



WESTERN MAJESTY

Bill Anton portrays the lives and landscapes of today's working cowboys

BY NORMAN KOLPAS

ONE WINTER'S AFTERNOON, Bill Anton and two friends—a father and son, both ranchers—headed into the Granite Mountain Wilderness, behind the house where Anton and his wife, Peggy, live on five acres in Prescott, AZ. “It’s particularly compelling out there in the snow,” says Anton, “because the sunshine tends to melt things very quickly.” The horses picked their way down a powder-covered bank toward a stream, hooves kicking up miniature flurries, while the late-afternoon sun limned slanting stripes in the snow. It also highlighted the steeds’ contours and the angular branches of nearby trees.

“I always remember, from what little formal art training I have had, that diagonals tend to evoke excitement and drama,” Anton says. He eagerly captured reference photos, sure that the scene was

meant to become a painting. Back in the studio, Anton worked up pencil studies, as he does for all his works, “moving things around and trying to direct the eye to the main figures once I figured out how I wanted them situated.”

Satisfied, he progressed to a small, full-color oil study “without much detail, no faces, no reins, no bridles—just the figures and the color scheme,” Anton continues. As is true for most of his paintings, the oil study shows him what difficulties he’ll have to resolve. “It also helps me determine if I have enough information to make it a major painting,” Anton notes.

In this case, he clearly did. Anton went on to create a full-sized oil-on-canvas work, starting, as always, with a detailed warm-red underpainting that endows the finished work with vibrancy; then

painting over that using a thin wash of the true final colors; and finally, working around the canvas to achieve a well-balanced scene. All the elements are, as Anton says, “working together, but the main figures are dominant, with everything else, for lack of a better phrase, paying homage to them.”

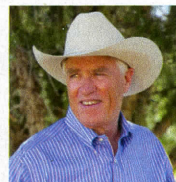
The resulting work, *FEBRUARY SUN*, achieves that quiet air of reverence—for its sure-footed horses and riders and for the glory of the wintry western setting. The painting is among those Anton plans to show in the 2023 edition of *Masters of the American West* at the Autry Museum in Los Angeles, CA, where last year he received the Gene Autry Award for the best body of work on view.

ANTON HAS HELD THE WEST in profound awe for most of his 66 years. Born and raised in Chicago, he first experienced the majesty of the region on a family summer trip when he was 7 years old. “I never forgot it: the wide-open spaces, the scent in the air, the snowcapped peaks in Glacier National Park,” Anton recalls. “I had never seen



▲ *Moon Shadows*, oil, 36 x 36.

◀ *February Sun*, oil, 28 x 32.



representation

The Legacy Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ;
Medicine Man Gallery, Tucson, AZ;
Illume Gallery West, Philipsburg, MT;
www.billantonstudio.com.

upcoming shows

Masters of the American West Art Exhibition and Sale, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA. February 11–March 26.

Prix de West Invitational Art Exhibition & Sale, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, OK. June 2–August 6.

anything like that. And I asked my father why in the world we lived in Chicago." The answer, simply put by a man who ran a food brokerage company, was, "You can't make a living out there."

Nonetheless, Anton's dream of a life in the West only grew stronger. "I spent the next 12 years trying to figure out how to get out of Chicago," he says. Although he had always been particularly good at drawing, his aspirations at the time focused more on leading an active life in the western landscape. "I was interested in high-mountain hiking and fishing in

the back country," he recalls. "It was the geography of the West that drew me first."

After Anton's first two years majoring in English at Chicago's Loyola University, his father passed away. Expectations that Anton would take over the business vanished, even as he "had also picked up a pencil and paper again for the first time in about 10 years," renewing his interest in drawing. Anton transferred to Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, where he earned his degree and met and fell in love with Peggy. Around that

time, Anton happened into the Phoenix Art Museum and saw the works of living artists who were painting the West—the annual show of the Cowboy Artists of America. It included works by Arizona painter Jim Reynolds "that moved me very deeply," Anton says. "I had never seen anything like them. And I knew right then, that's what I wanted to do."

His efforts wholeheartedly supported by his new bride, Anton set about learning to be a professional artist. "Peggy brought in the steady income, and I worked at the painting," he says. "What-



Off to the Races, oil, 18 x 24.



Who's Got the Cards?, oil, 36 x 54.



Passing Shadows, oil, 40 x 48.

ever success I have had would have been completely impossible without Peggy."

Anton took workshops, studying with Reynolds as well as learning from other area artists, including the widely respected Ned Jacob and Michael Lynch. Earl Carpenter, well known for his Grand Canyon scenes, "told me that if I wanted to be an artist, to go get myself an outdoor easel and start painting on location," Anton notes. "I started going outside and falling flat on my face, but it was evident that something that difficult had to be valuable, so I stayed with it. I was a young kid who was very enthusiastic, with maybe a little bit of talent but a whole lot of passion." Slowly but surely, he began selling his works.

Around 1984, Anton was admitted to the Phippen Western Art Show at the Phippen Museum in Prescott. Renowned western art collector Eddie Basha happened by, introduced himself, and bought a painting. "And he became a very prolific and regular customer," Anton says, endowing the artist with "instant credibility." Eventually, having



Rimming Out, oil, 42 x 42.



Taking It All In, oil, 36 x 50.

resisted representation for his first five or six years—"just because I needed a whole lot of brush mileage, and I didn't want somebody else telling me what they thought I needed to do"—he picked up a few select galleries.

And thus has Anton gone from strength to strength as one of today's most widely respected and admired painters of western subjects. His work can be seen in top annual western museum events; in the permanent collection of the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, OK; and in the corporate collections of major American companies, including Sears, DuPont, Hewlett Packard, State Farm, and Bank of America.

Private collectors seek him out for his uncanny ability to tell—through a realistic style graced with finely modulated colors and painterly brush strokes—compelling stories of the everyday, contemporary, working American cowboy. "I always wanted to just go out and experience the guys out there now—straight horseback outfits—that are no less picturesque today than they were 30, 40, or a hundred years ago," Anton says.

AS ANTON HAS diligently honed his talents and his artistic eye, so has he also continued to pose new challenges for himself over the years. Take, for example, his fascination with nocturnes—nighttime scenes illuminated only by the moonlight or, perhaps, an occasional campfire. "I don't think there's anything more romantic than the night sky, and I don't mean kissy-face romantic," Anton says with a smile. "Just the drama of how everything is subdued and mysterious ... Nocturnal lunar light is actually dead gray, very cold, and uninteresting. If you want to enhance the night and make a beautiful statement, you have to inject a certain amount of cold blue light. But you have to be very, very careful not to get oversaturated, because it can become cheap and phony."

Among Anton's recent nocturnes, *MOON SHADOWS* certainly hits the right note, capturing the romance and solitude of a lone cowboy on horseback leading a packhorse across a pool in a mountain glade. "I like the play of the light on the hat and shirt against the deep forest



Coastal Range, oil, 20 x 36.



Finally Home, oil, 30 x 34.

background, and how the good triangulation of the tree in the upper left and the deadfall timber on the right lead the eye around,” the artist says.

It’s appealing to realize that Anton leads the viewer’s eye as surely as a horseman leads his steed. It’s a perfect metaphor for the way he merges his skills and sensibilities with the subjects he portrays.

His goal is that his western works attract people—those who might not normally be interested in the genre—simply because they’re well executed. “I want the quality of the painting not only to elevate and honor the subject, but to transcend it as well,” Anton says. “Being given an opportunity to delve into the beauty around us, and do it for a living, is an immeasurable blessing.” ♦

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.

See more of Anton’s work at
www.southwestart.com/featured/anton-b-feb2023.