

DON OELZE

WESTERN INSPIRATION

By Myrna Zanetell

The son of American missionary parents, Don Oelze was born in New Zealand in 1965 and lived there for the next nine years of his life. Despite those beginnings half a continent away, Oelze, who now lives in Montana, has been blessed with the ability to portray the history of the American West with a remarkably vivid and captivating reality. The explanation of this gift is simple: From early childhood, his mother and father had piqued their son's curiosity about Western and Native American cultures by sharing stories of their own upbringings in Arizona and Montana. His maternal grandmother reinforced the young boy's intrigue with Western lore by sending the imaginative 6-year old a handmade set of Indian clothing.

"While this thoughtful gesture cemented my fascination with cowboys and Indians, it also resulted in my getting into trouble at school, because I spent more time drawing Indians than paying attention to my teacher," Oelze says.

When his family returned to the United States in the early 1970s, Oelze continued to pursue his love of painting and drawing. As a means to fill time, during the long travel days required for annual trips to visit relatives, he filled sketchpads with detailed images of his surroundings. Those firsthand impressions of the Western landscapes would provide a well-spring of information for backgrounds in his future paintings.

Following his graduation from high school, Oelze enrolled at Memphis State University, intending to major in art. Quickly realizing that the emphasis in the school's art department was on computer graphics, a direction he was not interested in exploring, he moved on to Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1992.

Above - Kickin' Up Their Heels, oil, 36" by 46"

"The annual fur trappers rendezvous, which lasted a few weeks, was a time for commerce, as well as a chance to cut loose and engage in frolic and general festivity."



Sunlit, oil, 32" by 26"

"This picture portrays a young Blackfoot warrior on the Two Medicine River in Montana, as he enjoys the warm light of the morning sun and the fresh, spring air."



Even after reaching that milestone, Oelze was uncertain as to his plans for the future. For that reason, more than a decade would pass before he finally began to travel the path that led to his becoming a professional artist. He moved to Seattle, Washington, where he shared studio space with a Northwest Indian, and continued to paint part-time while also holding down a job as a concierge at the Pacific Plaza Hotel. Because the venue was popular with Japanese businessmen, Oelze studied Japanese for three years, an endeavor that would prove beneficial in the not-too-distant future.

Single, and wanting to see more of the world, in 1995 Oelze quit his job and joined a friend for an extended hiking trip in China and, later, Japan. "Tokyo is a fascinating city, but one where living is expensive, so I knew I needed to find a job if I wanted to remain," he says, adding that he began to look for a job with a company that wanted to hire people who spoke English. "The first ad I answered resulted in my being hired to teach children in one of the small private schools. All

Japanese are required to take six years of English, so they have established classes called Jukus, which are literally 'cram sessions,' offering the opportunity to study in after-school sessions."

From the Jukus, Oelze moved on to teaching adults at the nationally known Berlitz Language School. It was there that he met Utako, whose lovely name literally means "poem child" and who would eventually become his wife. An additional perk to the job was the school's location in the "Wall Street" area of downtown Tokyo.

"This is where all the business executives and stock analysts work," Oelze says. "When a private company goes public, Japan requires that all documents be written in English, a regulation which allowed me to take on private translating assignments in addition to my regular job." Echoing the Japanese work ethic, he often remained in the office until late into the evening. In order to keep that demanding lifestyle from taking its toll, he began to paint once again, still pursuing his favorite subject: the Plains Indians.

The location of the language school also placed Oelze close to Shibuya, Tokyo's premier entertainment and shopping area, which included a huge Tower Records Store, which carried English books and magazines. "It was here that I discovered *Art of the West* magazine," Oelze says. "Reading every issue, cover to cover, familiarized me with the diversity of the Western art genre and helped me realize that a world existed out there, where I might be able to make a living selling my paintings. True story."

Above - Moving Down the Valley, oil, 34" by 54"

"This band of Cheyenne Indians is moving through a valley on its way to the fall camp. The chief's daughter is holding a parasol, which was a common trade item. The addition of that parasol was an afterthought for me, but seems to really complete the painting."

*Opposite Page
When Days Grow Short, oil, 30" by 20"*

"A Blackfeet warrior stands above a high plains valley, as winter clouds threaten behind him, and he knows that big changes are soon to come to his world."





Keep Up the Old Ways, oil, 38" by 52"

"A Cheyenne grandfather is passing on his life story, depicted on a buffalo robe. Some of these tales he hopes will impart wisdom and truth to the next generation and also emphasize the need to never forget the old traditions in an ever-changing world."

By then, Oelze was becoming quite proficient as a painter and, as luck would have it, a chance decision yielded the opportunity for the fledgling artist to market his work. "We visited my family in Montana on a regular basis so, in 2000, I decided to take along a few paintings," he says. "My sister Lenore's husband, wildlife bronze artist Dan Parker, liked what he saw and offered to take some of the canvases to display at the annual Charlie Russell Show. All of the pieces sold, so I continued to send Dan paintings to sell for the next four years."

Finding that outlet for his paintings placed Oelze at a crossroads. "I had lived in Japan since 1995 and had a good job, so my intent was to remain there for the rest of my life," he says. "However, based on how well my paintings were selling, I realized that, if I were ever to consider a career in art, the time was now." After discussing the issue, he and Utako moved to Kalispell, Montana, in July of 2004.

Once there, Oelze had to figure out how to market his work. "Rather than doing the gallery thing, I hired

a family friend as my representative," he says. "Our first sales attempt came in December at the Cowboy Christmas Show in Las Vegas. We rented a booth, choose 10 paintings to exhibit, and said a prayer. The show was a complete sellout."

Bolstered by his success in Las Vegas, Oelze began to search out additional venues, the most prestigious of which was Alberta's Calgary Stampede. "Thanks to the oil boom, there were a lot of buyers, who were interested in Western art, so I showed my work there through 2014," he says. "During that time, I had built up quite a following for my work, so much so that I was selected to do the official poster for the 2010 Stampede exhibition. The biggest affirmation that I was doing things right came, when [my] original painting sold at the auction for the record-breaking sum of \$135,000."

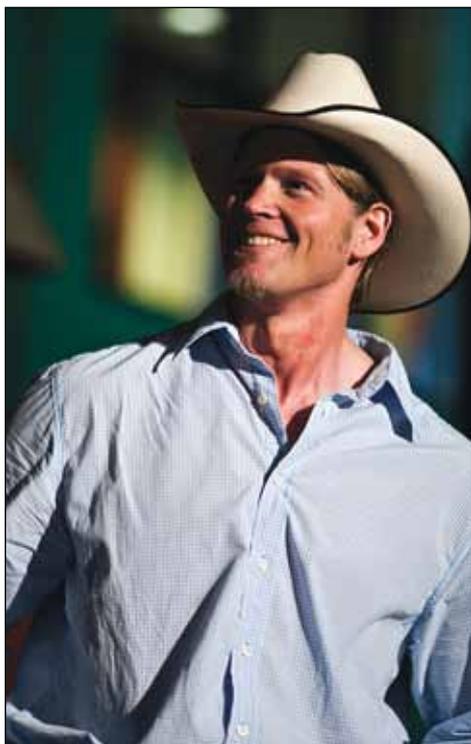
Although he had built a reputation in Canada, he was still unknown in the United States, so Oelze realized the time had come to seek gallery representation and to begin entering his work in juried art shows. Soon he was invited to participate in the Rocky Mountain Oyster Show in Tucson, Arizona, and the Phippen Museum's annual Western Show and Art Sale, where his 2016 entry garnered him the Art of the West Award for Excellence.

Calling on the limitless imagery that defines the West of the 1800s, Oelze says his primary focus is to tell a compelling story, one that will draw his viewers into the setting itself. "I read a lot," he says. "In fact, I may have several books going at a time, and this is where I get most of my inspiration. Since I am not portraying specific historical events, my compositions are generic in nature. However, for the 10 percent of collectors, who are truly familiar with the various tribes, I make every effort to be as accurate as possible, when it comes to depicting Native American subjects."



Mountain Passage, oil, 36" by 38"

"This painting depicts three Indian travelers, as they journey over high, rough country. There is no time to waste, as the sun is getting low. These men desire to get down to the protection of the timber before nightfall."



Oelze brings his work to life through private photo shoots. "I begin with a list of ideas I want to paint, and then I hire models, primarily Blackfeet, and have them reenact these poses," he says. "Over the past 10 years, I have collected enough clothing and accoutrements to outfit an entire tribe, so I supply that part, and I have a friend who provides the appropriate wagons, horses, and mules. After these photo shoots, I come back, sketch out my ideas, and then go directly to canvas. My wife Utako is a freelance commercial artist, who does illustrations for Japanese computer games. She has this wonderful drawing ability, so she really helps me out by looking at my work. I can tell by her face, when something is not working, and I trust her insights, because she is always right."

Now that he has finally "come home to the West," Oelze says his plan for the future is simply to perfect his artistic abilities. "If I change anything, it might be to expand my compositions to include stories set in the desert Southwest," he says. "My dad was raised in Arizona so, as a way to honor him, I would like to create more works that portray the history of the Apache." 

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