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Artisan

N O R T H W E S T

Painting
the Town

The colors
of Rocky
Hawkins



Basket
Case

Bronze artist David Crawford

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C O L O R S

By Barbara Coyner

"Color basically glorifies the act of vision, and brings us into contact with things in our memories," says Montana painter Rocky Hawkins, referring to his lively palette as power colors. "I like to use color like a musician uses lyrics, and strike a chord with the personality. You know how words in a song touch people. That's what I like to do with color."

To Hawkins, color creates the image, conveys texture and gets people involved. That means he might portray a horse with a purple head. It all depends.

"I try to paint like a child would, with no laws. The child paints what he feels because he's painting an idea. It doesn't have to be historically correct, but it provokes your imagination," he says. "I'm after the mysterious side of life. It takes away the boredom. I like to make the normal abnormal by changing colors, sizes, shapes and perspectives. Let's face it. We've seen and touched it all, so why not take an image and make it impossible to forget? There's a need to show feelings and passions."

You don't skip over a Rocky Hawkins painting. It really is about power colors, feelings and passions. That's no accident, according to Hawkins, because response and emotion are exactly what he's after. He wants us to react, knowing that each viewer will connect personally to things hidden deep within his or her memory. It's all about shaking up the imagination, detoxing it from television, the couch potato lifestyle and the passive pursuits we so easily give in to these days. "We have a wonderful gift on our shoulders, and we need to use it. Color lets imagination be part of our lives once again. We need color spiritually."

Tracking Hawkins in conversation is the equivalent of traveling in a tour bus. His words are scenic, his gestures are scenic, and no doubt his imagination is scenic. The proof is in the paintings of his rugged Indians and horses, expressive women, and landscapes of wonder. The proof is in the power colors.



"Land of the Spirits"
11" x 14"
Oil on board

"I look at a painting as a large landing strip. On a large format like that, you have to have guidance. A landing strip has lights for guidance, so I use color similarly for guidance. Once you're into the painting, it's your exploration. You're the pioneer and you get involved because of the significance of the colors. What you see depends on who you are. My paintings don't provide an ending, and that's to keep you coming back."

Hawkins, as often as not, finds himself drawn to the Indian culture, noting that tribal people lived with the colors of nature throughout their history. The introduction of beads and colored cloth must have stirred something in them, he suspects.

"I have a natural love of the Indians that goes way back, and there's a gut feeling for the beautiful culture of the people. They lived outdoors in nature, sharing their land with the animals, and making their clothes of animals, so that they almost became part of each other. Indians are exciting and mystical, and they're an idea I like to paint. Color to them was a big thing, and when the trade beads and red cloth were introduced into their lives, they had more appreciation for something that we take for granted now."

In a sense, the Seattle-born artist has come full circle over the last several years. Granted, his pedigree might label him as a city boy, but it's the rural landscapes of his home in Issaquah, Wash. during the 1950s that captured his interest. He explored, he drew, he traveled, and he even felled timber in the Northwest in his youth. And yes, he eventually turned

to painting as his true calling, anticipating a bright future as he married and started a family. But all that changed when his wife died in 1986, and he was left to raise his daughters, four-year-old Cheyenne and six-year-old Cody, on his own. It was a dark time, and Hawkins admits that his colors became more somber in tone, expressing feelings held deep inside.

"Sometimes an artist can take a tragedy and make something of it," he reflects now. "I felt a large spark, and I began to push myself even harder in art. There

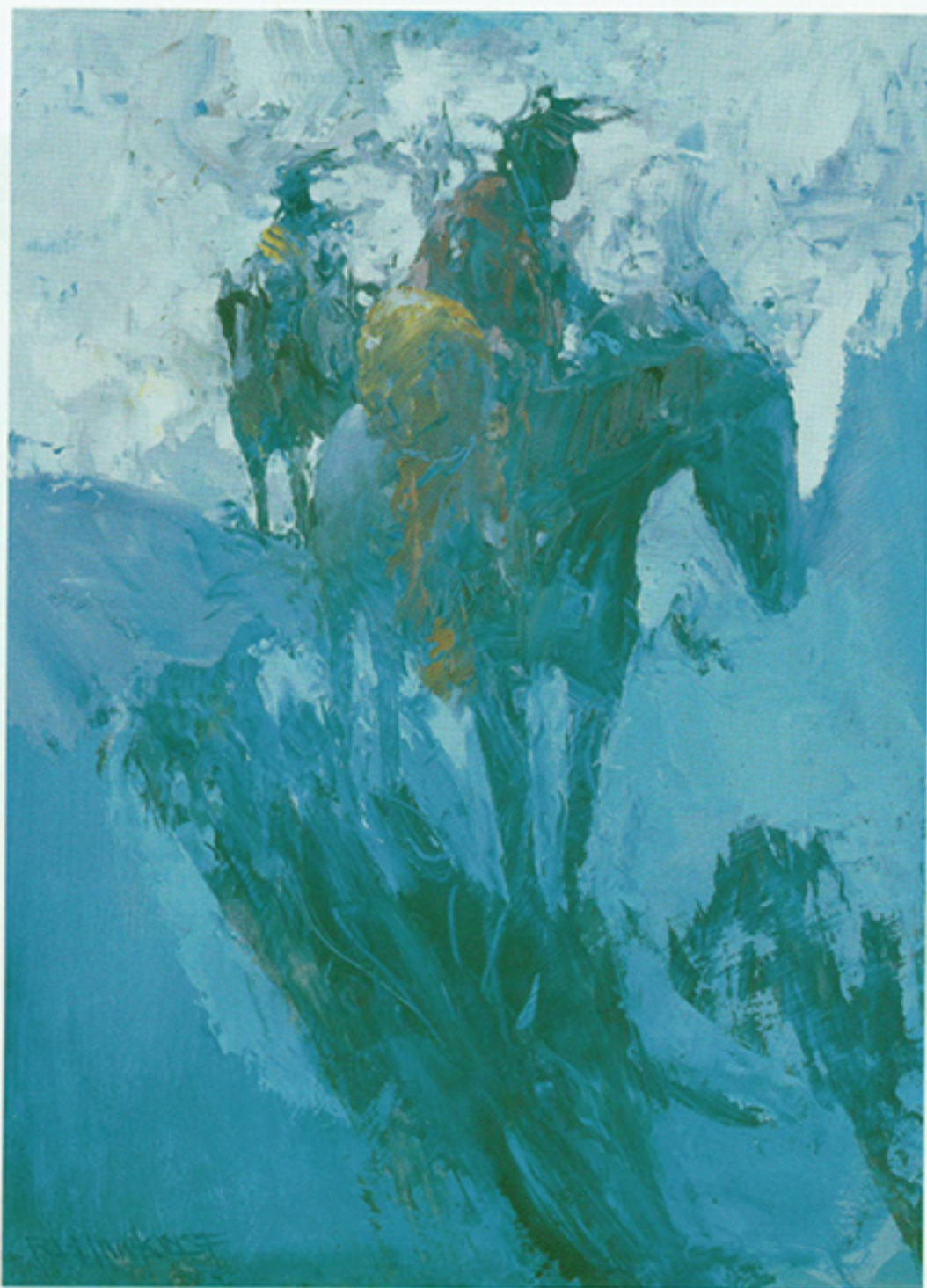
was a sense of determination, will and reason. I couldn't fail. The good part of being an artist is that I could paint all night and be with the girls all day, so that part worked for me."

Four years later, the color returned to Hawkins's life as he met Kat, a gallery representative, at a Charles Russell show. They joined their lives together, raised the girls and followed the art muse, which enticed them to give the Santa Fe art scene a try.

"I wanted to experience the art movement, the romantic sense of the 1890s,



"Eagle's Ghost"
20" x 28"
Oil on board



"Turquoise Trail"
9" x 12"
Oil on board

his inviting view of the bigger-than-life Tobacco Root Mountains.

"Most people think of Montana as bleak, cold and snowy, and they picture the Northwest as a primitive frontier. With the new art movement, we want to bring an awareness that the area has very talented people here. Some figure that everything happens on the East Coast, and they think we haven't caught up. Like, 'Do you have a telephone?' type stuff."

Rubbing elbows with other artists, Hawkins checks out their work, sometimes trying an experimental ingredient here and there. Secure with his own style, he doesn't shun mentors or new ideas added to the mix. "Others don't sour my cake," he says. "They are part of the recipe, plus me. We're all such unique people, and I believe in doing what is me. The recipe has room for new ingredients and seeing newness excites me and inspires me. But I won't forget I'm Rocky Hawkins."

going to the cafes and working with live models," Hawkins recounts. But after seven years, the big Montana skies called him home again, this time to Harrison and an 80-acre spread known as the Ghost Wolf Ranch. With a 50s vintage house and several outbuildings, the place had "project" written all over it. And so it has been for the last two years.

"Lately, my expression has been with a hammer, not a brush," Hawkins jests, noting that he's finally finished a studio. A barn on the property was the intended studio site, but another building serves the function for now. After

all, the painter has to get back to the easel.

He's also committed to being part of a movement to accentuate the art talents in the Bozeman area. That means time in town, time in the classroom and time in the community, all for the advancement of art. Hawkins considers it an opportunity to give something back, but nevertheless, it does take him away from his painting, not to mention



"Ghost Wolf"
5" x 7"
Oil on board