



FINALIST ALFRED NICOLS, Mississippi, USA, *Where Wagons Carved the Land*, oil, 30 x 40" (76 x 101cm)

MY INSPIRATION

Over the past forty-five years I have painted other subjects, but I always come back to the land I love...my homeland, my heritage, the southeastern United States. Old roads and trails carving deeply into the land have always been special to me. They have character; they have history; they have mystery and intrigue. Who made them? When? Why here? What were they like? Where were they coming from? Where were they going? Near my rural property, along the eastern banks of the Mississippi River, are loess bluffs, formed by dust blowing from the west over thousands of years. Loess is highly erodible, but has a property known as steep vertical cleavage. This makes for the most picturesque of old roads. This scene is from a friend's property in southwestern Mississippi. It is only a residual fragment of an early road, little used for perhaps a century, starting on the flat lands below and ending in dense tangles high in the rugged bluffs. I wanted to paint it so others could feel the mystery...and long with me for the answers.

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MY DESIGN STRATEGY

Always, the objective is to simplify and amplify, to paint the quintessence of the scene. My design strategy starts with identifying, locating, and trying to enhance the center of interest. Next I move to light. How can light and shadow be best used? I tried to enhance the center of interest in this painting by focusing at the center of interest all these features: the road disappearing around the highest bank; a relatively sharp edge with strong value contrasts; the unusual, precariously leaning tree; and, a subtle use of some evergreens played against the strongest reds immediately beyond. The warmest light moved up the bank toward the center of interest. Care needed to be taken in the design to end the banks in the foreground in an interesting, asymmetrical way that neither competed unduly with the center of interest nor ended in a corner of the painting. The small open field in the painting did not exist in the actual scene but was added to enhance linear and atmospheric perspective. Of the many trees only those that aided in the composition were included.

MY WORKING PROCESS

I painted in oils for my first ten years. Then commissions began to come with tight deadlines. Acrylics seemed an answer. The challenge: make them look like my original oils. Three things became critical: handle the value shifts as the paint dries (use lighter values); next, don't let the acrylics be too bright and garish (mix and use good grays, scumble and glaze complements); lastly, find a way to create needed blended passages and critical soft edges. I paint on a toned canvas that is highly textured with thick acrylic gesso using random swirling brush strokes. In my view the most critical soft edge in most landscapes is where the sky meets the land. That is painted early, wet-in-wet. Then I use color shifts and the heavily textured canvas to promote soft edges. The texture breaks the lines of the brush strokes, creating the illusion of a soft edge. The hardest edges are done using paint mixed with modeling paste, applied with a palette knife. I lay out a full "wet" palette, but mix most of the critical colors on white styrofoam plates. All the big masses are roughed in. Then I layer, glaze and scumble paint using traditional oil techniques.