

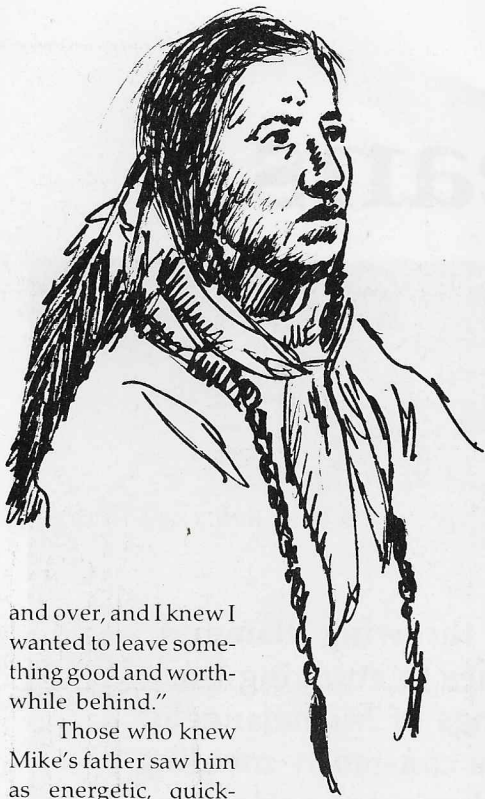
Melding Means and Ends

by Gene Ball

From throwing diamond hitches to studying the paintings of Michelangelo, Mike is constantly melding the physical experiences of his West with the world of art.



Photos courtesy the artist



and over, and I knew I wanted to leave something good and worthwhile behind."

Those who knew Mike's father saw him as energetic, quick-witted and confident. He was also demanding, a quality which can make sons feel obliged to prove themselves—to compete ... or rebel.

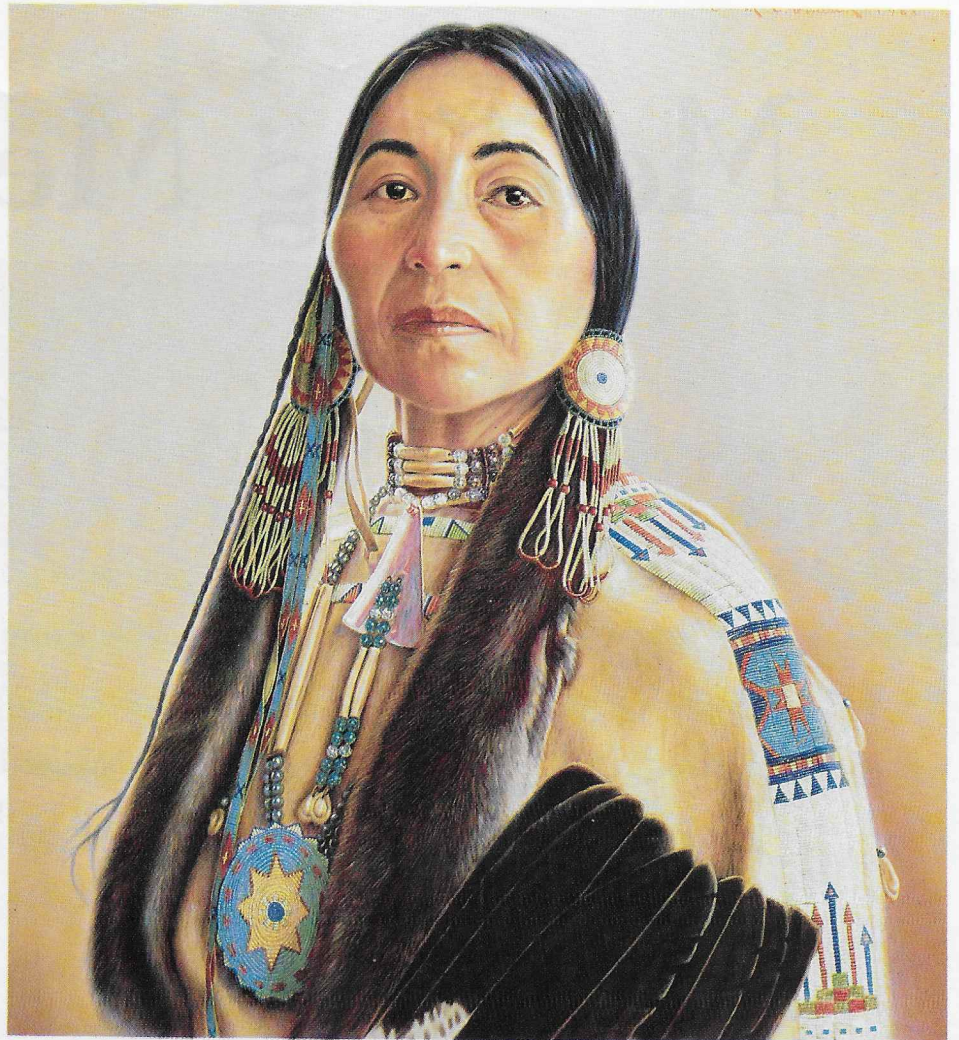
"Dad and I may have had a few rough spots, but I'm glad that in the summer of '76, the year before he died, we'd worked out a very good relationship. As I thought about the past, I realized that he had always encouraged my painting. I decided to start making time to paint, to start delegating other responsibilities."

The mountains of Wyoming are full of places where you can lose yourself—or find yourself. At the summit of Deer Creek Pass, the world seems divided. It flows out in both directions, and no matter which way you are heading, the shadows are below you.

Maybe it was from such a vantage point, where clouds and contrasts and clarity come together, that Mike began matching questions and answers. He entered a definite period of resolving problems and tying up loose ends. In terms of what to do with his life, art became the central focus.

He aimed his competitive, proving drive inward. The mountains, he knew, gave no quarter to those who ventured out unprepared, and the art world could be the same. He committed himself to being prepared and to being a pupil always.

"I set some realistic goals that meant something to me," he said. "I decided to



paint subjects that I knew firsthand, things I had seen and experienced. I needed to find out where my heart was because I knew my art would follow."

Then, in the clearing but still muddied waters waded Shauna. Around her Mike swirled questions about love, marriage,

his chief critic and to give him a fresh opinion when he has been too close for too long.

The home they planned was finished in 1982. Their mountainside location overlooks Hidden Valley; the south-facing solar windows are like frames around ragged segments of the Carter Mountains. It is a power spot for Mike.

"There are magical places around here. My dad is buried just below these foothills, and I think his spirit is still here, too. He promised each of the kids a forty-acre site adjacent to the ranch, and I finally chose this one. There are many good,

inspirational places to be. For me, this is one of the very best."

In addition to his immediate environment, there are other voices that speak to Mike. He says, "Influences are everywhere. Nature speaks—with colors and vibrancy. Surroundings are crucial. I try to have an environment that will help maintain a spirit of inner peace.

"Anything written about art is a voice,

"Viable art contains all the principles, the creative dimensions and the accuracy. You must get to know what you paint and be honest with yourself. No faking."

religion, home and family life. Shauna had the answers.

Further, she untangled his tangled business affairs and got him back on good terms with his creditors. As Mike put it, "We paid the bills—plus interest. I was surprised to find that some were two years overdue!"

Now he makes breakfast and she cooks dinner. But the collaboration goes much further. Mike relies on Shauna to be

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day—the animals, the people, and the activity—work together?”

“In terms of art, I’m an avid reader of art magazines as well as books. I especially like biographies of creative people—from Will Rogers to Shakespeare to Leonardo.

“Many successful painters of every age have followed the principles of rigorously studying the masters who preceded them. This fact should be persuasion enough that such a system works. The key is that in great art the means and the ends are ultimately indivisible. Techniques come and go, but technique in itself is never the point of a work of art. In any art form, the student seeks to study under the most accomplished practitioner he can find. The student dancer is pretty well limited to living teachers. The painter, on the other hand, has access to each of the greatest masters that history has produced.

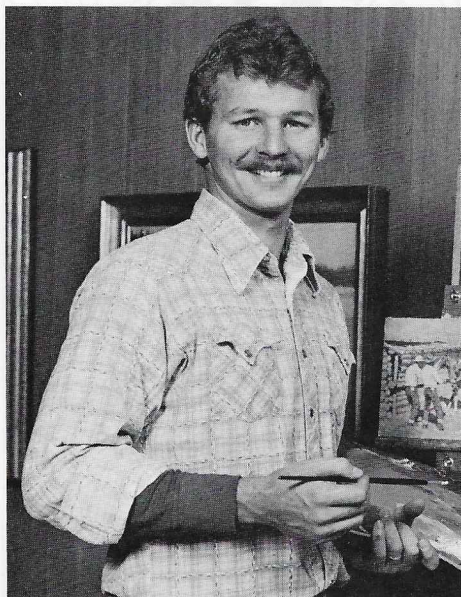
“I was instructed early to paint whatever I could from the work of the accepted old masters and to copy an artist’s work until I learned the secret of his excellence. I did this not for the sake of plagiarism, but to learn to think like that artist and to find out how and why he produced what he did. The greatest advantage in learning from the masters is that the lessons are never out of date.”

In talking about how his personality and philosophies appear in his work, Mike says: “The land and the people are what appeal to me most. I’m sharing a mission with many artists today to preserve a world that is passing. I know that if I paint some-

thing that I have not seen or experienced myself, or a subject that doesn’t intrigue me in some way, it will be fatal.

“I like to be in good physical condition, so I like to paint people who are tested, tough, weathered. I see myself in my paintings a lot. I’ve been on *that* horse, been in *that* place under *those* conditions. I’ve stopped that string of pack animals at night and studied the light and the shapes. I’ve tied those diamond hitches. When I paint a pack string, I want the panniers sucked in tight and given some dimension.

“Viable art contains all the principles, the creative dimensions and the accuracy.



M.C. Poulsen





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“I get very involved with each painting. There are times when I put so much feeling into the work that I don’t want to part with it.

“My paintings have contemplative, reflective qualities. They often tell a story. Nature is an important ingredient—man alone with nature or nature as company for man. All of these themes are obviously a reflection of myself.”

Although his head is full of painting ideas, Mike occasionally does commissioned works.

“For me they have been a great source of learning,” he explains. “Commissions helped me get started. In a way I love them. In a way I hate them. They are a challenge. They are tough. Commissions do inhibit freedom. But, there’s the opportunity to grow and meet people who like your work.

I weigh my decisions carefully and agree to do only the commissions I can learn and benefit from.”

A competitive drive keeps Mike working and revising his goals. “I want to extend my limits and add to my capabilities. I want my paintings to look effortless—easily done. More and more I’m moving toward a classical Old World style.

“One goal is to do some large-scale work. Perhaps a mural, if the right opportunity appears.

“In portraiture, my goal is to get to know the person. If I painted you, I’d try to get a part of you—almost like stealing something from you—that I could leave there forever on canvas. In general, I want viewers to relate to the painting the way I did. For me, people are the key to relating to art—both as subjects and as the audience.”

Mike’s technique and approach to his

art are thoughtful and deliberate. Although an idea may be fixed in a split second, the process leading to the finished product is time consuming.

“The first thing I remember when beginning a painting is that I must have something to say and I must want to paint it.

“I try to stay prepared with ideas and sketches and to be alert for subjects with universal appeal and enduring qualities. There are ideas in my head that have been there for years waiting for the right opportunity or combination of details. Once a painting is begun, I still find there to be an ongoing battle with the idea, composition, colors, contrasts.

“If I’m using a model, of course I want someone appropriate to the idea. I seldom use a model repeatedly.

“Awareness of details is critical in the early stages. Hands, posture—all factors are important in conveying a mood or message.

“I find it practical to take plenty of black-and-white photographs, whether from models or props. But I do not work from any single one. My paintings are the result of a composite of many photographs. For me, using color only confuses the values. The black-and-whites, however, leave me free to choose and construct my own color scheme.

“I’ve had little success using photos taken by other people. There are certain



M.C. Poulsen

left: EVERY SOUL IS FREE (1982), oil, 27 x 24½. "I think this is probably pretty typical of the Indian today. They are much more outspoken than before, and this painting may be saying 'You can strip me of my pride, but my soul is free.'"

right: BENEATH THE WESTERN MOON (1983), oil, 28 x 32. "This is a different type of painting for me ... I wanted to be a little freer. Moonlight does something for people. Many a night I have stopped while on my horse and looked at the night sky and just thought.... The rider is on a 'meat run,' which means that he is responsible for carrying out the meat from the high country after the hunt. So that the meat is not exposed to the sun all day, the rider will leave in the afternoon or evening and ride into the night."

below: ON THE WATER'S EDGE (1982), oil, 29¼ x 40½. "This is a very typical mountain scene in the early fall. The mountains are a magical place. Here the hunter is going to his camp, and packing in his gear for the season."





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subjects and angles which I look for and which are typical of my work. When I select and take the shots myself, I usually get scenes which I know will be useful. Also if I have viewed and know the scene myself, I can paint it with much more conviction and understanding.

“When doing a sketch I generally start with my first impression. Then I take my idea and any reference material I have and make composition sketches. After I come up with what I want, I prepare my color

sketch, which is transferred onto a board or canvas and fixed. The color sketch begins as a color wash so I won't be painting on a white board. Next I do a monochrome value study using burnt umber, and then I start applying color, going from dark to light.

“This method may not be for everyone, or anyone for that matter, but for me it has the advantage of separating problems of color from those of design and drawing. Painting is complicated enough and it's

easier for me to meet the difficulties one by one.”

In Wyoming, land and life seem inseparable. The Rockies inspire and dominate. The high country is both delicate and dangerous. In this setting M.C. Poulsen pursues his ambitious, perhaps impossible tasks: to translate the reality of the mountains and the outfitters to canvas—to make paint say what words cannot.

