

the art of  
**SCOTT L. CHRISTENSEN**

I dedicate this book to my wife Karen, who is deserving of the highest honor, as well as to our four wonderful children.

Acknowledgements:

Several people were particularly helpful during the process of bringing this book to completion.

Sincere thanks go to:

Lauren Geraghty for her remarkable enthusiasm, perseverance, generosity, and responsibility to detail;

Clyde Aspevig, Dan Gerhartz, Bill Reese, and Tucker Smith for their time, their encouragement, and their sharing of knowledge;

Mike Atkins, Jim Watt, Gene Costanza, Dave

NeVille, and Merlin Wuebbenhorst, whose friendships have been unwavering, and for continuing to help me see the road less traveled; Scott Piazza and Andrey Anisimov for their dedication and expertise;

Gary Ferguson for expanding my vision of the outdoors through his gift of writing;

Bob Moeller for the forward, and memorable conversations about art and writing; Garth Dowling and Heidi Marty for photos and transparencies of the paintings; Sue Swift for helping articulate my thoughts and put them into readable form;

Bob and Gail Hughes for their avid interest as collectors of my art;

Denver Art Museum, Cowboy Hall of Fame, Prix de West Society, and Ed Muno for color transparencies and other help in this project;

Bill Kerr and the National Museum of Wildlife Art for their enthusiastic support from the beginning of my art endeavors;

George and Diane Kneeland, Maryvonne Leshe, Dave and Pam Pierce, Kay Northup, Ann Hughes, and all their staffs, for standing behind my work for so many years;

And finally, to the many others who purchase my work. Without you there would be no need for a book.

Scott L. Christensen

Karen



Tony



Meleah and Elise



Ashley



## Foreword

For us as viewers, before the work of art, the picture itself is a meeting ground, an invitation for us to witness what the artist has seen, felt, learned and distilled about the world before him in a moment in time. Before the painting, we become, effectively, companions to the painter. To paraphrase words from a recent essay on poetry, "Painter and viewer are two moments of a single reality."

Scott's attitude, visible in his work and clear when he speaks, finds him engaging intensely with his subject, accepting its variable challenges, its shifting aspects, constantly challenging himself as he searches for the essentials of what he sees as he translates the results of keen study and rigorous choice into paint on canvas. Looking carefully at one of Scott's paintings teaches that light, atmosphere, and hue can be seen to interact, even to vibrate, and this is what Scott invariably succeeds in conveying to us. His paintings stand as events. His perceptions are true. His mastery of his medium is sure. Clearly, he loves and respects the paint on his brush while at the same time he presses its limits.

We can only be extremely grateful for this book of Scott's paintings, which will certainly touch and excite those of us who have the great pleasure of knowing his fine work; at the same time, I'm sure that many, as yet unfamiliar with his work, will soon find their way to the paintings themselves. Doing so will be rewarding indeed.

Robert C. Moeller III

ON DISTANT GROUND

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Book and Cover Design: Andrey Anisimov  
Essay by Gary Ferguson  
ISBN # pending

Produced by: The Drawing Board  
263a Hatch Lane Burlingame, CA 94010  
Photo credits: \_\_\_\_\_  
Printed in \_\_\_\_\_

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the art of  
SCOTT L. CHRISTENSEN



## ON DISTANT GROUND

by Gary Ferguson

To ponder a Scott Christensen painting - be it of the Snake River gathering autumn in a cluster of cottonwoods, the Pacific Ocean swelling and breaking against the rocky coast of California, or a breathless morning in a southern marsh - is to trade for a moment the thrum of daily life for the buoyancy, the hopefulness of nature. In these works are traces of something Wordsworth once said, about how in the outdoors we find reflected the very spirit that drives our imaginations. Like the landscape itself, there is in Scott's work a sense that the painting is forever on the cusp of movement; that the light and the leaf, the bloom and the backwater, exquisite as they may be in that moment, are but one bright beat in the larger rhythm of the natural world. For me there is more than just beauty in Scott's work. There is breath.

Such vitality is spun out of countless hours Scott spends roaming the outdoors - field box, a few tubes of paint, a dozen or more sheets of canvas board stuffed into a backpack - in search of an ever deeper understanding of the natural world. In the course of a single year he will create literally hundreds of on-site, or plein air paintings, as a base of knowledge for his larger works. "I do a lot of searching out there," he says, pointing out that much of his time is spent not painting, but simply observing: noting shadows along a trail through the woods, studying the quality of color in a handful of autumn leaves floating down a mountain stream. The only way to come up with an honest piece of art, he maintains, is to go into nature often, without any preconceived ideas. "If you go expecting something you're likely to fall into a certain style of painting, a set way of solving problems. And that doesn't interest me."

Scott Christensen





**Teton Range**  
Oil on Canvas  
6 x 8 inches  
Private Collection

**Hobak River, Early Spring**  
Oil on Canvas  
6 x 8 inches  
Private Collection



Given that Scott rarely picked up an artist's brush until his college years, some would say he came to the canvas late indeed. Yet in a sense, art was with him all along. One of the strongest memories of his Wyoming boyhood are visits with his grandfather, who, having been injured in a farm accident and confined to a wheelchair, gave himself over to painting. "What I remember best," Scott says, "is the smell of paint in that house." That, and the fact that some of the only times his grandfather seemed truly content was either in front of an easel or showing off his work to his grandson. "He'd watch intently for my responses. Whenever my eyes would stop on something, explanations would follow."

Curiously, as youth unfolded, it wasn't art that called to Scott, but football, baseball, track, wrestling - a fierce, consuming passion for sports that lasted all through high school and into college. Then at 21, a catastrophe. During a collegiate football game he suffered a fracture of his C-7 vertebrae the life as he'd known it for so long, filled with athletic competition, melted away like a June snow. Reluctant to embrace the obvious career choice of being a coach - "it was no substitute for playing the game," he explains - there began a drifting, a sense of utter uncertainty about the next move. At one point, in order to fulfill a requirement for his degree he enrolled in an art class; the course did end up lending a certain spark to his imagination. But on the whole it was a time of long, frustrating days broken by frequent trips to a trout stream in western Nebraska that he'd discovered years before - a place where he could be quiet, cast a fly line, try to imagine what might come next.

It was along that stream, you might say, that the notion of being an artist began to flower - taking hold yet again, oddly enough, much as it had for his grandfather, in the aftermath of an injury. Scott found the idea appealing not just for the chance to express his creativity (that desire would grow dramatically in the years that followed), but as a way to be under the open sky - beside a river, at the foot of the mountains, in the places he'd long felt most at home. To some, the decision seemed an audacious, reckless act, a sure sign of a lost young man adrift, grasping at straws. What the nay-sayers couldn't know, though, was the depth of Scott's natural artistic ability; that quality, combined with the same fiery determination that had so often carried the day during his years as an athlete, was a potent combination. "We don't think anything of someone working hard to launch a career as a

lawyer or a doctor," he points out. "But driving yourself to become an artist, that's something most people can't fathom. My art was to me no less serious than medical school is to someone trying to become a heart surgeon. I studied, and I worked on my painting every day. Only one thing scared me - and that was mediocrity."

Scott's beginning years as an artist were rooted in the study of classic works from a wide range of traditions. Early on, for example, he was struck by how the Impressionists tended to sacrifice the drawing aspect of their art in order to get just the right vibration of pigment, producing works with an uncanny degree of light and atmosphere, paintings that fairly shimmered with color. At the same time he strove to figure out how best to incorporate those aspects of nature that would make his paintings stronger, without becoming a slave to the scene by trying to put in everything, pushing beyond what a painting could bear. For guidance he turned to the works of Sir Alfred East and Edgar Payne, men who were extraordinarily inventive when it came to selecting and arranging the most important elements of a scene. "You have to make sacrifices," Scott explains. "Maybe you're standing in a place where the sky and the mountains are very dramatic; the trees have incredible color and the water is vibrant. You have to decide what you want your painting to be about, render that element the most important, and then paint everything else to support it." He recounts a comment by Edgar Payne, about how nature does not "capriciously scatter her gifts to lazy poets and luxurious darlings." There in the outdoors, everything is in front of you, Payne assured his students. It's up to you as an artist to make it interesting.

My Father introduced me and my brother Jamie to the outdoors at an early age.





Hawaiian Critic

In the works of his friend Dan Gerhartz, as well as Swedish painter Anders Zorn, Scott became increasingly sensitive to the use of edges. A painter is constantly challenged to keep the viewer's eye moving through a painting, returning focus again and again to a specific area of interest. "My goal is to take you somewhere, and one of the ways I do that is with edges. Your eye may go from the edge of a tree in the foreground straight up to the sharp edge in a cloud, and the angle of the cloud might lead you right back down to the right side of the painting, where another edge at the bottom will keep you in it again." These hard edges, he adds, give volume and stability to a painting - an especially important consideration in landscapes. Soft edges, on the other hand, lend a sense of atmosphere to a painting. In depicting an aspen tree in autumn foliage with a hillside in the background, for example, the transition between those elements will take place largely along soft edges, allowing the eye to "roll" around the tree.

There were a great many other influences on Scott during his early years as a painter - talented men and women, classic pieces of art, rolling through his life like mountain showers, leaving freshets of new insight in their wake. People like Bill Reese and Clyde Aspevig, who helped anchor Scott in many of the fundamentals, as well as shape his direction. John Singer Sargent, Joaquin Sorolla, and Anders Zorn, whose work was enormously helpful when it came to helping him grasp the concept of painting what the eye sees. (Unlike a camera, which records everything all at once, in great detail, the human eye picks up tremendous variety, catching subtle variations in texture and atmosphere.) There was the day Scott came across an extraordinary tonal painting by Edward Steichen, an image of moonlight and poplar trees, rich with subtle blues, violets, and greens - a work he found outstanding for its subtlety and arrangement, unforgettable for its depth of imagination. And then the discovery of Czech painter Alphonse Mucha, who seemed to breach the known world when it came to inventive use of composition and design. In 1996, Scott had a chance encounter at the Corcoran Museum with a stunning work by Emil Carlson, in which the colors had been layered by working the painting over and over again, producing exquisite harmonies; on leaving the Corcoran, Scott took with him a new appreciation of the need to see his own paintings through to a higher level, to cultivate perseverance.

And then there was the delicate matter of what some painters call truthfulness. For this Scott turned to the works of Russian painters Isaac Levitan and Ilya Repin. "There's a subtle difference between pretty and truth," Scott explains. "There's a time when your work feels like a pretty painting, and a time when it feels believable. I'm working on an aspen painting right now, exploring how I can make it bright fall without making it gaudy or garish. The compliments you need to balance those bright colors are all out there in nature, but you have to be able to see them. That's a very difficult thing to develop." The hard part for an artist, Scott says, isn't painting a tree, or a sky, or a background. It's orchestrating all of those things so they're in harmony with one another.

Not surprisingly, long years spent locked in the rigors of athletics left Scott with an abundance of determination, a tremendous asset in meeting the challenges of art. And yet such determination came with certain baggage - in particular, a tendency to over-focus. "I grew up being trained to give it my all," he explains, "which means I tended to establish boundaries by pushing past beyond so-called normal limits. I had this enormous issue with color. On one painting I tended to hold it in reserve until the work was virtually colorless, and when I'd gone too far, I'd turn around and go in the other direction. It can be a big problem to focus too hard on any one element of a painting; viewing your work through narrow criteria can make you lose perspective. And in the end that hinders your creativity." Scott ultimately gained valuable insight into the effective use of color through the writings of landscape artist John Carlson. Good color, Carlson explained, meant "expressive color with its infinite variations, not merely color dashed in upon the canvas." Carlson went on to say that good color was about good taste, that releasing its power meant learning to use it with reserve, that masterpieces depended on the art of conservation. Scott talks about how, these days, America is saturated with what he calls high horsepower art. "These are the paintings that have lots of bold color everywhere you look. It isn't uncommon for people to purchase such art and then grow dissatisfied with it; what at first seemed bold, becomes abrasive."

In Scott's quest to unlock the secrets of color, an even more critical piece of understanding went unrealized. It had to do with the role of value, a term referring to the range in a painting between the deepest shadow and the brightest light. Value, in other words, has nothing to do with color, but is



**Pacific Northwest**  
Oil on Canvas  
Private Collection  
16 x 24 inches



**Lonesome lake**  
Oil on Canvas  
14 x 16 inches  
Private Collection



rather a measure of black and white. While Scott understood value to be a cornerstone of good art, its real importance didn't dawn on him until one day during a casual conversation with artist and friend Kathy Whiphler. "I think my art would grow if I could see values," Kathy told him. That simple comment broke something loose in Scott, forever changing the direction of his work. "Carlson used to say that the strength of a painting was how close you could paint differing values and still distinguish between light and shadow. Suddenly I was beginning to understand the truth of what he was saying. When I finally got it - that it was value that sustains a painting, gives it stability - a lot of other issues, including color, began to sort themselves out." Almost immediately Scott's art began changing, growing more solid with each passing month. By 1993, ten years after standing on that stream bank in western Nebraska and deciding to become an artist, Scott Christensen was receiving invitations to national exhibitions across the country.

In talking with Scott I'm often struck by the unmistakable parallels between what he does to create an effective landscape painting and the approach of a devoted naturalist. He has literally spent years outdoors, trying - and often failing - to render the color of a shadow, a certain light reflected in a stream. On the surface such painstaking effort might seem useful only to the extent that it would help an artist create factual, realistic art. But as Scott points out, such knowledge is actually the springboard to successful improvisation. It's a point made many years ago by the great jazz musician, John Coltrane. Asked by an interviewer how he became such an inventive, original talent, Coltrane answered by recounting all of the tedious hours of practice as a youth, trying to master the basics of clarity, note changes, moving up and down the scale. After going on for long minutes with such details Coltrane paused, leaned over to the interviewer, and broke the slightest smile. "And then you forget all that," he said. "And you just wail."

In addition to immersing himself in the environment, Scott sometimes uses still photography to capture things like topography, building structure, or the shapes of trees. Video tape is more useful still. He may turn on a video camera to record rapidly changing cloud patterns over the mountains, patiently watching the movement and then picking a design that satisfies him. Other times he may zoom up on the shadow of a rock or tree, all the



**Gros Ventre Cattle**  
Oil on Canvas  
10 x 12 inches



Jenny Lake Outlet  
Oil on Canvas  
14 x 14 inches  
Private Collection

while talking into the camera about, say, the amount of red present, filling in by verbal description what the camera can't see. Back in the studio those commentaries serve as important clues. "I bring all this information back, and then make color and temperature adjustments from memory. The things the camera gives me, my paintings from the field, my past experience - all of that comes together to create a solid base to work from in the studio."

That studio, by the way, is a 1200 square-foot, one-room log building adjacent to his home in Jackson, Wyoming. Inside, walls are hung with many of Scott's own drawings and paintings, ranging from 6 by 6 inches to five feet square. A large pallet - on wheels, so that it can be rolled around the room - is ready and waiting, loaded with paints and brushes. Nearby is a mammoth easel with elaborate counterbalance weights, capable of handling large framed paintings - an important consideration, since Scott tends to finish his works in the frame. Elsewhere in the room is an extensive collection of art books, black and white photography by Steichen, poetry by Robert Frost. Also dozens of hand-carved frames - replicas of old period pieces - and three enormous black notebooks stuffed with photos of the works of Russian masters. There's a loose assortment of still life materials: cups, vases, dried or sometimes fresh flowers, a detailed plaster figure of a human head. All of this rounded off by what may be Scott's favorite keepsakes - an assortment of old paint boxes, each one rich with memories of the field.

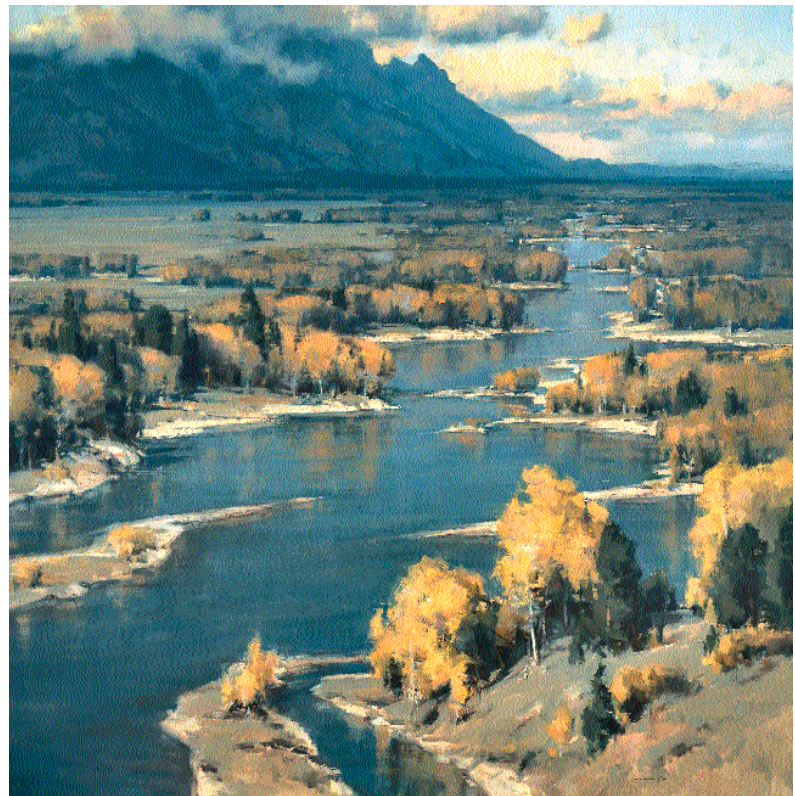
Beyond matters of talent and determination, Scott says, a landscape artist must cultivate an extraordinary level of patience. Appropriately, patience is one of the things nature teaches best and is yet another reason he continues to leave the comfort of that studio to paint on site in locations around the world. There is in the stillness of the outdoors, he explains, a certain giving up of expectations. In the hollow of such places is a chance for the artist to adjust his own rhythm, his own level of perception - trading for a time the rush of day-to-day living for the possibilities held within the smallest currents of the natural world: a breath of wind fingering autumn leaves, the distant whistle of a hawk, the sound of the artist's brush clicking lightly against the pallet.

All nature is but art unknown, wrote the great English poet Alexander Pope. My thanks to Scott Christensen for his steadfast commitment not just to know such art, but to release it, that it might blossom in our lives.



THE PAINTINGS

**Jackson Valley Fall**  
Oil on Canvas  
60 x 60 inches  
Private Collection



right  
**Pillars of Color**  
Oil on Canvas  
48 x 40 inches  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Pete Peters



left  
**Pillars of Color**  
Pencil on Paper  
8 x 5 inches  
Artist's Collection



Granite Canyon Runoff  
Oil on Canvas  
40 x 48 inches  
Private Collection

June 2, 1997

The en plein air approach to painting has come to me of necessity, allowing me to better understand natural light and convey its effects with paint. It has become a sort of short hand, a means of capturing the essence, or soul of a place. Sometimes it might be an elaborate study of elements, a search to truly see and understand. Other times, when I see clearly, I emphasize specific elements, and in the process produce a heart-felt declaration.

These studies are usually not attempts at finished works, but field notes. The outdoors is so full of information that it can be just noise in my mind; it takes work to cut through and capture the essence of a place. In that sense, the subject matter simply serves as the catalyst. Great works are not about subject matter, but about the qualities of good art.

If a painting seems as though it is going the right direction, I may see it through to completion. Often, though, these sketches are better left alone. Persistent effort to add unnecessary highlights has caused me to lay to rest many a painting. In trying to elaborate, I may ruin some of my best work.

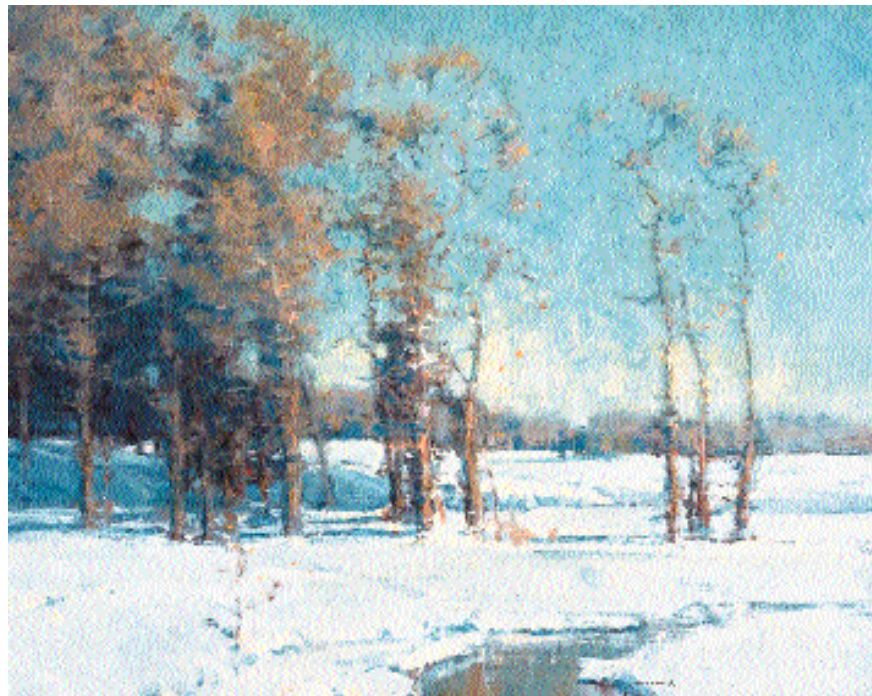
A willingness to paint what I think I see, without preconceived ideas, may still lead to failure. But oh, the life that comes from a good experiment! The search extends my growth and understanding as a painter. There comes a point in an artist's life where knowledge is not set aside, but rather driven beyond mere facts by a more important element, imagination.



**Fall Cottonwood**  
Oil on Canvas  
60 x 60 inches  
Private Collection



**Winter Cottonwood**  
Oil on Canvas  
34 x 40 inches  
Private Collection



**Moon Rising**  
Oil on Canvas  
40 x 32 inches  
Private Collection

Nature is to the beginner an enormously overloaded 'property room.' He sees, for instance, the myriad leaves upon a tree long before he sees the tree at all.

John F. Carlson, N.A.  
Carlson's Guide to Landscape Painting



**Moon Study**  
Oil on Canvas  
10 x 12 inches  
Private Collection



**Tower Falls**  
Oil on Canvas  
12 x 20 inches  
Private Collection

“Build up your picture from the broad masses; don't finish your trees, or your sky, or your distance first. Keep them all in hand like a musical conductor. Have no false notes, no discordant line or colour.

Sir Alfred East  
Landscape Painting

