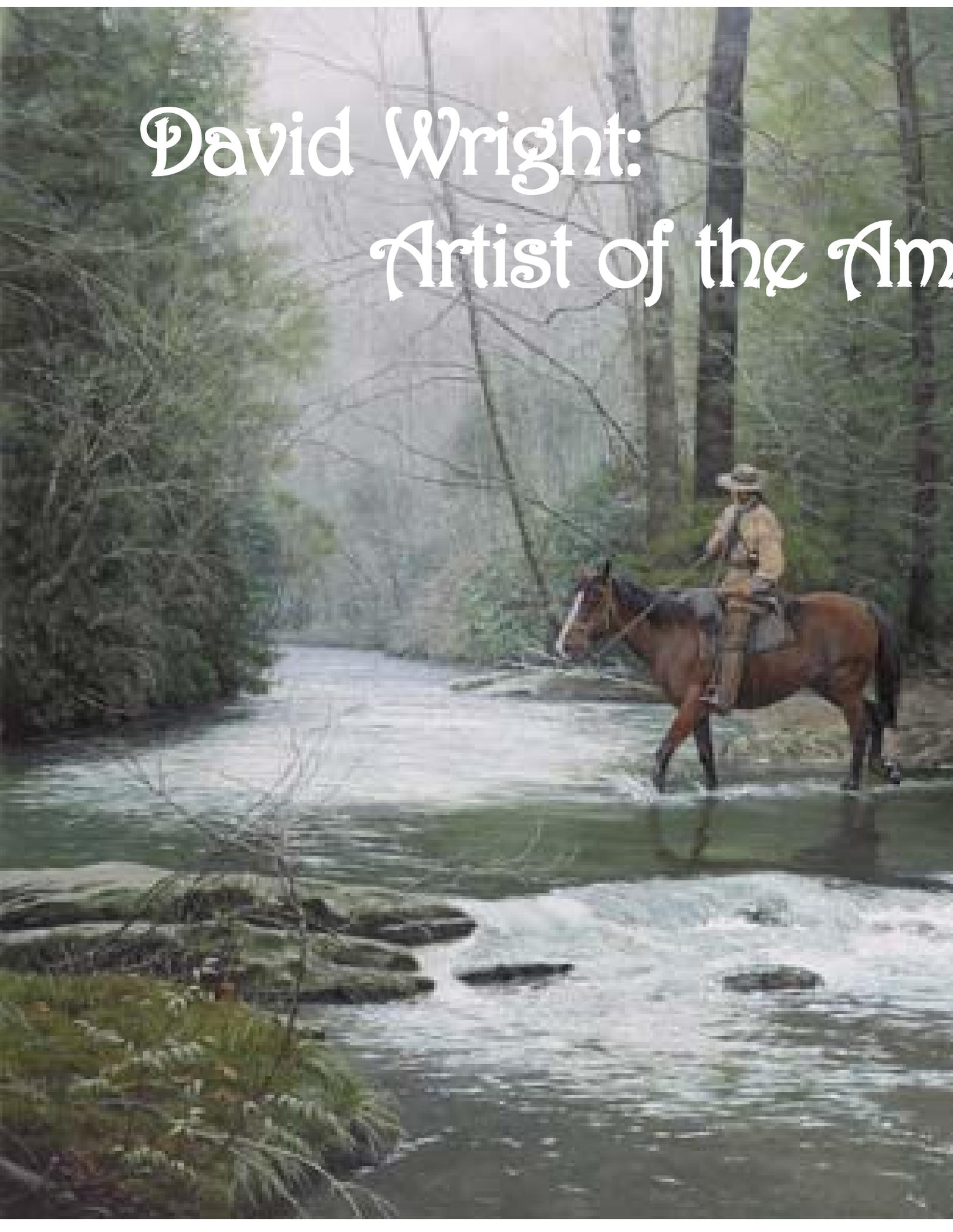


David Wright: Artist of the Am



American Frontier

by Joshua Shepherd





Gateway to the West - Daniel Boone Leading the Settlers Through the Cumberland Gap, 1775

In little more than a generation, it was gone. From the close of the colonial era to the demise of the Rocky Mountain fur trade, the march of the American frontier witnessed the birth of a nation, spanned a continent, and just as quickly passed into history. It was an epic era that captured the imagination of America, but which largely came to an end prior to the advent of photography.

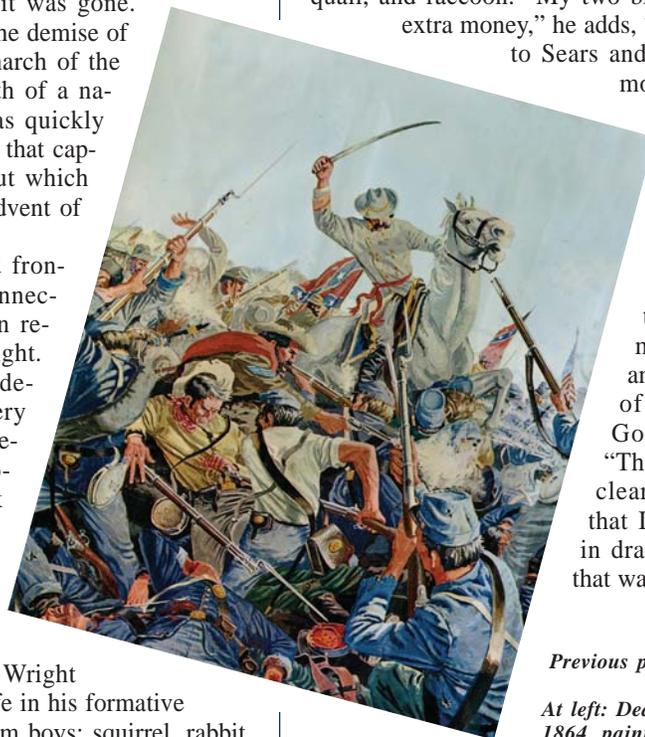
Fortunately for art collectors and frontier history enthusiasts, a visual connection to that vanished world has been renewed through the art of David Wright. In a prolific career spanning five decades, Wright's unmistakable mastery of the canvas, paired with a sober respect for the nation's past, has produced a remarkable body of work which has become an iconic fixture of the longrifle culture.

From the outset, he seemed providentially equipped for such an undertaking. Reared in rural Kentucky, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania, Wright enjoyed a good measure of outdoor life in his formative years hunting the usual quarry for farm boys: squirrel, rabbit,

quail, and raccoon. "My two brothers and I trapped to make extra money," he adds, "and sold our furs every spring to Sears and Roebuck." And, not uncommon for boys of his generation,

he became enthralled with the American frontier due in no small part to the Davy Crockett television series.

Fittingly enough, one of his first memories was an early introduction to art. At the age of four he asked his mother to draw pictures for him, and she obliged with renderings of horses and an antique Gordon's potato chip truck. "Those two images I recall very clearly," explains Wright. "After that I have always been interested in drawing and painting, so maybe that was the seed that got me started."



Previous page: Far Beyond the Settlements

At left: Death of General Adams - Franklin, 1864, painted in 1963.

The subject matter of his first attempts at art was somewhat predictable for a little boy: cowboys, frontiersmen, Indians, Civil War soldiers. “I got in mucho trouble in school,” he remembers, “for drawing when I should have been studying.”

Regardless of any potential neglect of the three R’s, his time investment in doodling was well spent. By the time he graduated from high school, it was clear that his artistic abilities surpassed the avocational, and he received professional training at Nashville’s Harris School of Art. Wright spent one summer in Italy with a select group of students; they lived in a 15th century villa while studying the masterpieces of Renaissance art, and Wright was fortunate enough to come home with a unique souvenir. He approached the villa’s owner –

a countess – about purchasing a firearm from the home’s historic arms room. For the princely sum of \$22, Wright selected an original Charleville musket. It was his first flintlock, and, despite its age, served him well. “I hunted with it for years,” he says.

Wright found ready employment in the art field in 1962, but his work went on hiatus two years later following a stint in the U.S. Army. After serving as an advisor in the early days of the Vietnam War, he continued a successful

career in commercial art and graphic design, but continued to paint fine art pieces on the side. He also became involved in the burgeoning “buckskinner” culture, attending blackpowder shoots, crafting his own period weapons and accoutrements, and studying the history behind it all.

In 1973, he recalls, “a major change in my art career occurred.” Wright was selected as one of the initial artists for Gray Stone Press, a start-up whose specialty was the fine art print market. For three years he executed landscapes for Gray Stone, but in 1976 he created a piece that emanated from his abiding interest in frontier history. It was a straightforward, black and white image entitled *The Mountain Man*. When

“I had become a painter of the American frontier, and loved it.”

Wright introduced the piece at an NMLRA shoot in Friendship, Indiana, demand for the artwork was overwhelming.

The phenomenal success of the print proved to be a watershed event in his career. It sold so well that Wright phased out of the landscape business and focused on the genre that he had always loved. For nearly four decades he’s focused his artistic energies on portraying our nation’s past, from the colonial era through the Civil War. “I had become a painter of the American frontier,” he explains, “and loved it.”



The Captives



The Warrior

Throughout his career, he recognized the need of honestly depicting history. While a good number of artists are content to simply capture the “feel” of the past, Wright acknowledges that “it is a historical artist’s obligation to present and future generations to paint the subject with as much accuracy as possible.” Such an approach has translated into a lifetime of research. Due to countless hours of delving into primary sources and museum collections, he’s now widely regarded as an authority on the material culture of America’s frontier. However, he modestly notes that visually recreating a centuries-old world has its limitations. On occasion, he ruefully observes, “The minute I conclude that a piece of research is solid and conclusive, and put it in a painting, something new will surface to add to it or prove it wrong. I can only paint within the bounds of my knowledge at the time,” he explains, “so I keep researching.”

Once he develops a concept for a work of art, Wright will arrange a photography shoot with a select group of models. They’re avid participants in the longrifle culture and, as the artist says, “They know their stuff.” Wright is also keen to portray individuals that are visually appropriate to the 18th and 19th centuries. Life on the frontier was by no means easy, and entailed extraordinarily heavy physical labor paired with less than ample meals. That’s simply not the lot of modern Americans, and, as Wright observes, “We don’t have that hungry look.”

Only after he has comfortably established the necessary historical research behind a painting and shot supporting photos will Wright move on to the canvas. Over the course of his career he’s used a number of mediums, including oil, gouache, casein, and acrylic; in the last decade and a half he’s returned to oil. It’s a demanding and laborious medium that has been favored by master painters for centuries, but requires a major investment of the artist’s time. How much time, he explains, “depends on the size and complexity” of the painting, “not to mention the research.”

His finished canvasses are renowned for depicting the haunting majesty of America’s frontier wilderness, and usually serve as a backdrop for the longhunters, Indians, and mountain men who struggled on the van of civilization. Rather than portray chaotic battle scenes, Wright specializes in painting captivating vignettes that humanize the dry past. “I paint people in the historical environment,” he’s explained, “In this way, you can see and understand – even feel – that essential moment in history that shows our heroes as they were.” A prime example of common men and women depicted in heroic surroundings is Wright’s monumental masterwork *Gateway to the West*, which depicts Daniel Boone leading a party of settlers through Cumberland Gap in 1775. The piece was commissioned for the Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, where an imposing 14 foot version of the painting now looms large in the site’s visitor’s center.

Wright’s familiarity with the weapons, clothing, and accoutrements of the American frontier has led to another venue for his creative talents. Twice, he’s been approached by Hollywood producers about serving as a historical consultant for major motion pictures: 1980’s, *The Mountain Men*, a gritty portrayal of the Rocky Mountain fur trade,



The Observer

and 1992's, *The Last of the Mohicans*, the epic adaptation of James Fennimore Cooper's French and Indian War classic. Regrettably, Wright had to decline both jobs because he was already committed to other projects. However, he



Wes Studi and David Wright on the set of *Last of the Mohicans*

was able to allocate enough time to work as an extra on *Last of the Mohicans*, where he made the most of the opportunity by arranging a photo shoot with actor Wes Studi, who portrayed the character Magua in the film. Wright has since used the actor's image in several portraits of colonial-era Native Americans. "He is the finest looking American Indian I know," says Wright, "a gracious fellow and neat person."

Since then, he's worked behind the scenes as a consultant and art director for a number of historical documentaries, including *Daniel Boone & the Westward Movement*, *Boone and Crockett: The Hunter Heroes*, and *80 Acres of Hell*. The film work constitutes a dramatic transition for a fine artist; it's a "complete mental break," he says, to temporarily "walk away from being a painter." He is, however, clearly cut out for the work. For his art direction of the film *First Invasion: The War of 1812*, Wright was nominated for a primetime Emmy award in 2005.

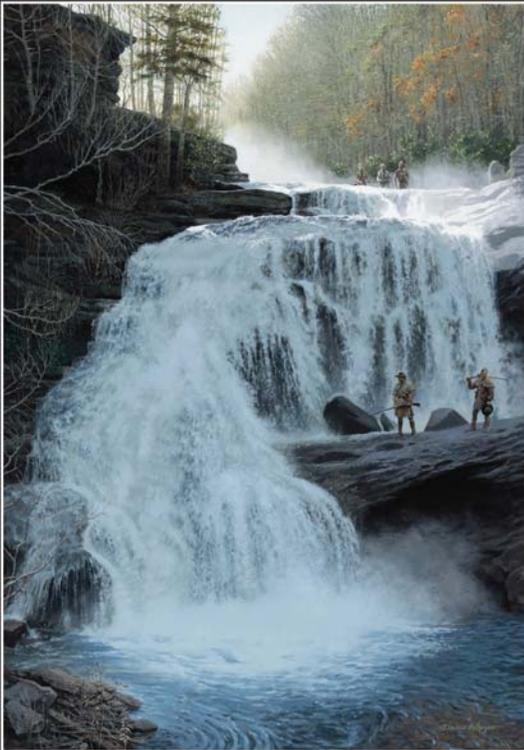
First and foremost, however, David Wright is a painter. Despite the remarkable success of his professional career, he remains an unassuming Tennessean with a ready wit, easy grin, and contagious enthusiasm for the true-to-life epic that was the American frontier. "I have plenty of ideas to turn into paintings," he says, "and won't stop painting as long as God gives me good health."

For further information on the art of David Wright, see www.davidwrightart.com.

Wright is represented by Lord Nelson's Gallery of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; and Legacy Galleries in Scottsdale, Arizona, and Jackson Hole, Wyoming. **MB**

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