

Praying with his paintbrush

Montrose artist explores 'sacred landscapes'

People make a beeline for Lewis Williams' landscape paintings the moment they catch a glimpse from across a gallery. The Montrose-based artist's scenes of southwest Colorado and the Four Corners region have bold lines, vivid colors and slightly abstracted geometry – a style of painting he borrowed from his parallel career as a painter of Byzantine religious icons.

Twenty years ago, Williams stopped painting landscapes altogether to focus exclusively on devotional images of Catholic saints and holy figures.

"An icon is an opening into the other realm, or heaven," he said. "We're looking through the veil."

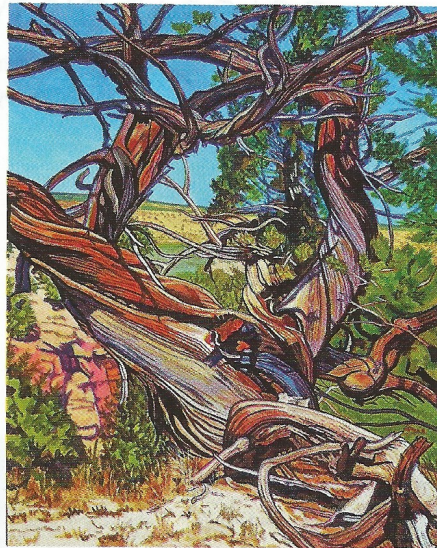
He spent four years apprenticing in New Mexico under Robert Lentz, a Colorado-born Franciscan friar and master iconographer. Williams learned the centuries-old rules for painting icons in the highly stylized Byzantine tradition. His training was as spiritual as it was technical.

"Every mark you make is supposed to be prayerful," Williams said. "Any prayer you say while painting gets prayed again when people pray with our icons."

Williams loved the concept of using his art to give viewers a portal into the divine, but after a decade as a full-time iconographer, he realized traditional icons weren't the only way to do that – the natural beauty of the Southwest could inspire those same feelings of reverence.

"When I look at this landscape, I feel an excitement that is more than I can explain," he said. "It takes me to a spiritual place. It's sacred."

He returned to painting landscapes, though he kept the techniques he'd learned as an iconographer, where the focus isn't on capturing images as they are on Earth but



Courtesy Lewis Williams

Landscape artist Lewis Williams, of Montrose, calls this painting "Grandma's Place."

on achieving a kind of spiritual ideal. Fluffy clouds become geometrical; mountains and trees are depicted with lines and flat shapes of color. Another holdover from painting icons: He still prays as he paints.

As Williams looked for opportunities to explore his new style of "sacred landscapes," he was accepted as an artist-in-residence at several Bureau of Land Management sites, including Canyons of the Ancients National Monument, near Cortez.

He felt a powerful connection to the spirit of those who came before him in this stark land filled with Ancestral Puebloan sites. Exploring the ruins, he narrowly avoided stepping on a rattlesnake. Shortly thereafter, he came upon a petroglyph of a rattlesnake.

Williams always begins his landscapes at the actual place, and though his stylizations are so complex he must finish the paintings in his studio, he tries to capture as much of the spirit of the land as he can, sometimes mixing water from a nearby stream into his acrylic paint.

"Sleeping Ute Awakes," Williams' painting of Sleeping Ute Mountain, which dominates the southern horizon at Canyon of the Ancients, so profoundly captured the spirit of that place that the BLM selected it in 2013 to promote its artist-in-residence program nationwide.

Find more of Williams' sacred landscapes at lewisartwilliams.com.

– Matt Masich

Denver's 16th Street 'doors to nowhere'

Perched above Denver's 16th Street Mall are two mysterious doors. On the second floor of the Tattered Cover Book Store, an ornate columned arch reads "C.S. Morey Mer. Co." Across, another door, "BARTEDES" carved in bold, appears to float on the side. The doors lead nowhere; opening them would mean tumbling 30 feet to the road below.

Yet these obscure doors used to be the main commercial entrance to each building. How is that possible?

The 16th Street viaduct, a series of connected bridges erected in 1899, ran from Wazee Street up and over the railroad tracks, South Platte River, and into Highland, dropping off near modern-day Platte Street. One of nine that left Lower Downtown Denver, the viaduct allowed people and vehicles to cross the tracks, the river and Cherry Creek.

"The doors to nowhere were connected to the viaduct when I first saw them," said Joe Sokolowski, a historian who gives walking tours with Historic Denver. "They did not seem like main, welcoming doors since traffic on the viaduct by then was like a freeway."

The viaduct came down in the early 1990s, and today the warehouse district has given way to a booming residential, baseball and restaurant scene.

See the doors for yourself at the corner of 16th and Wynkoop or on a Historic Denver Walking Tour.

– Leah M. Charney



Denver's historic 16th Street Viaduct, circa 1890-1900.