



# WESTERN HERITAGE

**David Dibble** interprets a traditional rural icon through his contemporary lens

BY ELIZABETH L. DELANEY

“**ART IS A** vehicle that I think God has given us to understand Him and ourselves and others better, to be better as a world. It is a means to make us who we need to become as individuals and as families and communities.” So says Utah painter David Dibble, for whom art is not just something to look at, but to think about; something to inform and inspire. At the same time, he paints with a celebratory intent, channeling both his innate desire to create and his excitement for communicating a narrative in order to bring aesthetic pleasure while also stimulating mind and senses.

Dibble is a painter of barns that occupy the landscape of the American West. His canvases depict the iconic structures in rich, atmospheric hues that wax and wane in the light, a collection of pared-down shapes and line impressions. He catalogs these icons of farm culture, honoring and immortalizing them in the contemporary canon.

Although it took a while to materialize, focusing on barns as subject matter was a logical step in Dibble’s artistic journey, representing a culmination of training and experience as well as a return to the artist’s roots. Growing up on his family’s farm in Davis County, north



## representation

**Mockingbird Gallery**, Bend, OR;  
[www.dibbleart.com](http://www.dibbleart.com).

◀ **My Night for Chores**, oil, 48 x 48.



**Bumper Crop, oil, 24 x 24.**

of Salt Lake City, Dibble spent his young life largely outdoors, exploring the same terrain as his great-grandparents did when they settled the land in the 1880s. Closely bound by the family's vast homestead, with mountains and valleys in the distance, he developed a kinship with the land—both the land that people cared for and the land left untamed. “Those fields on our property were as much a part of my home as the building was,” says Dibble. “There was also a strong feeling of heritage, and a strong sense of place that was really important.”

The young nature lover felt an affinity for making art as well, and though he didn't realize until later that he wanted to be a landscape painter, his early experiences on the farm had a significant and lasting impact, engraving in him a deep respect for agriculture and the environment as well as his own heritage.

“I can see in hindsight that that was a huge influence on me, connecting me to my family and to my sense of divinity,” he says.

By the time he went off to college, Dibble knew he wanted to study art. Encouraged by his mother to follow his dream, he enrolled at Weber State University, where he studied art and vocal music; he later transferred to Brigham Young University, where he earned his bachelor's degree in illustration. Following graduation, Dibble worked as a freelance illustrator for a year before deciding to enroll in San Francisco's Academy of Art University to pursue a master's degree in fine art and illustration. The combination of applied and fine art suited his aspirations and fulfilled his long-held desire for more traditional training, including figure and landscape painting, in addition to plein-air



**The Spectator, oil, 36 x 60.**

work. At that point, the emerging artist discovered that landscape painting was his true creative niche.

**AFTER EARNING** his master's, which concluded with him painting a 36-foot-long mural on the side of his family's barn, Dibble followed his wife to New York for her graduate work. He continued painting, but in 2008 the market crumbled amid the economic crash, forcing him to seek alternative



employment. Armed only with a portfolio of landscape paintings, he managed to land a job at the prestigious Blue Sky Studios, where he worked on concept design for animated films like *Rio*, *Ice Age*, and *Peanuts*. In a twist of irony, the traditionalist who had never wanted to incorporate digital plotting into his painting process now had a day job working exclusively with digital imaging and illustration. Consequently, the new skills and knowledge he gained from the digital process enhanced his

fine-art practice, allowing him to more effectively map out compositions, lighting, and color stories.

After six years at Blue Sky, Dibble was recruited by Brigham Young University to teach illustration, and he and his family returned to Utah. He has found teaching to be an extremely rewarding career in terms of honing and understanding his own artwork. "Teaching has been a powerful way to develop as an artist," he says. More than that, Dibble loves working with the students,

watching them learn and grow, and contributing to their life's journeys. "It's really powerful to be part of something bigger than yourself," he adds.

In addition to the opportunity to share his gifts in the classroom, Dibble was pleased to move back to his native state so he could reconnect with the landscape that first captivated him as a boy. "Engrained in my soul was this western aesthetic," he says. "It was really enlivening to come out west again and see all this color that I'd been

missing—the rawness and roughness of the West.” Subsequently, what surfaced upon the artist’s return to the West was a need to paint barns.

The definitive, universal symbol of farm culture, barns embody the identity and history of a place. They are physical

and visual evidence of a culture that is becoming increasingly lost. For Dibble, they also represent a personal pursuit in the preservation of his familial legacy, and also in remembering his father, who passed away soon after he moved back to Utah. Elements of his father appear

often in his work: A loosely rendered red tractor, or a can of WD-40, are symbolic of a man who worked the land.

Dibble travels throughout the western United States in search of subjects for his paintings; over the past 18 months alone he has driven nearly



**Patriarch, oil, 40 x 40.**



**Bluegreen, oil, 36 x 36.**

10,000 miles. However, many of his canvases are inspired by the barns in his own backyard. “Some of the best barns in the world are right here in the Cache Valley,” says Dibble, referring to the well-crafted, formidable structures designed by the Scandinavian immigrants who settled the area. “They built really strong, beautiful barns, because that’s what they knew how to do.”

**WHEN HE DECIDES** to construct a barn composition, Dibble first does

small plein-air paintings or takes photographs to capture the essential elements and spirit of the scene. He then moves into the studio, ready to translate his sketches and photographs into the larger, final work. As he learned from his days in the world of animation, digital editing can be an effective and efficient tool, and he employs it throughout his painting process to develop his initial concepts, perfect his compositions, and amplify design elements. When it’s time to apply paint, he works exclusively in oil, applying the sumptuous pigments

with brush and palette knife.

He pairs traditional subject matter with a contemporary approach, which is partially driven by his work in animation but also born of his lifelong interest in simple spatial constructions and limited minutiae. He traces his interest in this aesthetic to his time growing up on the farm, where the vast fields were delineated into grids stretching as far as the eye could see. Offering simple yet sophisticated shapes organized into bold, intense compositions, Dibble’s interpretations are not straight translations



Father of My Father, oil, 60 x 48.



Leftovers, oil, 48 x 48.



Long Cold Lonely Winter, oil, 22 x 22.

of the original scenes. Nor are the artist's paintings characterized by an idyllic aesthetic, or even the majesty of the land. Rather, they reflect the monumentality of the humble architecture and its deeper cultural meaning. "It's big, it's in your face," he says, referring to one of his barns. "This isn't a pastoral scene. This is a symbol of something bigger that we're dealing with."

He further explains, "I'm trying to talk about a lot of issues of both loss of agriculture that's changing in our culture, in our society, and those values that I think are being lost as well, and changed. And that we are sometimes too quick to develop, especially here in the West. That idea of private land and of Manifest Destiny is still really strong—that idea that there's always more space. We build like that, but we can't forever." Today, only six acres of Dibble's 100-acre family farm remain. Most of the land has been developed, often without consideration of the toll humanity would take on the area's natural resources. He doesn't seek to demonize those responsible, but to plant a seed, to make people consider the lasting effects of not planning for the long term.

Dibble paints as tribute, as remembrance, and as exaltation. His emblematic barns serve as a clarion call for reverence and balance in our perhaps overly cultivated world. "What I'm wanting to do is just have people think about it a little more, to celebrate what is lost, to celebrate what's still there, to make people realize the heritage that we have and the values that come along with that, of hard work, of faith, of community. Barns, for me, are very much a symbol of those things." ❖

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See more of Dibble's work at  
[www.southwestart.com/featured/  
dibble-d-aug2019](http://www.southwestart.com/featured/dibble-d-aug2019).