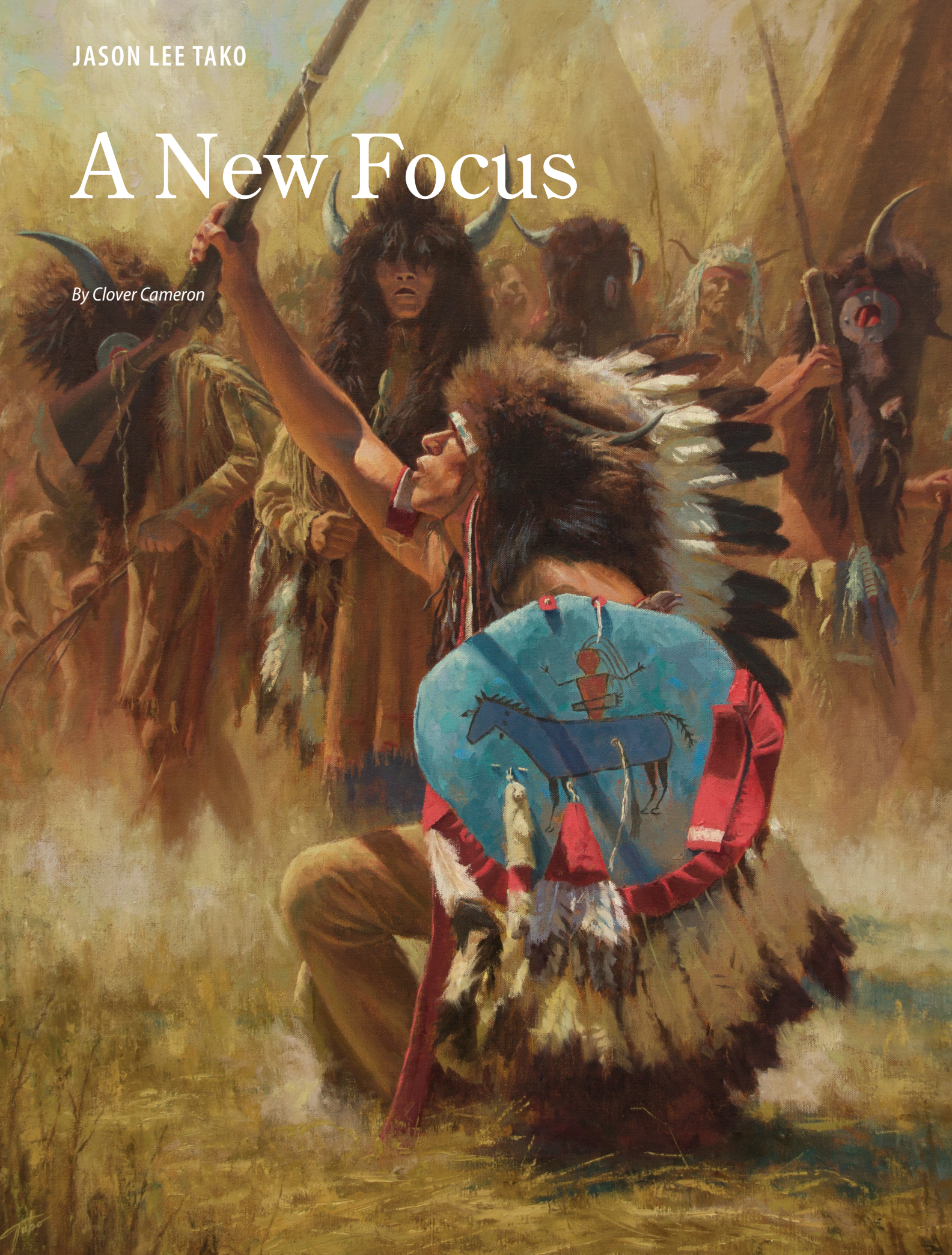


JASON LEE TAKO

A New Focus

By Clover Cameron



Many artists, when asked how they got started, will cite a parent or teacher who encouraged them, an artist they admired—someone who guided them to their vocation.

For Western oil painter Jason Lee Tako, all of these influences played a role, and he is generous in giving credit to everyone who supported him on his journey. But, when he recounts his foundations, it's clear that his first and best inspiration was nature itself and the simple act of sketching what he saw in the woods.

"Growing up in rural Minnesota, I would get up at five in the morning and go out in the woods and sketch, which was a little unusual, but I really enjoyed it," Tako says of his routine in his hometown of Faribault, Minnesota. "I really liked the solitude. There were wetlands, a lot of woodland areas and lakes."

Anything nature set before him, Tako sketched: animals, plants, the changing sky. He wasn't yet painting—that would come later—but he was honing his ability to capture the essence of objects and to compose eye-catching pictures.

A book Tako read as a teen, Clare Walker Leslie's "The Art of Field Sketching," prompted him to take a more regimented approach to his walks in the woods. "That book had a profound impact on me," he says. "She talked about making a connection with nature, not just drawing or painting from photographs. So I kept a sketchbook as a journal, and I made a commitment—a sketch every day—so I'd go out in the woods and wetlands, and I would just sit there in solitude. Sometimes I'd see animals, sometimes I didn't. Deer, fox, geese, whatever, I'd make



Cheyenne Mother, oil, 24" by 18"

"I loved the expression in this beautiful, young woman's face—a perfect combination of maternal compassion and protective determination. I used a loose, painterly approach, similar to John Singer Sargent, to paint the complex patterns in her dress."

(Left) Blessing the Thunder Iron, oil, 38" by 30"

"The desire to paint a Buffalo Dance scene was what started me on the path to historical Native American subject matter. In this painting, I wanted to express dust, heat, movement, and light. This is something I will continue to explore for years to come."

an effort to sketch them, and I'd also just enjoy being out there trying to make a connection with nature."

Tako dabbled a bit in painting during his teenage years and even got his first taste of oils—"I have to say I loved working with the medium," he says—but a newly discovered passion for music set him on a different life path.

"In my senior year [of high school], due to the influence of some friends, I got into music," he says. "A friend was putting a band together,

and my priorities kind of shifted. This was in the early '90s, and I became a musician.

"I went to music school in Minneapolis [at Music Tech of Minneapolis, which is no longer in operation] and I became a bass player. I went on to study jazz and rhythm and blues. I played in rock and jazz bands for about 10 years."

About a decade into his music career, Tako found himself drawn back to the outdoors and back to art. "I started going out with my



(Top left) *Nice and Steady*, oil, 11" by 14"

"This painting is just as much about the light on the fringe of the Southern Cheyenne's war shirt as it is about the warrior himself. The dark, cool, neutral background helps to emphasize the light and intense colors of the warrior's regalia."

(Bottom left) *The Buffalo People Are Coming*, oil, 36" by 60"

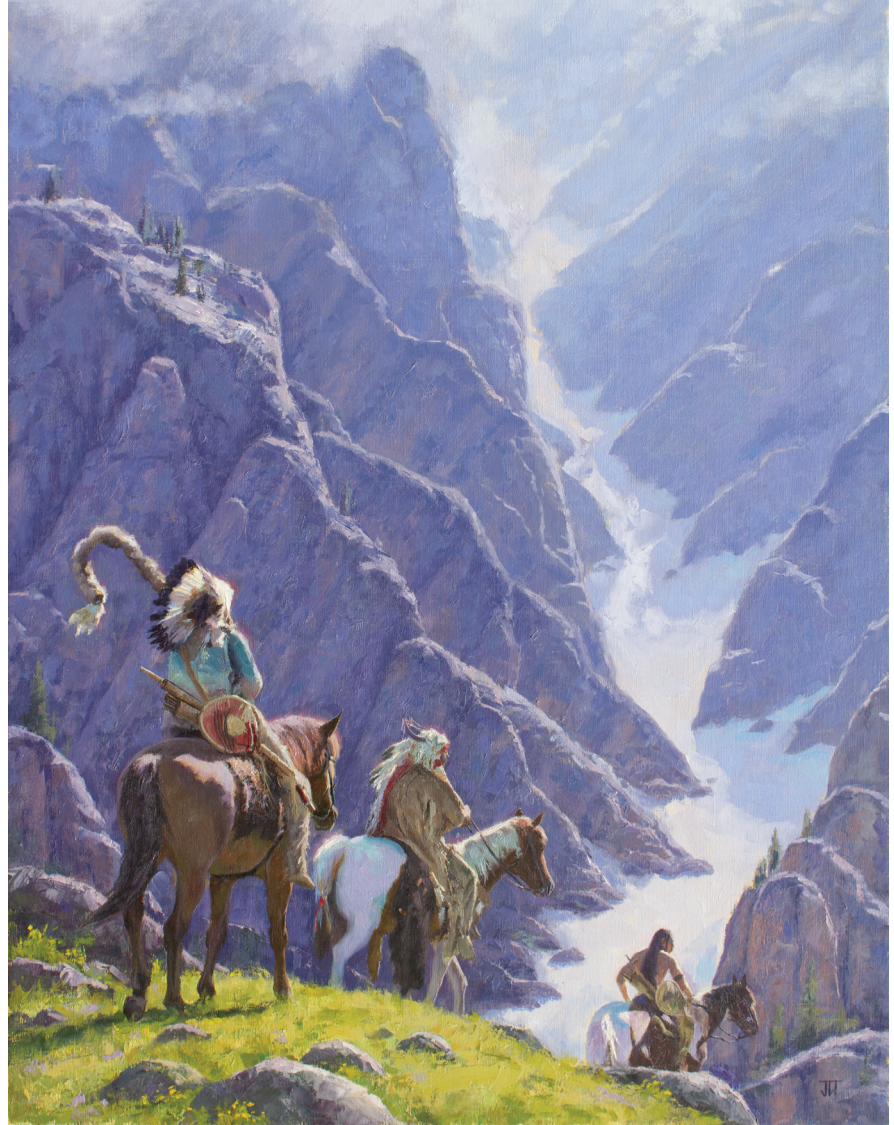
"In the 1830s, Caleb Atwater witnessed a buffalo dance parade in which one man did not wear a buffalo mask, but rather put one on his horse and rode it through the parade while others danced around him. I had wanted to do a large buffalo dance painting for years, but it wasn't until I read about this mounted rider and his horse with a mask that I knew I had found the right compositional element to make it happen."

friends, out to nature again," he says. "And then I realized, after playing in smoky bars—this was back when you could smoke in bars—how much I missed the solitude and peace of nature. And, with the encouragement of some friends, I started sketching again."

Sketching soon led to painting. "I started with watercolors," Tako says. "I didn't really have a clue then, but my thinking was, 'Watercolor is one of the most difficult mediums to work with so, if I can get watercolor down, I can paint with any medium.' This isn't true, but it's what I thought at the time. So I did watercolor for a while. I would go out and, every single day, I would sketch either in pencil or pen and ink. And then I started sketching in watercolor, which was very, very challenging."

Tako's rediscovered interest in the arts led him back to school. He enrolled at Dakota County Technical College in Rosemount, Minnesota, and earned an Associate of Arts degree in applied visual arts. Although the program's emphasis was on commercial art, his studies also encouraged his creative development on a personal level.

"There was a teacher there, Barbara 'Bara' Arens, who took me under her wing," Tako says. "She did things like take us up to her cabin at Lake of the Woods on Oak Island and have an art show there. She really pushed and motivated me in the fine arts direction. She said, 'You know, I understand you're doing graphic design for practicality and



Navigating the Pass, oil, 34" by 26"

"The landscape in this painting was inspired by a three-day plein air painting trip in the Beartooth Mountains in southern Montana. This area was part of the original Crow Reservation and was Crow territory in the pre-reservation days. I wanted to express the massive size of the mountains, so I had them run right off the top of the canvas."

to make money, but you really need to pursue your fine art and go this direction.' And I said, 'Well, okay.'"

Arens' counsel stuck with Tako and, as he worked as a graphic designer, he kept his sketchbook handy. "I'd look for something to sketch," he says. "If it was really cold out—Minnesota winters can be cold—I'd sit in the break room and sketch guys eating their lunch."

Tako also tinkered with different media. "I switched over to acryl-

ic for a little while, but I hated it," he says. "It's a wonderful medium for other artists, but acrylic and I just do not get along."

A commission led Tako back to the oil paints he'd dabbled in back in high school. After marrying Rebecca and moving to Pennsylvania, he says, "I bought some oil paints, did a portrait of a dog, and brought it back to Minnesota," he says, adding that his client was pleased with the painting. "I stuck with oils from

"People went crazy over it."

Wolf Medicine, oil, 16" by 12"

"A member of the Sioux Nation posed for me in his backyard right outside Rapid City, South Dakota, for this painting. For the background, I painted some raw canvas to look like a painted buffalo hide and set it up in my backyard near a small fire so I could study how the interior of a furnished tipi would look at night."





then on out. I still did watercolor and did a lot of sketching, but I ended up buying a plein air oil painting set, and now I hardly ever touch watercolor.”

Then Tako began to see development opportunities. “I had the incredible pleasure of meeting the late, great Richard Schmid, whose book, ‘Alla Prima,’ was a profound influence on me when I got back into art,” he says. “I had him critique my work, which was nerve-wracking, but he was very encouraging. And then, about 13 years ago, I went out West for the first time and took a 10-day workshop with Scott Christensen. It really helped me clean up some loose ends and problems I was having with color and value at the time.”

Newly settled in Dover, Pennsylvania, he and Rebecca began to raise a family of two girls and three boys now ranging in age from 8 to 19. Tako continued to work in graphic design but also made time to sketch and paint, primarily wildlife but eventually people as well. That transition was the result of a happy discovery.

“One day I was doing a wildlife scene of some bison out on the plains,” he says. “I felt it needed a vertical design element, but there’s not a lot of vertical out on the plains. So, just for the heck of it, I put in two Indians on horseback up on a distant hill, looking over the bison—no detail, just little tiny silhouetted figures. I put it online, and people went crazy over it. A collector snatched it up right away.”

Tako says he got to thinking, “Maybe I should try this out. I realized that historical Native American work can combine all the different things I have an interest in as an



Mountain Crow, oil, 14" by 11"


“Indians who lived in the late 19th century would recount how they would dress down in a war party while they traveled to enemy country, but would then put on their finest regalia about 10 to 15 miles from the enemy encampment. If they died, they wanted to die well-dressed. In this painting, I imagined a Crow warrior all dressed up as his war party nears a Flathead camp.”

artist, including the human figure, which I think is one of the most beautiful things there is.”

Soon, with Rebecca’s support on the administrative side, Tako left commercial art behind and was working full-time in the fine arts. He’s never looked back.

His background in the graphic arts has served him well, however, enabling Tako to create his own promotional materials and, more recently, instructional videos that he began to post online during the pandemic. “I had been teaching in-person workshops,” he says, “but the pandemic

threw that out the door, so I started doing online workshops. I teach oil painting online; I do the video editing and everything that goes into making the workshops a reality.”

As Tako enjoys his success, he remains cognizant of his foundations, of the value of all that sketching in the woods. “If the house were to catch fire, I’d probably grab my sketches before my studio paintings,” he says. “I could never replace those sketches.” 

Clover Cameron lives in Trout Lake, Washington.