

William Acheff



Pueblo Idols, oil, 38" by 48"

"This painting was a commission, using some of the client's material. I wasn't at all sure of the result in the early stages of planning, because of the variety of subject matter that I originally brought to the studio. I found that this simple arrangement worked well for all the objects chosen. Since this painting was going to be hung in an entryway, it needed to command immediate attention without being too cluttered."

TIME FOR A CHANGE

By Nancy Gillespie

About 15 minutes north of Taos, New Mexico, Highway 522 stretches straight as an arrow across mesa land. On both sides of the road, the increasing development of a once rural area are evident, a state of affairs denigrated by natives. Privacy and a sense of serenity is a high priority for most Taos residents.

The route to William Acheff's home and studio stands as a metaphor for his

life: a couple of twists and turns, then a remarkably straight shot to the pinnacle of success. But, at his peak as a well-known and highly regarded painter, Acheff senses imminent change in his work. Rather than force or manipulate those changes, however, he is willing to permit them to assume their own form and direction.

Pointing to a still life on his easel, a small oil of tangerines so real and so tan-

gible they seem almost to leap off the canvas, Acheff says, "I've been doing this for 28 years." The implication in his statement is simple: It's time for change.

Such acceptance is often anathema to artists whose continuing success is wholly dependent on a style coveted by their collectors. They can be literally trapped in the style to which their public has become accustomed and, sometimes, criticized by their peers.



But change is implicit in growth, and Acheff is not one to rest on his laurels ad nauseam. "I used to paint every day, but the last year I'm painting less," he says. "I'm looking for something different, so it seemed natural to back off a little and reflect. I'm ready to paint other things. I've had ideas for 20 years that will eventually come to fruition. For the time

being, I want to take a breather and think about what I want to do. Regardless of the direction, I'll employ the same basic premise that's been behind all of my art: light, shade, shadow, and reflection."

Whatever the nature of the change, when it manifests itself, there's no doubt Acheff will pour his heart and soul into it. He has adapted time and again to startlingly different environments and circumstances. Change is no stranger to the Alaska-born artist.

"We left for San Francisco, when I was 5," Acheff says. "I had been raised in a little town of 200 people - there are probably 600 now - a town in the middle of nowhere, the place where my mother was born. I spent my first five years with outhouses and hand pumps, so when we moved to San Francisco, I was in culture shock."

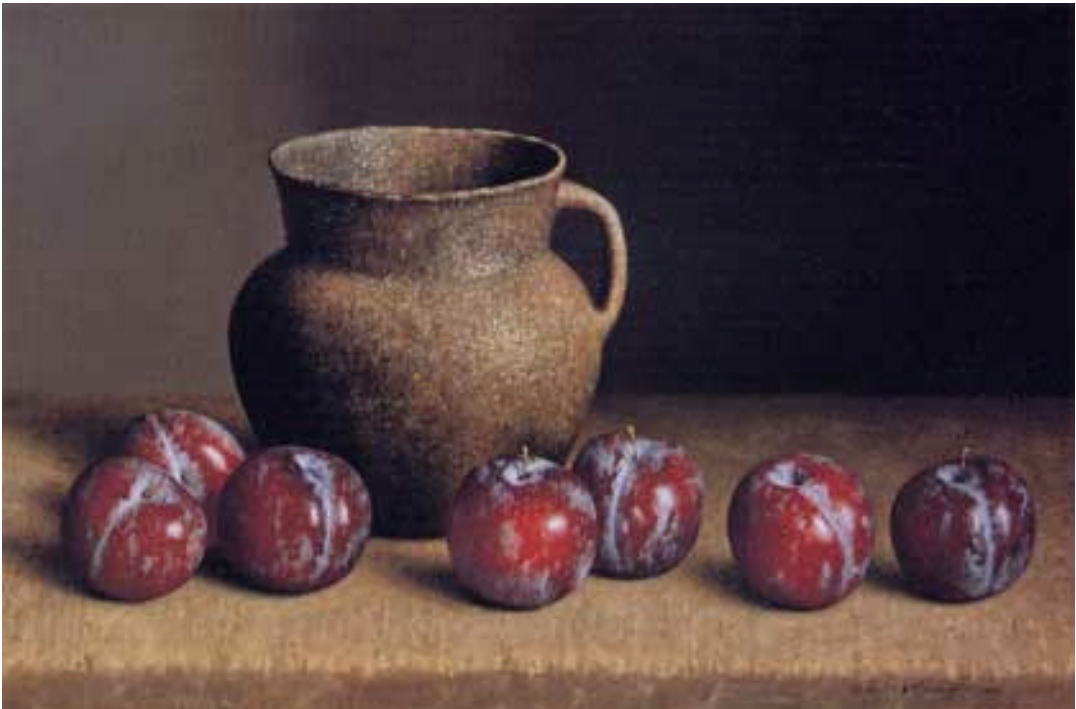
Acheff adjusted and, for the next 20 years, lived in the Bay area. On some undefined level, however, change was in the wind. "A friend who sold art all over

the country mentioned Santa Fe, told me about all the artists there, and suggested a gallery that might be interested in my work," Acheff says. "I wanted to leave California, where everything was money, money, money, and I didn't feel I was getting any support at being an artist. I was changing, too, becoming more inward, and there were too many distractions."

The timing was right. Three months later, Acheff and his girlfriend were in Santa Fe, looking for a place to rent. When they didn't find anything that met their needs, they drove to Taos. "We arrived on the day the local paper comes out, checked the ads, and found a place we liked," Acheff says.

The girlfriend eventually returned to San Francisco, but Acheff settled in. "I was 26, when I came to Taos in 1973, and I'd been painting for only four years," he says. "I was selling my work to a dealer in L.A., showing in San Francisco and Santa Rosa."

One might think, "so much, so



Red Plums, oil, 10" by 15"

"Plums are an old favorite subject to paint."

young,” but Acheff already had explored a career as a barber that, oddly enough, provided the springboard for a career in art. Cutting hair put him in contact with a man, who would create an enormous change in Acheff’s life - and turn a barber into an artist.

“I was working in the barbershop one day, when Roberto Lupetti, an Italian artist known in San Francisco, came in for a haircut,” Acheff says. “I was just making conversation about this and that, when Roberto mentioned that he taught an art class. He told me I was welcome to come to one, if I wanted. The classes were free, he added.”

Initially, Acheff wasn’t interested. Although he had majored in art in high school, he thought going to art school

was synonymous with being an art teacher, a career that held no interest for him. “Art classes might have been the farthest thing from my mind, but I couldn’t get Roberto’s offer out of my mind,” Acheff says. “Something just clicked.”

Acheff attended a class the following week. “Here was this really sophisticated teacher from Italy, so I expected to find talented students in his class,” he says. “My first day, Roberto handed me an eraser, ‘if I needed it.’ I thought to myself, ‘Wait until you see what I can do.’ I started drawing and, when Roberto came over, he said, ‘Oh, I see you’ve drawn before.’”

Acheff’s first drawing was finished the following week and, hands down,

was the best in the class. He was more than equal to the competition, and he still has the drawing. “I worked five days a week, all day, for six months with Roberto, who let me do my own thing, let me develop,” Acheff says. “He told me in the beginning that I had what he was looking for in a student, and I could be a professional artist. I realized he wanted to pass on his legacy to me.”

At Lupetti’s suggestion, Acheff set out to complete 12 paintings in six months. Lupetti told him that, when he was done, they would take those works to a gallery. Acheff finished 12 still lifes and set off for a San Francisco gallery, with Lupetti’s warning ringing in his ears: “The gallery owner is really rude, and he’ll just thumb dismissively



Make War or Peace, oil, 32" by 26"
"With the stern gaze on the man's face, one would hope that he would favor peace over war. The arrows, without the tip, might lead one to believe that that might be possible."

through your work.”

With that in mind, Aceff, dressed nicely and driving a sporty little Alpha Romeo, planned to make a good impression. As luck would have it, he found a parking place right in front of the gallery. “The owner looked me up and down and said, ‘Who are you?’” Aceff recalls. “I explained and brought my paintings in. Just like Roberto said, the man thumbed through them and finally told me, ‘I’ll give you \$25 each; I can write you a check right away.’”

Aceff refused the offer; Lupetti had told him to ask for \$50 each. “Well, I’ll go out of the room and let you think it over,” the dealer said. Again, Aceff said no, that he wanted \$50. The dealer said he’d never get it.

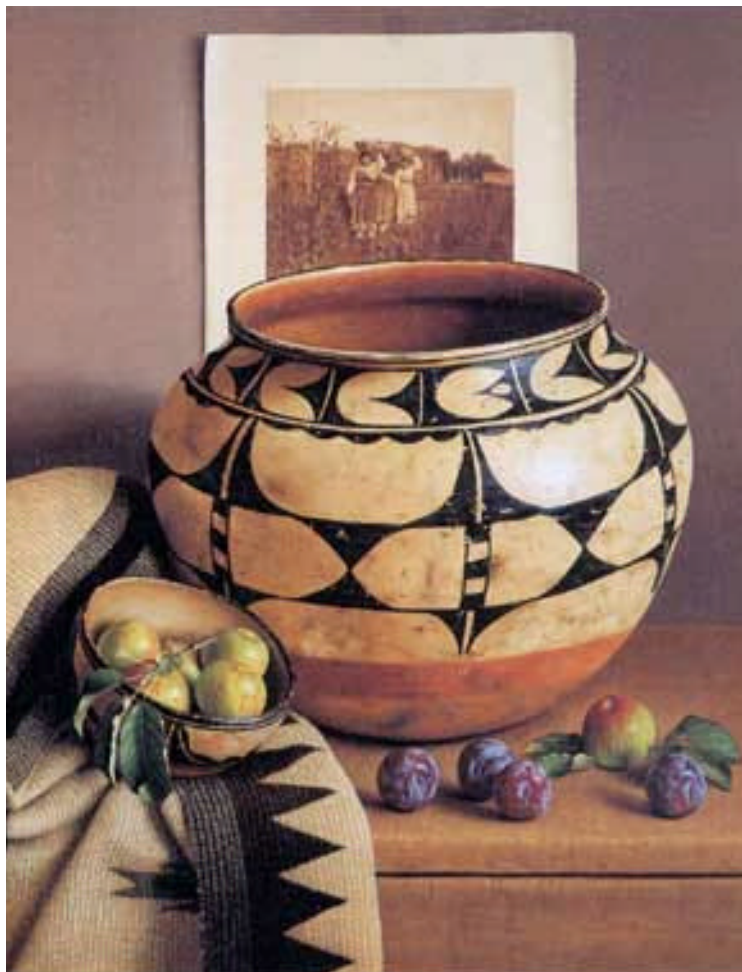
“I packed up my paintings, walked out, and approached another gallery up the street,” Aceff says. “They told me they weren’t taking any new artists. Discouraged, I went back to Roberto, who went with me to a gallery in Sausalito. They bought one and took three on consignment.”

It was an auspicious beginning, but to Aceff’s friends, “it looked as though I were going backward,” he says. “The felt sorry for me, and one friend even said, unequivocally, that I was going to starve. The key was pretty basic; I lived within my means.”

Aceff won acceptance in a Burlingame gallery, where his work immediately began to sell. “In 1971, the art market got tight, and I started selling

to a dealer in L.A.,” he says. “I learned the cold side of the business from him - how to take it.” Through that dealer, Aceff also met the man who recommended that he move to Santa Fe.

When he landed in Taos, instead, Aceff met artist Bob Daughters, who mentioned a local gallery. Aceff approached the owner and showed her his work. The ensuing conversation led him in yet another direction: Indian subjects. When he put two of those Indian pieces in a show, one sold immediately. “The collector actually told me, ‘I’m going to buy this painting, because one day you’re going to be famous,’” Aceff says. Such a statement is music to any artist’s ears, but all too often it is an unfinished melody. In Aceff’s case,



Late Summer Harvest, oil, 30" by 23"

"I always look forward to late summer, so I can gather fresh fruit from the trees. The light is perfect at this time of year."



Red Quills, oil, 16" by 8"

"Hanging mocs is another format that I seem to repeat over and over, with the various mocs that I acquire."

however, that collector was right.

Today, Acheff is represented by top galleries in Texas, New York, Arizona, and New Mexico. The winner of the 1989 Prix de West Award, he claims other honors, as well. Twice Acheff has been among the finalists for the Hubbard Award for Excellence Show in Ruidoso, New Mexico. More recently, the Autry Museum purchased one of his paintings for \$27,000.

While Acheff waits for the elements of a new style or new subject matter to surface, he is concentrating on some minor remodeling of a house that has grown to 8,000 square feet. That house is the subject of an amusing - and, as yet, unfinished story. After a sell-out show in 1978, Acheff bought the house and 30 acres in Hondo. He sold it 11 years later, and the new owner added a 2,200-square-foot guest house.

Three years ago, Acheff bought back the property. Since then, the man Acheff had sold it to and bought it back from has offered to buy it back from Acheff. No one yet knows how this amusing little scenario will end. "I love this house," Acheff says, "but I'm not attached to it. Selling it again would leave me homeless, and that's a little disturbing. But I might travel or build another house."

Either way, Acheff won't lose any ground. (Pun intended.) □

Nancy Gillespie, a former art professor and museum director, is a writer living in Taos, New Mexico.