
Magical Moments

The California landscape inspires **Steven Curry**
to capture scenes of transcendent beauty



BY NORMAN KOLPAS

NEAR THE TOWN of Pacific Grove, on the northern tip of central California's ruggedly scenic Monterey Peninsula, two lofty coastal cypress trees twist sinuously side by side, their trunks shaped over time by the prevailing winds and the sun's transit through the sky. Across Monterey Bay, the sun sets behind the foothills, highlighting the silhouetted trunks and branches with fiery orange and bringing the trees to life, like lovers locked in a dance.

"I wanted to capture the energy of the trees and that fleeting moment when the low sun lights up the branches," explains Steven Curry, the artist who created the painting, entitled **LET'S TANGO**. His ultimate goal, he continues, was for the finished work "to be as beautiful as I could make it, to the point that it brings the viewer joy."

Delivering joy through such ravishing scenes has earned Curry a growing reputation as a talented portrayer of California landscapes. He proudly stands as one of the latest celebrants in a painting tradition that traces directly back to the tonalist works of Arthur Mathews and the regional impressionism pioneered in Southern California in the early 20th century by artists including Edgar Payne and William Wendt. "While I paint in that early California tradition, I don't want to paint *old*," he notes, emphasizing that final world to indicate his distaste for anything that might smack of copying what has been done before. Rather, he says of those inspirations, "I'm not aiming for a perfectly lit photo-realism. I want to paint with that kind of passion and emotion."

CURRY GREW up in a home suffused with passion and emotion for all things artistic. Born in Millbrae, an idyllic southern suburb of San Francisco, and then raised in largely rural Marin County north of the Golden Gate Bridge, he was surrounded by creativity. His father, a graduate of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, was an art director in the advertising industry and kept "a drafting board and all these cool colored markers" at home, supplies readily accessible to young Steven. His mom made elaborate afghans and quilts and created



▲ **Let's Tango**, oil, 22 x 18.
 ◀ **100% Organic**, oil, 20 x 30.

an upscale line of teddy bears that she sold to I. Magnin, a luxury department store based in San Francisco. "Every year they participated in an art show together, with my dad's woodcarvings and my mom's crafts," Curry recalls.

That environment fostered Curry's own artistic talents. "Art was something I was good at," he says. "It was fun to do, and I got pats on the back." In grade school, a drawing he made of the St. Patrick's Day parade won third place in a contest run by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Other students wanted to work with him on team assignments, for the good grades that resulted from the beautiful illustrations Curry drew. When his interests later turned toward sports, he says, "My mom always worried that I would ruin my hands."

As his high-school years drew to a



representation

Hueys Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM; **The Vault Gallery**, Cambria, CA; **Hillside Fine Art**, Claremont, CA; **Waterhouse Gallery**, Santa Barbara, CA.

upcoming shows

Santa Barbara Artwalk, **Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History**, Santa Barbara, CA, September 22-24.
 Anniversary Show, **Waterhouse Gallery**, November 18-30.



Downstream, oil, 11 x 14.



Among the Groves, oil, 9 x 12.

close, Curry's father lobbied for him to follow in his own footsteps, studying at the Art Center and then going into advertising. Instead, Curry forged his own path, beginning with art studies at a local junior college and then at the well-respected art department at California State University, Long Beach. Graduating in 1982 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in visual communication, he found steady work with successful graphic-design firms in the Los Angeles area, doing everything from logos to type designs to CD, VHS, and DVD covers for a wide variety of clients.

After six years, Curry decided to start his own company. The Curry Design Agency, based in Santa Monica, won such top clients as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Sony Pictures, MGM, and Nissan North America; three of its creations were selected to be archived permanently in the Library of Congress.

Such impressive projects certainly brought Curry benefits. More and more, however, high-powered success began to feel like a handicap. "I was so busy slaying dragons and putting out fires," he says, that he couldn't enjoy the rewards he'd earned. "I kept dreaming of early retirement and of doing more hands-on, back-to-basics work like making furniture or painting."

Finally, 16 years ago, he closed Curry Design and, on his birthday, bought 20 acres in Southern California's Ojai Valley, not far from Santa Barbara. The pastoral retreat is so beautiful that famed director Frank Capra used it for the setting of the fabled land of Shangri-La in his 1937 film based on James Hilton's bestselling novel *Lost Horizon*. Curry moved his family there, and he began to paint.

"You're not very good at the beginning," he admits with a modest laugh. "But if you just keep doing the work, painting and going through miles and miles of linen, you get better." Over the first several years, he also sought to improve his skills by taking workshops under the guidance of painters he admired, including Camille Przewodek. The real value of these experiences, he points out, is simply "seeing how somebody else does it. If you can walk away from a workshop having learned

one new thing, it was successful.”

Gradually, Curry’s own success began to be recognized. In 2007, he was asked to participate in the Sonoma Plein Air show, an event that brings some of the nation’s top landscape artists to the California Wine Country town and its surroundings. He gained representation from top dealers, including Waterhouse Gallery in Santa Barbara, and was invited to contribute works to the annual show at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, where he was a featured artist in 2013, 2014, and 2015. Last year, he was included in the prestigious annual Gold Medal Show of the California Art Club, one of the most respected organizations dedicated to keeping traditional arts thriving in the Golden State. All of these achievements have provided confirmation of his simple belief: “I could get good at this if I just keep doing it,” he says.

Through such persistence, Curry has gradually evolved a process that he feels works well for him. Though he sometimes executes small studies on location, he now prefers to do most of his work in the 400-square-foot skylit studio he rents in a small industrial area of Ojai, a short drive from his home. He may refer to sketches done on site, or to photographs he takes on his travels around the state. Perhaps even more often, now, the paintings come “pretty much from my head,” he says.

But that’s not to suggest, he hastens to add, that any given scene he depicts does not exist in the real world. “Elements of it do,” he says. “But the stylization, design, and editing involved in creating a painting would make it hard to see if you compared a photo of the scene and a painting of it side by side. I’ll ask myself where my focal point is, my brightest bright, my darkest dark. If I see the setting sun, I’ll definitely enhance it, tweak the colors, and make it glow.” So, for example, you would definitely recognize the windbreaks of old eucalyptus trees that feature in *AMONG THE GROVES* as those you see when driving along country roads near Petaluma; but you might be hard-pressed to find those precise trees in the real world.

At times, a somewhat more unusual source of inspiration may be the impe-



Winter Passage, oil, 9 x 7.

tus for a painting: a vintage frame. A few years ago, Curry started coming across stylized, carved Art Deco frames in black paint with gold leaf that seemed as if they’d been custom-made for his painting style. Now, he’ll occasionally let one of them become the starting point for a scene he creates, such as the somber sunset in *WINTER PASSAGE*. Its tall, slender central trees are elegantly offset by a gentle arch at the top of the frame. “It’s wonderful,” he says, “when you have that illusion of light in a painting, picked up by the gold leaf of the frame.”

The creative process, Curry admits, has become for him much simpler and also much more mysterious. “I wish I knew where these paintings come from,” he says. At the same time, he eagerly feels an air of mystery about what new

works might lie ahead. “What’s next? I have no idea,” he says. “But whatever is coming next is what drives me. I just keep painting, and my work constantly evolves. I still believe that my best painting is one yet to come.” ❖

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See more of Curry’s work at
[www.southwestart.com/featured/
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