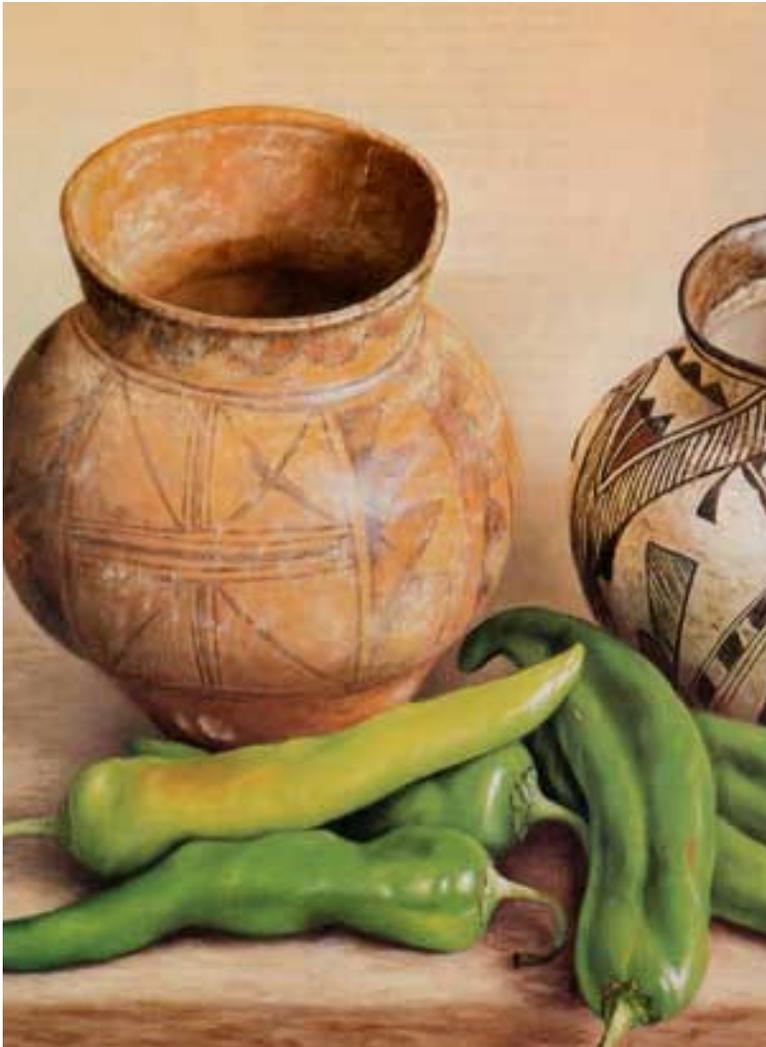


william acheff

clean pure honest



By Tricia Hurst

In the early fall of 1978 the art world of Taos, New Mexico witnessed one of the most unusual openings ever seen in that colony. The Shriver Gallery was giving the first one-man show of a little known, young artist, and people were queuing up at the door an hour in advance. When entrance was gained, would-be buyers were asked to participate in a drawing for the works hanging on the walls; the unhappy losers were put on a waiting list.

When one patron's name was drawn, an unassuming, good-looking man walked up to him and said, "Congratulations."

"Who are you?" queried the startled winner.

"I'm the artist," was the reply.

More than half of the people in the room turned around to get their first glimpse of William Acheff.

Two and a half years later, three galleries are still telling their clients that if they want an Acheff, they'll have to resign themselves to waiting.

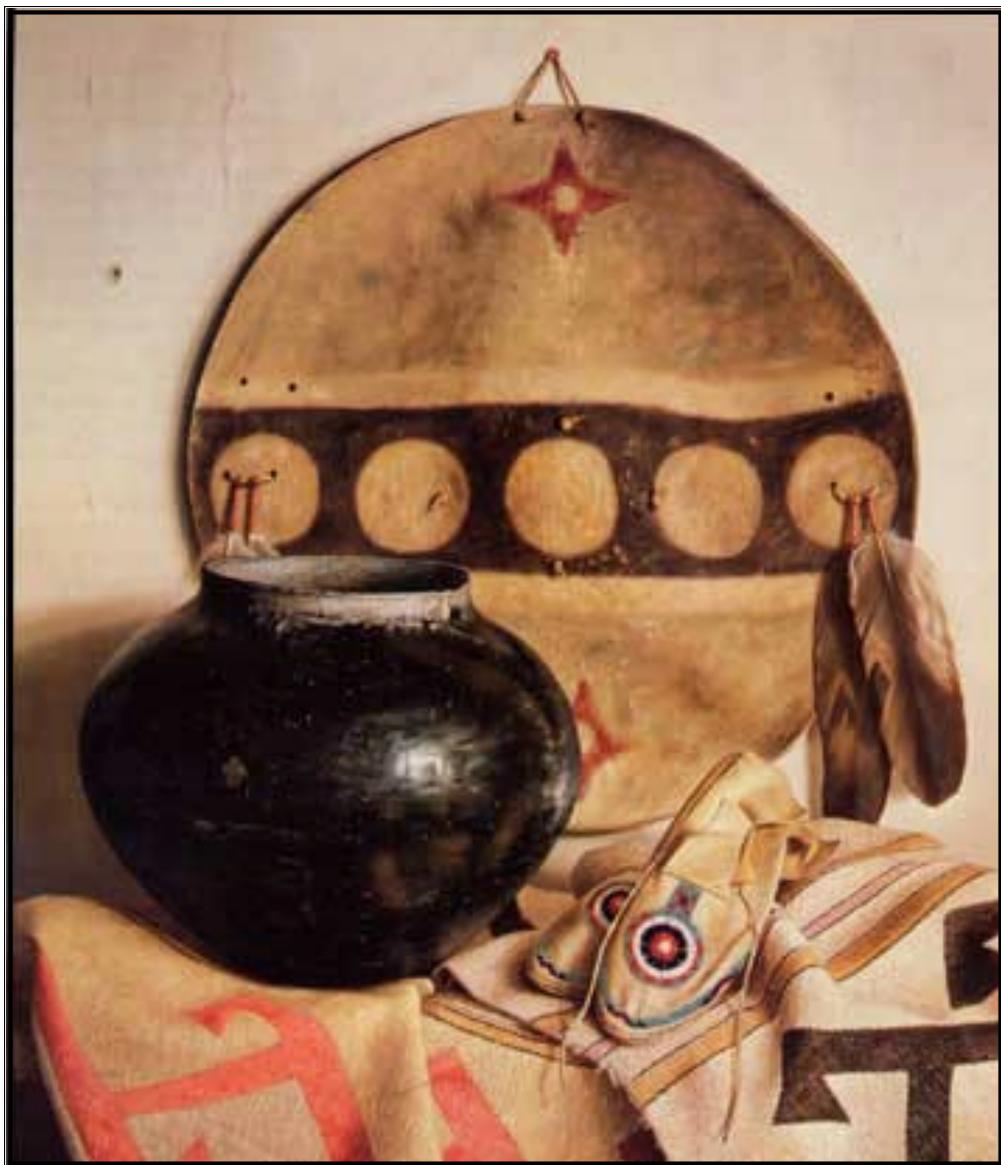
All wait.

Under such circumstances many a young artist would be prone to lean towards a wee bit of egomania or at least sink into the euphoria of being deliriously happy. Typical of the then 31-year-old Acheff, he opted for a third choice and remained calm, cool, collected, and seemingly in complete control of his destiny and all that goes on around him.

"I'm not that cool all the time," says the artist. "The Western Heritage Horse, Cattle, and Art Auction in Houston can be a little unnerving. It is a formal, black tie, sit-down dinner affair where multi-millionaires mill around a hotel annex filled with livestock and art. For some crazy reason I bought a large can of peanuts, and while everyone else was going through the various courses of the meal with a great deal of decorum, there I was chomping on peanuts. I still don't know if it was the black tie or the crowds that made me do it."

Acheff is a loner, a very private person, and it comes through in his work loud and clear. To say he is a realist is an understatement. His oil canvases of southwestern objects and artifacts are so lifelike that it is a rare viewer who can resist touching them. Most people are convinced that the artist is trying to put something over and that the works must be three dimensional.

Acheff dislikes being called a *photo-*



realist, for he never works from photographs. His canvases speak more clearly than any camera study, because Acheff is interested in capturing the essence of the object painted. To say that his work is 'alive' is to repeat a cliché. But one has to use the word, because an Acheff canvas seems to breathe; his paintings are pure, uncluttered, and superbly crafted masterpieces that speak for, and of, the artist.

"I'm not insecure, so I don't have that ego problem you asked about. When you're 'wholeistic' (that's my own word)

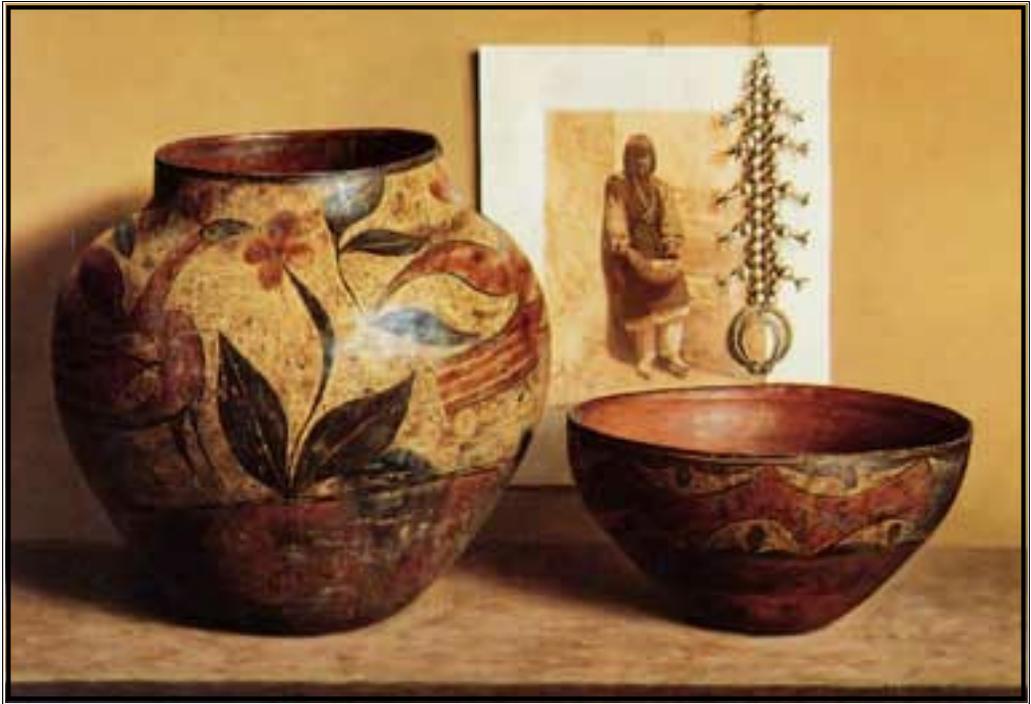
you don't have to worry about weakness. What's happened with my art has come about so gradually and built up so slowly that it's become a part of my life. I went through all those ego things before I started painting and while I was a kid chasing around, making a lot of money, but in general, going nowhere. When I just kind of fell into art, I felt good about it, and in turn, I felt good about me. I knew this was it; I was in a good space.

"In life you always want more. I think it's a lack of perception. When you feel

William Acheff
FROM EARLIER DAYS
OIL, 34 X 30

Collection of J. Connally

full, you're satisfied; I'm not so sure that's good. As I grow, my painting grows. If I take care of myself, I'm taking care of my work. I started doing transcendental meditation in San Francisco almost eight years ago. The moment I started, my life changed. My painting got better; my colors became brighter. Before, something was holding me back. My work today is



William Acheff
 ZIA LADY
 OIL, 24 X 34
 Collection of J. Connally, Jr.

better than it was last year, and as my perception becomes more refined and broader, I see more. Your awareness is sharpened when you're relaxed, and through meditation you achieve a higher state of relaxation. I'm not a religious fanatic, but TM works for me."

William Acheff was born in Anchorage, Alaska in 1947. His mother is half Athabascan Indian, his father is Russian. The first five years of his life were spent in the little town of McGrath, population 125, and if you wanted to get there, you literally had to 'drop in' from a plane. When he was five, the family moved to the San Francisco Bay area.

The artist has been called an Indian painter, and on more than one occasion, an Eskimo painter. He points out, however, that his mother's father was of Scottish and Dutch lineage, and that a one-quarter heritage doesn't make anyone anything.

"Eskimos are the Indians who live on the seashore, along the coastal areas. The group my grandmother was from lived where the Navajos and Apaches originat-

ed. I don't consider myself an Indian any more than any of the other nationalities I have in me, and I'm certainly not an Indian painter. If it becomes 'in' to be Dutch, Russian, or a Scot next year, I bet that's what someone will tag me.

"I paint Indian objects because I relate to them, maybe because I have some Indian blood and because I was close to my grandmother, but that's not the point. It's the ethnic quality of the artifacts. There's a purity in them. Nothing's manufactured by machine. There sits a pot; the whole mood of what went into making that pot is a story, and that's what I want to capture. I like earthy things, textures from nature."

Many, but not all, of Acheff's paintings tell a story. He has borrowed some of his subjects from Edward S. Curtis, the renowned photographer who photographed the Indians of North America around the turn of the century. The artist frequently takes a Curtis photograph and recreates it in paint on the canvas; the artifacts which surround it relate to the story. On a canvas using an old Curtis photograph of two Taos Indian women with San Ildefonso pots on their heads, Acheff places a beautiful San Ildefonso pot in the foreground. The effect is stunning.

"I've been asked if I continue to paint pots because I've got a good thing going. My reply is, 'No way!' If I see a pot I like, it generates an idea, a theme, and I can't help but paint it.

"I may have reached a plateau in my style and development, but that plateau is only about a number 8 out of 100. I've got 92 to go. I haven't reached the point where the pot is going to fall off the canvas, but I'm working on it."

Bill Acheff lays no claim to having wanted to be an artist since childhood. His mother says he did have an early encounter, however, when he swallowed a crayon as a toddler - it gave him a stomachache... So much from the myths of artistic orientation.

In the California high school system, Acheff did take a heavy load of art classes, and he painted and constructed theatrical scenery. His teachers urged him to go to art school, but he had bigger dreams. He planned on becoming a barber!

"I don't know why people think it's so funny. I cut hair in school to pick up extra money, and I didn't plan on going to college. I needed to get out of the whole school scene and away from the kids who were just running around, getting drunk, and going nowhere. I never really related



to the cultural values of the West Coast. I wanted to get out in the world, see what was happening, and experience new things and new people.

“I got into art when I was in my teens, but I was always slower than the rest. I wanted to take my time and do a good job at whatever I did; I guess I’m a perfectionist. I was more loose then and what I did was more impressionistic. I never thought of it as anything but fun, and besides, I was determined to get a barber’s license which I did when I was 19.”

Perhaps becoming a barber was one of the luckiest moves Acheff ever made. At 22 he was merrily combing, snipping and styling heads, and making an excellent living for one so young, when into the salon walked Roberto Lupetti, an Italian artist from Milan. Educated at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, Lupetti

was well known to the California art scene. To make conversation the young barber asked the artist if he ever gave lessons. Later Acheff called him at his studio and was invited over. Acheff says it was more of a lark than anything, but one has to wonder.

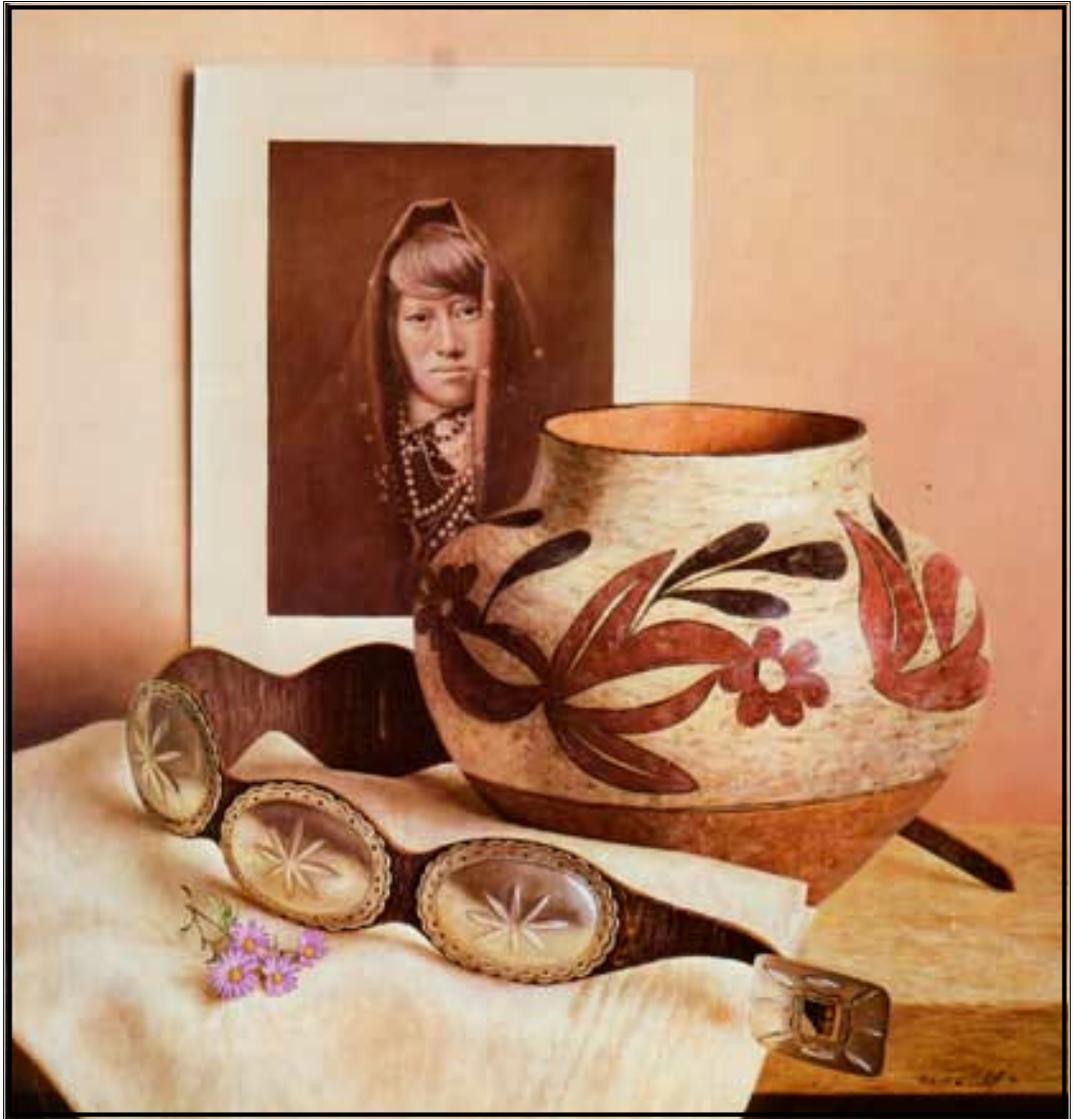
Lupetti’s wife told Acheff that her husband had been looking for that one student who would be receptive to what he was teaching. “As it turned out, I was the one, and he exposed me to everything. I sopped it up like a sponge, five days a week, seven hours every day for six months. I cut hair the other two days. I don’t think I really slept during that entire period. Lupetti dropped his entire class, and I was the only one left. After a month, he told me he thought I had the makings of a professional artist. I couldn’t believe it. I was just doing it because I enjoyed it.

William Acheff
GREEN IS FOR CORN
OIL, 28 X 32
Private Collection

“I had saved quite a bit of money, and was driving an ivory-colored Alfa Romeo, really living it up. Even though I didn’t know it, I was about to change my entire lifestyle and do a lot of growing up.”

At the end of six months of intensive work, Acheff’s teacher told him to go home and continue painting. For the next two and a half years he did just that, visiting Lupetti twice a month for advice and criticism.

“I’d show him what I’d done, and he would tear it apart; but every time I left him, I knew I’d learned something. After a year or so, a new kind of learning was necessary - how to be broke with style. I



William Acheff
FOR AN ACOMA LADY
 OIL, 24 X 22
 Private Collection

had given up barbering, and a beat-up Volkswagen beetle had taken the place of my Alfa Romeo. I remember sitting in that little bug and thinking back to the time when Lupetti had sent me to a gallery director to show my work. I drove up in my fancy car, dressed to kill, and when I walked into the gallery with my paintings, the director glanced out at the car, and

then looked me up and down. Let's face it, I certainly didn't present the image of a starving artist. That was to come later when I'd drive to Sausalito and sell a small canvas for fifteen dollars and sit in the bug and look at the check and feel just great. That piece of paper stood for a lot more than money. Then I started selling for seventy-five dollars, and one gallery in Beverly Hills wanted everything I could do. One day I walked in with a traditional still life, and a client bought it on the spot. It wasn't even framed."

Today Acheff's works go for thousands of dollars at the Shriver Gallery in Taos, Settler's West in Tucson, and Bruner's Fine Arts in Santa Rosa. He feels that coming to the Southwest had a lot to do with it. When he settled in Taos in 1973, he felt comfortable with his surroundings. The strong Spanish and Indian cultures apparent in the people, architecture, and artifacts appealed to him.

"For the first seven months or so, all I did was read, run, chop wood, and paint. My nervous system was coming down



from the hype in California. I had a feeling Taos was where it would all happen for me, and I've never left. It took seven months to let it all seep in. I realize now that I left California because there really wasn't anything there for me.

"I know nothing about the Southwest or New Mexico, but my first painting was of a pot, a blanket, and some Indian corn. It felt right. When a person paints, their feelings are going to come out no matter what it is they paint. If you have talent, there is a great responsibility to express that talent, and that expression should be as clean, pure, and honest as the work itself. What I'm trying to say is that a work can be technically perfect, but you have to give it life. That life is a part of yourself - given with all you've got. It can't come from anywhere else. I talk to my work, and when it's finished, it starts talk-

William Acheff
HOPI DANCER
OIL, 26 X 28
Private Collection

ing back to me. I think that dialogue is what others sense."

Acheff says he's reached a plateau that is about an eight out of 100. What is 100?

"To be at 100, I'd have to be an enlightened person, a fully evolved individual. All I'd have to do is 'think' the canvas and there would be a painting."

What would another number be, like a twenty?

"A twenty? A twenty is better than an eight."

One thing is certain. Whether he reaches that 100 or not, William Acheff is a master of the canvas, and the world of art is hearing more about him every day.



William Acheff