there.

WHILE CARSON FEELS a strong affinity for the allegorical nature of Renaissance art—and for such masters as Rembrandt, Raphael, and da Vinci—he also cites some of the gi-



◀ **LEWIS AND CLARK AT THE GREAT FALLS, OIL, 36 X 54.**
IN THE BITTERROOTS, OIL, 54 X 60. ▶

ants of western art among his influences. He mentions Charles Russell frequently. “Russell was a true genius, a consummate western storyteller,” says Carson, who admits that a strong narrative motivates him more than any other element in painting. “I consider myself more allegorical than most western artists,” he notes. “My paintings have a broader context.”

They are also undeniably broad in size—up to 5 feet wide—yet Carson’s paintings seem to necessitate such large sizes to contain the variegated stories they tell. “Technically, I’m an historical painter—not an historical illustrator,” he observes. “I consider myself a romantic, interpretive historical painter.” While his stories may be invented, narrative constructs, they are based on historical accuracy.

Carson’s majestic piece **IN THE BITTERROOTS**, depicting a scene of the Lewis and Clark expedition, offers a prime example of this hybrid of narrative and history. An impressionistic landscape of a snowy mountain pass serves as the painting’s background; the narrative unfolds in the figures wending their way through this winter world. The figure of Meriwether Lewis walks directly toward the viewer while a smaller story takes place behind him. The Shoshone guide Sacagawea, wrapped in red, glances furtively at William Clark, who is looking back to check on the rest of the party. The artist relied on speculation about a clandestine romance between these two historical figures as the basis for this depiction. “I think I’m the only artist who would bother to show it,” Carson says.

The figures—along with some animals and blankets—provide the only warm tones in an otherwise icy canvas as the viewer follows the travelers through the snowy pass. “In my mind’s eye I

BEFORE SUNSET, OIL, 32 X 48. ▶
MEETING WITH PONTIAC, OIL, 30 X 64. ▼



could see the expedition coming down the hill. It seemed like a good setting for the story," explains Carson, who says he paints landscapes "broadly and quickly" but "slows down to render details" in the figures.

Carson's background in illustration still influences his painting. "You naturally think in terms of the narrative, and you truly learn to tell the story," he explains. Those stories occupy the central place in Carson's canvases and remain the driving force in his work. "Compared to most western artists, I'm more of a storyteller," he says. A piece entitled *THE GESTURE* finds its narrative in a mountain man proffering his rifle to a group of Native Americans as a gesture of trust. "It's a romantic interpretation, not historically accurate, but it speaks its own story."

Since 1997 Carson has participated regularly in the prestigious American Miniatures Show at Settlers West Galleries in Tucson, AZ. In 2000 he had his first solo show at May Gallery, and it has since become an annual event. His paintings are in a number of private collections—including that of the late historian and biographer Stephen Ambrose—and in the Pearce Western Art Collection in Corsicana, TX.

In 2001, Carson and his wife, Marguerite (who is also a painter), moved to Saluda, NC; he maintains a studio there and also at their second home in Cave Creek, AZ. "I'm a hard worker," he admits. "I usually spend about nine hours a day in the studio." For reference, Carson keeps extensive personal libraries in both homes. "I own many books on both contemporary and deceased western artists," he says. He also possesses a huge collection of period costumes, which informs his careful eye for detail. "And when I'm out west, I photograph innumerable landscapes and horses."

Carson hopes that his artwork imparts a strong allegorical sense: "My paintings are mostly about mankind and its struggles—stories about good and evil, stories about humanity." One of his pieces, *LEWIS AND CLARK AT THE GREAT FALLS*, speaks directly to his work's thematic nature. Carson based this powerful painting with its sweeping views of the falls on drawings and accounts by Lewis. It's a rare scene in Carson's oeuvre, because the falls, not the human figures, take center stage. "It took months for Lewis and Clark to find portage around the falls," he explains. Despite its historical allusion, the painting speaks more about the human capacity to overcome obstacles, no matter how great, and ultimately to find a way. Its grandeur—like that characterizing all of Carson's work—is merely a vehicle to impart that most human of all messages. ♦

Mark Mussari writes frequently about art and design.