

TIM SOLLIDAY



Where Spirits Soar, oil, 25" by 21"

"In this scene I was trying to show the majesty of the great American wilderness and how this chieftain was at one with God and nature, and how that can't help but make one's spirit to be uplifted."

T. Solliday



Taos Travelers, oil, 36" by 48"

"This piece afforded a great opportunity to use my plein aire experience while making good use of a kind of procession idea for composition."

'DID I MOVE THE SOUL?'

By Myrna Zanetell

Turning 57 in June gave Southern California painter Tim Solliday pause to reflect on the fact that the past 10 years represent one of the most exciting and challenging decades of his life. During eight of those years, he was privileged to work out of the studio of one of the nation's most revered artists while building a solid reputation of his own in not one, but two, genres. And, most satisfying from a personal point of view, Solliday has evolved from an artist seeking representation for his work to one who is sought after by major galleries and collectors alike.

Asked to explain the secret to the upward spiral in his career, Solliday credits a steadfast determination to face greater artistic challenges for motivating him to transition from being strictly a painter of plein air

landscapes to creating compositions on a grander scale that portray people and social settings, as well as the environment.

Growing up in the shadow of the legendary California Impressionists, it was only natural that Solliday would choose to follow in their footsteps as he began to pursue his artistic dreams. He had inherited his passion for drawing from his father, who worked as a technical illustrator for McDonald Aircraft. Winning his first art competition at age 14 only deepened Solliday's resolve to make fine art his career. However, earning a living painting traditional imagery during the late '60s and early '70s was not a realistic goal, so he bided his time, pursuing his love of art during off hours while supporting himself as a sign painter.

"In reality, I was an artist, except I

was painting large figures and hamburgers on billboards rather than canvas," Solliday says with a laugh. One of his coworkers, who was aware of Solliday's part-time painting, asked him to accompany him to a local bookstore, where Solliday discovered Harold McCracken's biography of Frank Tenney Johnson. Inspired by Johnson's loose, painterly approach, Solliday painted for the Western market for a few years, before realizing that he was more comfortable documenting the vanishing open spaces of Southern California and taking up the emerging genre of painting en plein air.

During that period, Solliday soaked up artistic knowledge like a sponge. He studied plein air painting under T. N. Lukits and life drawing with Steve Houston, a successful movie illustrator and figure painter



Woodland Mystic, oil, 36" by 22"

"This painting is somewhat light-hearted, showing an 'at one' with nature Indian figure without trying to be preachy, and making use of good design and composition."

who Solliday says, "really got me working from life." Works by early California painters, as well as those of 19th century neoclassic artists, also intrigued Solliday.

"Work by illustrator/muralist Dean Cornwell, who did these great procession scenes depicting the history of the early West, and that of English artist Frank Brangwyn also became major influences," he says. "Cornwall and Brangwyn began as illustrators,

as did Johnson. Having worked as an illustrator myself, seeing how each transitioned into fine art without losing their integrity made a lasting impression on me."

By the early '80s, Solliday's career as a fine artist had come to fruition. He not only was making a substantial living as a landscape painter, but he also was winning top awards in the annual exhibitions of organizations such as the Oil Painters of America



and the California Art Club Gold and at the Laguna Beach Plein Air Invitational. Despite these successes, Solliday admits to a lingering desire to paint Western subject matter, especially American Indians.

By chance, it was his enduring fascination with Frank Tenney Johnson that would finally fan that spark into a career-changing flame. From Solliday's first reading of Johnson's biography, he had been haunted by a section revealing that the artist had lived and worked in Alhambra's Artist's Alley, not far from the San Gabriel Mountains where Solliday currently resides. Relying on a photo from the book, Solliday scoured the area, street by street, until in 1992 he finally discovered the small Arts and Crafts style bungalow nestled in a grove of trees and looking just as he imagined it would.

Hopeful of one day making the studio his own, Solliday invited the absentee owner to his gallery shows for the next five years. Persistence finally paid off in 1998 when the owner asked Solliday if he would like to lease the space as a working studio. "Painting there was such a spiritual experience," he says. "It was almost like the great painter had never left."

Johnson's ever-present aura gave Solliday the push he needed to return to the Western art market. "The truth is, I loved Western art since I was 3 years old because, to me, the Western story



Meeting in the Poplars, oil, 30" by 30"

"As I said in the catalogue for the Prix de West, I see this piece as reminiscent of meetings in surroundings natural to the individuals, in that whether they are meeting in buildings with pillars around or out-of-doors with trees, the setting is natural to the participants and makes for a good composition psychologically."

represents America's mythology he says. However, I was a bit leery early in my career to paint Western subject matter, because I didn't feel the market was ready for loose interpretations of the West."

Bombarded by so many ideas that he even sketches them on the backs of envelopes, Solliday begins turning stories into paintings with a simple line drawing. "I think my compositions out in black and white before I ever go to color, the same way older illustrators like Tom Lovell did," he says. "In fact, Tom sometimes did black and white studies as large as the paintings."

Occasionally, Solliday also creates finished studies, using chalk and conte, before moving on to oils. "Using color is a natural urge for most artists, but one that must be tempered by a solid knowledge of drawing, he says. In fact, the palette of an artist whose work seems really colorful may be limited to a small range of individual hues because being well-trained in the use of darks and lights allows him to make the most of the colors he favors."

Citing the poem, "There's Nothing Like a Tree," Solliday admits to an addictive interest in the leafy wonders. "I do all my paintings from life, so I want my compositions to express that quality," he says. "The way trees sway in the breeze and have limbs that twist in all directions makes them seem to have a life of their own. I especially love using sycamores and poplars, because I'm able to capture the reflection of the sky in their white bark."

Trees lend a strong design element as well. "Their trunks have a wonderful linear quality that brings you



Watcher of the Flock, oil, 24" by 20"

"I saw this as a metaphor for God watching over mankind when things look scary and life seems hard."

into the picture, while the shapes of the limbs move the eye around the canvas," Solliday says. Conversely, he also is drawn to tall trees whose angular lines are reminiscent of the pillars in classical architecture.

Currently working out of a studio in his home, Solliday finds his greatest inspiration in painting Native American subject matter. "My preference is for the Plains Indians, especially the Sioux," he says. "They were a beautiful people, and their accoutrements were more sophisticated."

Insistent on working from life, Solliday uses live models in order to capture the draping of a blanket or shadows on faces. He is especially drawn to depicting his subjects engaged in daily activities that are common to individuals of any race. An example is a painting of one Indian watching as another paints designs on his lodge.

"It is quite common to see one person critiquing the work of another," Solliday says. "This is philosophy combined with everyday life, a bit like Norman Rockwell's approach. In my Native American work I try my



Refreshment and Finery, oil, 24" by 30"

"In my early training, I was taught to paint objects in still life. In showing a somewhat common trading scene, I was able to use still life objects to show the beautiful Indian designs and some objects of refreshment at the same time."

best to depict costuming appropriate to each tribe but, quite honestly, I am much more interested in the overall concept than exacting historical accuracy. The greatest works of art, such as the paintings from the Renaissance period were not that accurate, because the character of the face and the pose say more to the viewer than specific details. Centuries from now what counts is the overall spirit of the painting: Did I move the soul?"

A supportive family is another key element to the success of any artist, and Solliday is no exception. "Thank God for my wife Pauline," he says. "Without her I wouldn't be where I am today. She handles the business part of my career and sometimes models for me, posing as an Indian or pioneer woman." The images of Solliday's daughter and son—Claire, 9, and Austin, 17—also find their way onto a canvas on occasion.

Looking back over his 30 years as a professional artist, Solliday admits that painting Western subject matter is not much of a departure from plein air painting. "My landscapes already had a strong Western element, so these things all transition with one another," he says. "In fact, that is the reason I feel so fulfilled by the work I am doing now."



It is that sense of fulfillment that has made it easy for Solliday to heed the sage advice Lukits gave him early in his career. "To be successful," Lukits said, "all you have to do is paint something that people want more than their money."

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