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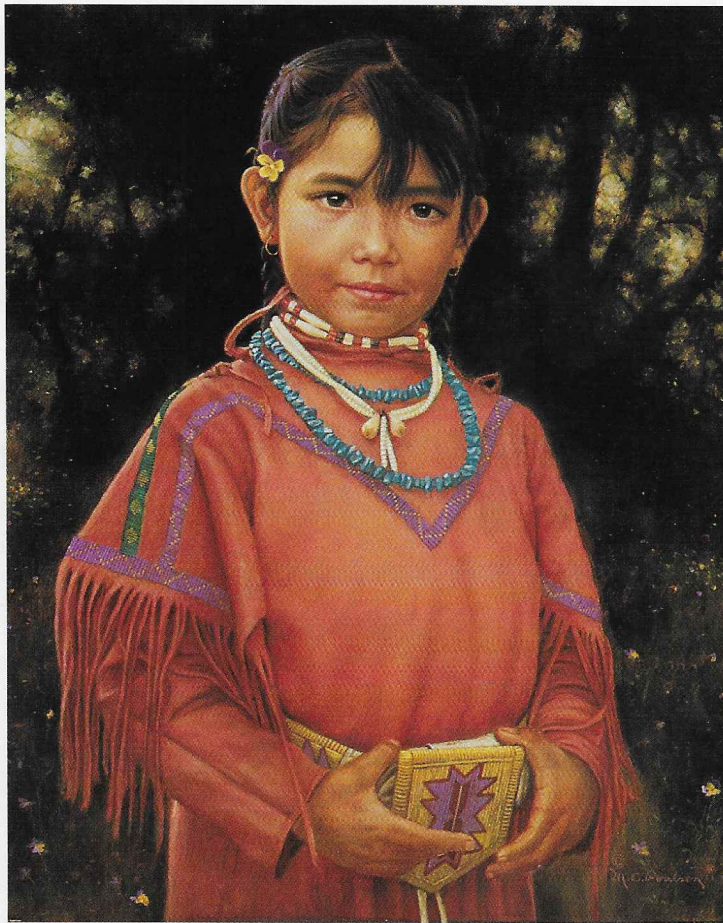
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In the Eyes of a Child,
oil, 20" by 16"

"While describing her excitement at dancing in the powwow, this child's eyes reminded me of the way children look at the world—innocently, living in the moment with no concern for tomorrow."

Touching the Soul

By Stan Cuba

Mike Poulsen's choice of subject matter—landscapes, Native American portraits, and ranch life—is not accidental. As a near-native of Wyoming, he paints the people and places he knows and loves.

Many of Poulsen's portrait subjects have an underlying ruggedness shaped by the harsh elements of their environment. Their determination inspires the artist, who in the mid-1980s endured his own battle—with leukemia—during which he underwent a painful marrow transplant, with his sister as the donor, and fought the ravages of chemotherapy. Poulsen's strong desire to paint throughout his ordeal, combined

with the unfailing support of his wife, Shauna, aided his recovery.

Art has been a part of Poulsen's life for as long as he can remember. As a child growing up in Akron, Ohio, he copied Carl Bloch's religious paintings from the family Bible. "The pastor would pin up my pictures on the church bulletin board, but they wouldn't stay there long," he says, "because people would take them home." The dark, traditional backgrounds of those Bible paintings and a realist, academic painting style are apparent in Poulsen's portraits of Western subjects.

By the time he was 7, Poulsen was drawing from marble busts and plaster casts at the Akron Art Institute,

and his love of art continued to grow. "When my brother wanted toy trucks and cars, I wanted paper and paints," he says. "I honed my drawing skills and absorbed every art book I could get my hands on."

In 1962, when he was 10, Poulsen's father followed his dream and moved the family to the Cody, Wyoming, area. Having successfully grown the Great Western Reserve Insurance Company in Akron, a company founded by his father, the elder Poulsen left the insurance business behind to buy a ranch. He purchased 15,500 acres of land that he developed into the Hidden Valley guest ranch. In addition to raising cattle and horses, Poulsen's father



Kindred Spirits, oil, 24" by 18"

"Children and their pets are usually best friends. My desire is to always depict some emotion in my work, hopefully connecting the viewer with the subjects."



*Descendant of the Sheepeaters,
oil, 30" by 24"*

"The attraction was a yellow ribbon shirt, a feather bonnet, and a handsome little boy. Later, I found out about his ancestry from his grandfather. He related stories about his tribe, which lived much of the year in Yellowstone Park in early history."

played host to "urban dudes," who were seeking an authentic Western experience.

Throughout high school, Poulsen lived a life that most young people his age only dreamed about. He had his own horse and helped to outfit and guide hunters into the wilderness in search of deer, elk, and mountain sheep." After his graduation from high school, Poulsen followed the family tradition and enlisted in the Marine Corps. While stationed at Quantico, Virginia, he commuted to Washington, D. C. where he studied law at Georgetown University. "The real idea," he says, "was to get off base any way we could."

Poulsen also took advantage of his proximity to the nation's capital to visit the city's art museums. "I exhausted every companion I had, because I insisted on seeing as much as I could," he says. Those vis-

its gave Poulsen an invaluable art education, which he put to good use as he continued to draw during his years in the service.

Poulsen's experience as a hunter earned him a place on the rifle team and a transfer to Oahu, Hawaii, where he also played basketball for the Marine Corps. During that stint, the pastor of a local church, a painter himself, introduced Poulsen to professional painter and teacher Larry Roberson. He became Poulsen's mentor and, for two years, the budding artist studied and apprenticed with him.

"He taught me the fundamentals, including cleaning brushes and stretching canvases," Poulsen says. "Without him, it would have taken me years to catch up." Roberson stressed simplicity of design, technique, and facility in various media, and encouraged his students to develop their

own styles. Poulsen adopted those principles and has since passed them on to his own students.

While studying with Roberson, Poulsen completed his first oil painting. As an exercise in understanding a master artist's use of color and technique, the assignment was to copy a portrait, landscape, or still life. Not surprisingly, Poulsen chose to copy Thomas Moran's *Mount of the Holy Cross*.

Following his discharge from the Marine Corps, Poulsen used the GI Bill to continue his art education at Arizona State University-Tempe. While visiting a gallery in Scottsdale, he met artists Olaf Wieghorst and Ted De Grazia, both of whom graciously critiqued his paintings. "They were probably a little more interested since they noticed that I was wearing cowboy boots," he says.

Weighorst pointed Poulsen in the



Spring Joy, oil, 12" by 9"

"Freshly picked flowers, a mountain butterfly, and the early smell of spring always lifts a heart."



Heir to a Dream, oil, 30" by 20"

"Today, Indian nations have dreams for their children to be accomplished, remembering their heritage and working toward a better world for their families and their people. I make it a point to try to get to know my models in a personal way to get a feel of who they are."

"I have so much more to learn. We're expected to do everything in 60 or 70 years, but I need three or four more lifetimes."



direction of a nearby gallery, saying, "Tell Dick [the owner] that I recommend you." That gallery accepted Poulsen's work, and he successfully showed there for several years.

In the fall of 1977, after his father was killed in a hunting accident, Poulsen returned to Cody to help his mother run the family ranch for a year, until he found the call to return to painting too strong to ignore. Two years later, he met and married Shauna. Five years after that, the Poulsons were the proud parents of Michael and Apryl, Wyoming's first in vitro babies.

When his mother gave him 111 acres of the family ranch, Poulsen built a spacious home and studio with a southern exposure that offers a magnificent, unobstructed view of the snow-capped Carter Mountains and Castle Rock. "It is absolutely beautiful," he says. "I am fortunate to be here." A few years ago, Poulsen built a second studio in Cody, where he could paint and be more available to potential clients.

Poulsen has expanded his subject matter to include cowgirls, young women, and peasant types, while his technique has evolved from a highly detailed and hard-edged one into a more painterly application of oils on textured canvas. "As I have developed more skill and confidence in my painting, I am willing to experiment," he says. "I'm not afraid to fail."

In 1989, Poulsen paid tribute to his father in the form of a limited-edition, leather-bound volume titled *Along the Border Trail*, in which he reproduced his father's diary of outdoor experiences, practical insights, and personal wisdom, accompanied by Poulsen's original oil sketches. Through that project, Poulsen met a



The Wedding Dress,
oil, 30" by 24"

"The original dress in this painting is on display at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. The center had a reproduction made and commissioned this painting as a companion piece to the dress."

rare book collector, who helped to facilitate one of his two trips to Russia in the early 1990s, where he negotiated an exchange of his work with the Russian Arts Council, visited museums in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and bought dozens of art books.

The legacy of the American West, which fascinates the Russians, is close at hand for Poulsen. He often visits the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, where he has studied romantic landscapes painted by Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, as well as works by Frederic Remington, W. R. Leigh, and the Taos painters. "As I tried to dupli-

cate their color schemes, I began to understand why they used certain colors against other colors and experimented [to identify] how they achieved a certain feel with those colors," Poulsen says. "It was a tremendous learning experience."

Last spring, Poulsen used the center's collections to teach an on-site studio art course that he titled "Learning From the Western Masters." He enjoys teaching almost as much as he enjoys painting. "It is a wonderful way of putting me in my place," he says. "It humbles me and brings me down to earth. My students learn from me, and I learn from them."

After more than 25 years as a professional artist, Poulsen still finds art exciting. "There are so many ways to interpret things," he says. "I have so much more to learn. We're expected to do everything in 60 or 70 years, but I need three or four more lifetimes."

As he looks to the future, Poulsen anticipates the continued challenge of communicating with his art. "Art is the love of my life," he says. "It brings me great joy to create something that might touch the soul of another." □

Stan Cuba is a writer living in Denver, Colorado.