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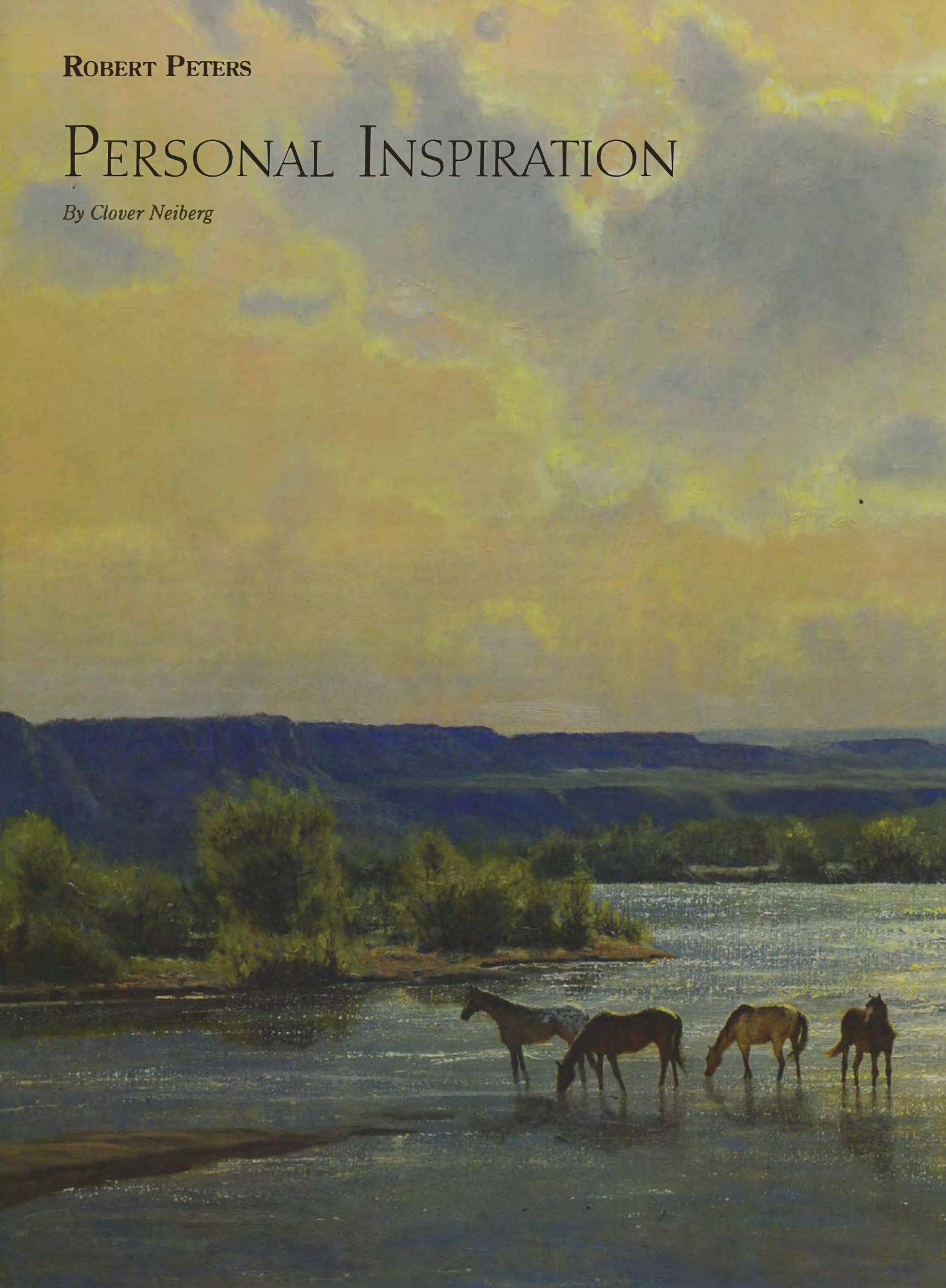


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ROBERT PETERS

PERSONAL INSPIRATION

By Clover Neiberg





San Juan Glitter, oil, 36" by 56"

"The San Juan River provides water crucial to the animals of the Four Corners region. Often, at the end of a hot day, horses will water along the sandy banks of this river. As these horses drank, I found myself inspired by the shimmering waters and wide horizon of this unmistakably Western scene."

Robert Peters is talking to me on the phone, but he'd rather be painting. As a successful Western landscape artist with a 30-plus-year track record, he understands the necessity of the peripheral aspects of the artistic life: the marketing hustle, the gallery shows, the website design, the research, the magazine profiles.

Peters is a good sport, answering my many questions in a friendly and engaging way. But, as he speaks, I picture him pacing his studio in Prescott, Arizona, hoping the clear morning light will last longer than our conversation. I picture him frowning thoughtfully at an in-progress canvas, making a mental note to return to an area that isn't yet quite to his liking. I picture him spinning a paintbrush between his fingers, itching to get back to the business of painting.

On his idea of a perfect day, Peters would spend five or six hours

in his studio, creating one of the vast Western landscape oil paintings for which he is best known. Blocking out all other distractions, he would move from one area of his canvas to the next, detailing one section, while the brushstrokes dry in another.

Depicting places he knows and loves, Peters would strive to faithfully recreate the rocks and trees, the clouds and shadows. "My inspiration always comes from my personal experiences in nature," he says.

Peters takes pride in his personal familiarity with his subject matter, painting landscapes close to his home. "I'm not a world traveler," he confesses, adding that for his purposes, he doesn't need to be. "Within several hours in either direction of where I live, you can find lots of different kinds of terrain."

Although he likes to start with a vision, Peters doesn't feel constrained by that initial idea.



Swan Valley Idyll, oil, 30" by 40"

"This bucolic valley in Idaho surrounds the Snake River, just across the Wyoming border from Teton National Park."





Sweet Day of Summer, oil, 30" by 40"

"Summer in the Teton Range is truly a special time. The idyllic summer days are literally buzzing with life."

"Sometimes a piece goes in another direction than originally planned," he explains. "You just go with it. You can't be that rigid. You have to let the art lead you. Sometimes, something else is going on. You have to be willing to experiment."

If he happened to finish an in-progress work on this hypothetical perfect day, Peters would stand back, scrutinizing the piece, looking for opportunities to improve it. "I'll tend to look at it, hang it on the wall in the studio, make adjustments as needed," he says. "You're constantly problem-solving as you go."

Peters works quickly and confidently. Speed comes with experi-

ence, he says, adding, "I can paint a lot faster than I used to." Working without interruption, he might be able to finish a small painting in a day's time. To complete one of his larger pieces, he might need to string together a week's worth of perfect days. As much as possible, he works in a linear way, sticking to just one painting at a time. "I like to start something and then finish it," he says.

Peters hasn't always been so focused and disciplined. As a child, coming of age in the Arizona desert, he was, by his own account, artistic but scattered. "I was interested in photography; I took a drawing class," he recalls. "Mostly I just kind of doodled."

His artistic focus began to sharpen when Peters enrolled at Arizona State University, where he credits

a much-admired adjunct professor as a key influence and early mentor. When he was 22 and left Arizona State to pursue a career as an illustrator in New York, that professor provided him with the support and guidance he needed to get his start. "She had been an illustrator," he says. "She was able to help me navigate the industry. I put together a portfolio, went to New York City to all these appointments, and landed a really nice agent. It was a great training ground."

During those early years as an illustrator, Peters created content for a dizzying array of clients, including Revlon, *Field & Stream*, 7Up, and *U.S. News & World Report*. He thrived on the deadlines, the high volume of work, and the client-driven environment and credits those years with laying the foundation for his



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artistic discipline and work ethic. "There was nothing touchy-feely about it," he says. "The client has to like the work; it's sink or swim. That experience made me a much more capable artist."

As he built up his impressive commercial art resume, Peters never entirely lost his connection with the deserts and canyons of his youth and found time for creative work of his own: landscapes, still lifes, and wild-life paintings. He enjoyed his work as an illustrator, but he knew he couldn't settle for that type of artistic outlet indefinitely. He wanted to head west, to make a go of it as a creative artist. With his skill, his discipline, and his unique artistic vision of the Western landscape, he felt he had the necessary components for success.

After more than a decade as an illustrator, Peters began to make his way west. He, his wife Nanette, and their two children Katherine, now 18, and Bryce, 14, spent some time in Durango, Colorado, before moving to California for a few years. Finally, they settled in Arizona, the stomping ground of Peters' youth, and they've been there ever since.

In the years since he left the world of commercial illustration, Peters has developed a style that is instantly recognizable to Western art collectors. He favors big canvases and big subjects—sun-washed canyon walls, shadowy peaks, changing skies over vast plains—but sometimes zooms in on the finer details: a shard of prehistoric pottery, a dappled horse, a bend in a clear stream.

Song of March, oil, 28" by 30"

"Some of the most dramatic and colorful Rocky Mountain winter scenes occur in March. With an abundance of fresh snow, bright sunlight, and colorful willows, the effect can be breathtaking."

Peters takes pride in the unique quality of his art, though he's quick to point out that the evolution has been organic, not planned. "I didn't make a conscious effort to come up with a quote, unquote style," he says. "Art is an amalgamation of all your experiences. I found nature to be very compelling."

Peters also draws inspiration from deceased artists, including Jean-Léon Gérôme, Willard Metcalf, and Emil Carlsen. "It all filters down into you," he says.

"From your experiences, you come up with an original look and feel. All these components of experience come together. It takes a lot longer than you'd think to get to that point!"

Peters has achieved and sustained commercial success. He's won awards and has developed a distinctive artistic style. He's packed one child off to college; the other, a freshman in high school, is becoming ever more independent. He no longer accepts commissions, preferring to chart his own artistic path without the distraction of others' visions.

When Peters is away from the studio, he's likely to be at a show, exhibiting his latest pieces. His cur-

rent dance card includes the Prix de West show at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; the Masters of the American West show at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles, California; the Quest for the West show at the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, Indiana; and the Night of the Artists show at the Briscoe Museum in San Antonio, Texas. He looks forward to returning to those shows each year, bringing his work to new audiences and touching base with fellow artists, who have become friends. In between shows, his work can be found in galleries throughout the Southwest.

Most of the time, however, Peters can be found living out one perfect day after another, losing himself in the flow of his painting for hours at a time. Patiently and expertly, he sets

paint to canvas, building deserts and mountains and rivers, brushstroke by brushstroke. Background distractions fall away, until there's nothing left but the artist and the work.

As our conversation comes to an end, I once again imagine Peters in his studio. Free of the morning's "taking-care-of-business stuff," with plenty of hours of good light left in the day, perhaps he's standing back to examine yesterday's piece. Perhaps he's preparing a new canvas for his next painting. Maybe he's flipping through photographs, seeking inspiration. The minutes fall away, and then the hours. Peters finds his flow. He is painting. There is nothing else in the world he'd rather be doing. *AW*

Clover Neiberg is a writer living in Portland, Oregon.

Colorado, oil, 36" by 48"

"This is my favorite state to paint in autumn. The snow-covered peaks, extraordinary fall colors, grazing horses—it doesn't get much better."

