





SUZANNE BAKER

Cowboys she knows by name, milling cattle, rocky trails, and a backdrop of some of the most beautiful mountains in existence — this is the world Suzanne Baker captures in paint. It has not been an easy occupation, but its rewards are genuine.

“I’ve always been very conscious of the beauty of Western life,” she says, “and I’ve felt moved to express it. When I do a piece I feel good about, I know I’ve accomplished something.”

Others know as well. Her paintings ring with authenticity, not only of the look and rhythm of cowboy life, but of its inner heart and soul. One is transported directly into her timeless scenes, where the crisp morning air, the horse’s sweat, or the smell of dust are palpable.

Left: *Sunrise, Horton Creek*, acrylic, 26 x 28 inches. Courtesy of El Prado Galleries, Sedona, Arizona and Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Above: *Dan’s Cows*, acrylic, 26 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Baker is particularly adept at capturing the effect of dust.

There's a good reason for this true-to-life quality in her work: Baker has spent a good deal of her life in the saddle. "Growing up," she recalls, "I was always on a horse. I was avid and would ride out as far as I could get in a day. Later, during college, I worked in a pack station in summer and trained horses in the winter. I even shod horses."

Her upbringing also gave her a love for the rugged California back country. The Sierra foothills were in her backyard, and she ranged far and wide on riding and hiking trips into the little known parts of the mountains. Some of her paintings are pure landscapes that portray the magnificent lakes and craggy snow-covered mountains of the High Sierra. She still hikes those mountains. She does not limit herself to one terrain, however, and says, "I love sage-covered country, and I often go to the eastern side of the Sierra and into Nevada to paint."

Baker's cowboy subjects are often people she knows, friends who own ranches or work on them. She likes to attend cowboy events such as ranch rodeos, but says she finds her best subjects in the ordinary workday scenes of cattle ranching.

When asked about her motivation to paint, Baker replies, "My mother was a fine artist and extremely talented. Because of tough times and raising a family, she wasn't able to use her talent. But she gave me the love of art and the feeling of wanting to paint. I felt impelled to do what

**Below: *Bringing Up the Rear*, acrylic, 30 x 34 inches.
Courtesy of the artist.**

**Opposite: *Shadows of Fall #1*, acrylic, 32 x 26 inches.
Courtesy of El Prado Galleries, Sedona, Arizona and Santa Fe, New Mexico.**



she wasn't able to."

Having raised a family herself, Baker knows first hand the difficulties of combining two demanding occupations. She painted as much as she could during that time, though she says "my family's needs always came first." Now that her children — she has two sons and a daughter — are grown, she has given art her full attention.

Though she had several inspirational art teachers along the way, Baker says she is essentially self-taught. She admires the work of the California plein air painters of the turn of the century such as Edgar Payne as well as that of Frank Tenney Johnson, who also lived and painted in California. An appropriate model for Baker, Johnson once wrote, "... having been reared in the Cattle Business, with its wild life in the open, it was but natural that I should choose the painting of Western Life as the means of expressing myself."

Baker has many collectors and admirers of her work, however she says a few critics have expressed wonder and even disbelief that a woman artist could so successfully capture the essence of the cowboy experience. This, she feels, amounts to a kind of ignorance, since women have been no strangers to Western ranching life since its early days. In fact, it is her combination of what may be thought of as predominately masculine and feminine qualities — action and ruggedness with grace and repose — that make her work so dynamic.

Baker's work has not gone unnoticed. In 1989, her gallery received a call from the White House asking for the loan of a few paintings. It seems President Bush was hosting a Texas-style barbecue for the Chinese delegation in Beijing and thought her paintings would be the perfect thing for creating a proper atmosphere. Air Force One flew in to Phoenix and collected three paintings, and her audience suddenly became international. The paintings were eventually returned after their foreign fling. She says this was one of the most unexpected things that ever happened in her career.

Baker exhibited her work with the Society of Western Artists when she was a member, and has won many Best of Show awards. She is proud of her acceptance in the national Art for the Parks competitions, since there is such a large volume of entries. Her paintings are currently shown in a number of galleries in the West.

Cowboy life is often described by those who do it as a difficult and sometimes dangerous calling. How does Baker reconcile this aspect with the beauty she portrays? She comments, "When you're out there, you're doing a job that might be rough, but you're still conscious of the beauty. That's where all the cowboy art and songs and poetry comes from."

She adds, "A lot of cowboy artists like to tell a story in their work, but I don't focus on that. I'm looking more for the feeling and mood of the scene. I love the play of light



Suzanne Baker belongs to the land. Growing up in ranching country in Three Rivers, California, near the entrance to Sequoia National Park, she learned to love the cowboy life as well as the rugged terrain thereabouts. Ranching was not the only activity in this community, however; due to its spectacular beauty, a small art colony formed. Under the influence of her artist mother, Baker sketched from an early age. She also loved horses. After college at California Polytechnic in San Luis Obispo, she returned to a life on the land, ranching and farming with her husband Gordon in central California and Nevada. After raising three children, she began to paint professionally. Baker's work has won awards and recognition, from the national Art for the Parks program to a past President of the United States.

on figures and animals and dust. I like the glow from the mountains at different times of the day. I like to backlight figures. Aesthetics is really what interests me.”

Part of Baker's success is the attention she gives to every element of a painting — cowboys, horses, cattle, distant mountains, dust, and rocky foregrounds. After one observer commented on the beauty of her rocks, she said, “Rocks excite me — their shapes, texture and colors. Every time I paint a rock, it's like I never painted a rock before. I realized at some point that in order to paint a rock well, you have to think like a rock.”

This sounds almost zen-like in approach, which may not be far from the truth. “I want to convey the soul of a subject,” she says, “in the spiritual sense. This sounds intangible, but I believe it to be the important thing in art, not the mechanics.”

As for how well she is able to accomplish her goals, Baker says, “I look at the old masters of art, and I know how far I have to go. But this keeps me excited. It's like the brass ring that's just out of reach.” She adds, however, “I feel my art is evolving, and that it's moving closer to all the beauty I want to express.”

Both beauty and utility are hinted at in evocative titles such as *Dan's Cows*, *Evening in Buttermilk Country*, *Pat at Work*, *Summer Cloud Shadows*, *Return of the Lunch Mule* and *Early Morning Dust*.

Baker's paintings bring Western heritage to life by allowing us to follow working cowboys on their daily rounds amidst the magnificent Western landscape. We see them in all their rough grandeur and with them we ride out, pausing a moment on a dusty trail to listen to the sound of distant thunder. 🐾