Back in October of 1990 I was fortunate in being able to take a two week painting course with Henriette Wyeth, daughter of N.C., sister of Andrew and wife of artist Peter Hurd. It was offered by Santa Fe Art Institute and was the last time she would teach as she was then in her early eighties. We worked from a live model every morning for 3 hours, broke for lunch and then went on location at the 5 mile marker out of Nambe where we were instructed by her son, Michael Hurd. Henriette was best known for her portrait of Pat Nixon. Her husband Peter was primarily known for his landscapes of southern New Mexico, where they lived and he had been raised. A major exception was his commissioned portrait of LBJ, which hangs in the Smithsonian’s National Gallery and was despised by President Johnson,,who famously quipped “Artists are welcome to be seen in the White House, but not Hurd”. Henriette and Peter presented the portrait to Johnson in Texas where she blew up at the President for his uncourteous reaction to the work.

We students were unhappy with the choice of landscapes that Michael insisted upon. After all it was gorgeous fall weather in northern New Mexico with brilliant foliage everywhere and instead we were stuck painting a bizarre looking piece of stone, that resembled a dinosaur.

The afternoon sessions at the same rock formation got interesting one day when we arrived in our individual cars to find helicopters overhead and a sheriff’s roadblock down the road. We soon discovered that it wasn’t a manhunt, but rather the film set for actors Billy Crystal’s & Jack Palance’s marvelous comedy, CITY SLICKERS.

A week after the course was over another student and I went back to have another “crack  
“ at the rock. We had met at Leona’s Burrito Stand in Chimayo and saw a hand made sign near the film location, stating MAPS TO STARS HOME JUST AHEAD, in the middle of nowhere with not an adobe structure or even a fence in sight. Back at the painting site, my friend Malcolm Withers, locked her keys in her Mercedes. I drove back towards Chimayo to call her husband and ask him to bring the spare key. This was long before cell phones. On the way I found one of the sheriff’s deputies, who offered to call her husband Arnie as soon he finished with another roadblock for the film which was coming up. We painted another couple of hours until Arnie showed up with the key and we were finally free of the rock. You can see it today in much the same form as it was then but with a major fissure.

As a follow up to the class. Malcolm and I planned a painting vacation in southern New Mexico which would culminate with a stay at the Hurd Gallery in San Patricio and a visit with Henriette and Michael. We started in the extreme southwestern part of the state south of Hatch, at a ranch owned by Arnie’s oldest friend. The hacienda had been built in 1905, but finally completed in the 50’s. It was U shaped with 19 exterior doors, some rooms having as many as three. A sense of neglect prevailed with loose flagstone and bricks, often covered with numerous animal skins. Arnie refuses to visit his old friend there as there is not a chair in the place he trusts. On his last visit the iron curtain rod over his bed fell, missing him by inches.

The living room with its incredible view of the Hachita Mountains gave the sense that Charlie Russell and Will Rogers had been there moments before discussing the big game specimens our host had bagged worldwide, which are mounted all over the enormous room.

The Master Bath, only one of two in this very large home, had been altered to suit the needs of the former lady of the house, who had developed morbid obesity in her later years. A tub had been cut into the floor to allow for easier bathing. The hole had later proved to be a booby trap and was boarded over.

On our first day at the ranch we began painting outside in various locations after a marvelous breakfast prepared by the cook, Bill, who never inquired but simply fixed each of us what he thought we should have. After a few hours, I was told to come inside as Malcolm had suffered a bad fall on one of the trophy rugs. She was taken to the hospital in Las Cruces, and I returned home. Regrettably we never completed the visit to Henriette in the beautiful Hondo Valley.

Mary Thomas

Santa Fe, NM

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