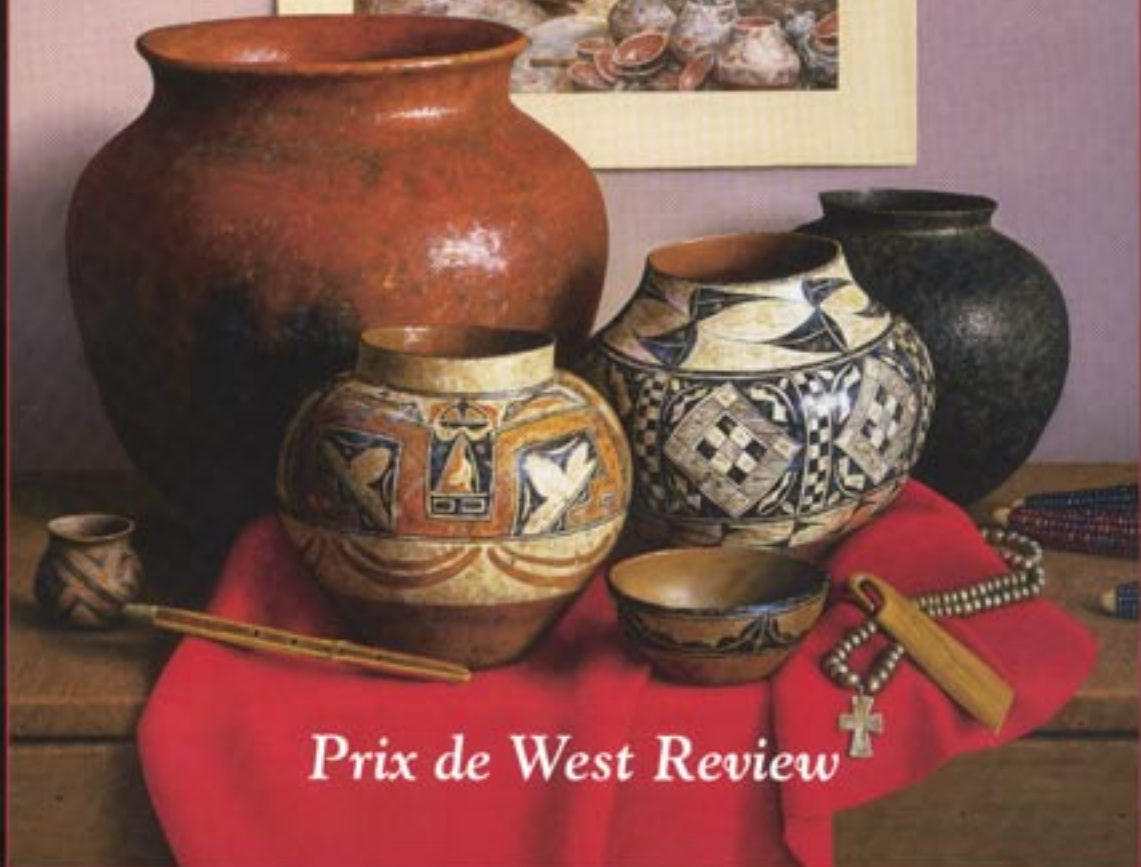


# Persimmon Hill

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*Prix de West Review*



*William Acheff*

2004 *Prix de West* Award Winner  
W.R. Leigh Painting Inspired  
Prix de West Award Winner

BY M.J. VAN DEVENTER

A 1911 painting by William R. Leigh inspired the work of art titled *As You Were* that won the 2004 Prix de West Purchase Award for William Acheff of Taos, New Mexico.

The award was sponsored by Rob and Karen Braver/RBC Financial and presented by Keith E. Bailey, Board of Directors member.

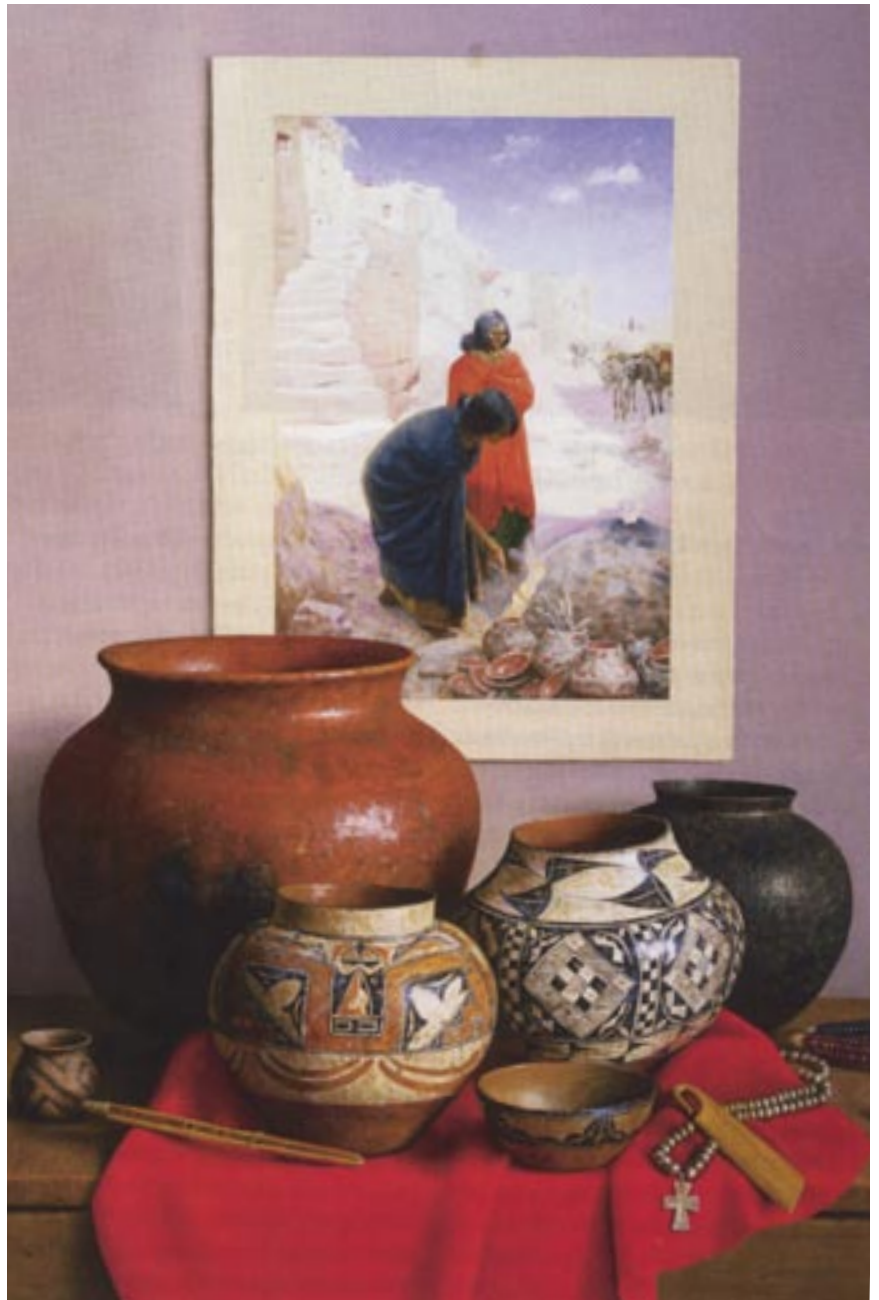
The Leigh painting reflects the simple lifestyle of the Acoma people and features several large pots in a typical pueblo landscape. Acheff first encountered the painting in the 1970s when he used to stay in the home of Max and Pat Shriver, owners of the Shriver Gallery in Taos.

"I thought the painting was beautiful and so expressive of the Acoma lifestyle. I wanted to compliment the Acoma pots in the painting with some of my own pots. I also wanted to portray their life, the way it was, thus the title, *As You Were*," Acheff said.

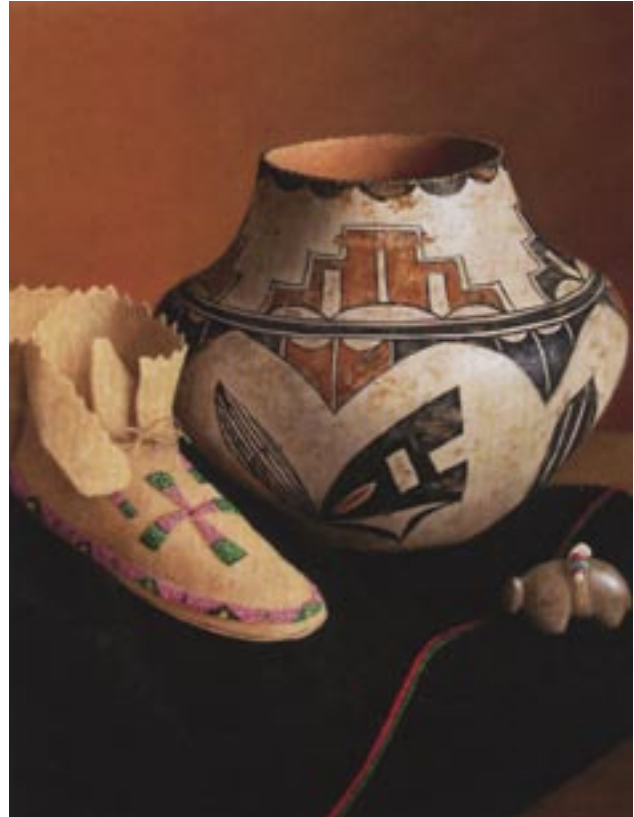
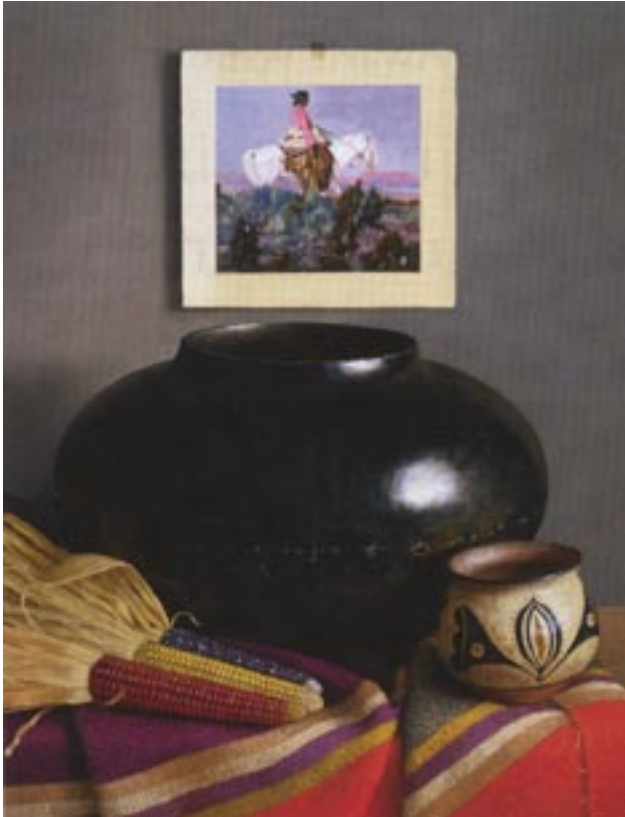
I always loved that painting even though at the time I moved to Taos in 1973, I wasn't aware of all the tribal differences," Acheff said in an interview, following the announcement he had won the Prix de West award for the second time in his career.

His other Prix de West honor was in 1989 for a *trompe l'oeil* (fool the eye) painting entitled *Flapjacks*. He joins a select group of artists who have won the award twice ~ Howard Terpning, Hollis Williford and the late Tom Lovell.

As is typical of an Acheff painting, a work of art is often incorporated into



*As You Were*, Oil, 53" x 36" by Bill Acheff is the 2004 Prix de West Purchase Award Winner.



*Silence and Serenity, Oil, 30" x 23" and Lavender Beads, Oil, 12" x 10" are other works by Acheff in the 2004 Prix de West Invitational Art Exhibition.*

the piece, giving a historical context to the painting. His *Flapjacks* painting followed a similar motif with Frederick Remington titled *Bringing Home The New Cook* in the background.

Acheff is noted for elegant beadwork motifs that look so real you want to reach out and touch them. *As You Were* is unusual for Acheff as there is no trace of beadwork on this painting. Beadwork is not indigenous to the Acoma pueblo.

Acheff paints from life and carefully composes the elements of each painting. He has a precise sense of design and strategically plans each layout for a painting before ever picking up his palette and brushes.

"I like to have some symmetry in a painting and I am very careful about my layout. I get the placement of the objects exactly where I want them before I start painting," he said.

Originally he had a blue Rio Grande blanket featured at the

bottom of the painting. But after studying the work for several days, he realized the design on the blanket competed with the design of the painting. He painted a new blanket in a vivid red color over the original one he had planned to use.

Other elements in the painting include a flute, that he said "could be from any pueblo," and an Acoma weaving comb, along with pots representing several pueblos.

Acheff explained his usual cycle for a painting as first getting excited about an idea, and then setting up the still life scene. He often works from his personal collection of pottery, moccasins, fetishes and clay ducks.

"It's an uphill climb to get the painting where it looks like something and then there's the downhill side where the painting just flows. But I had a big block on this one," he said.

"The block doesn't happen

too often, usually just on the big paintings. This is the largest painting I have ever put in a show and I wanted to do something really good this year for the Prix de West this year. I wanted to dazzle people with this painting. I knew I couldn't make a mistake. A painting is always challenging and a little self doubt. I may stumble a bit, but in the end I will always win over a painting block," Acheff said.

Once the painting was in its exquisite frame, Acheff looked at it with a critical eye. "I just let it rest for a week and a half. I kept looking at it ~ peering into the painting. I just have to do that. I thought it was finished but I saw several things that bothered me so I began touching it up. I wanted it to be perfect," he said.

Although the announcement he had won the Prix de West Purchase Award was a surprise, Acheff said, I thought it could happen this year. I was so happy with the painting and the way people



*Ducks In A Row, Oil, 6" x 12" by Acheff is also on display at the 2004 Prix de West Invitational Art Exhibition.*

responded to it. But it would not have mattered to me who won the award because I was already fulfilled. I had been thinking about doing larger, more involved paintings for several years and decided this was the year to do that. *As You Were* measures 53" x 36".

"I knew I had good paintings this year," he said. "I started earlier. I wasn't rushed. I guess the older you get you are less apt to say, 'yeah, yeah, I'll get to it.'"

The painting took Acheff more than a month of long hours to create. He jokes that it really took 35 years ~ the number of years he has been painting. He has participated in Prix de West for the past 21 years and he said as he began to approach his 30th year of painting, he realized painting was becoming effortless for him.

Some artists might call the ease of painting confidence in their ability. Acheff prefers to call it expanded knowledge and familiarity with what he is doing. "Once in a while, a painting gives you trouble, but overall, there is a fluid quality to creating a painting," he said.

Acheff's first teacher was Roberto Lupetti, an Italian artist

who encouraged him to be honest in his work and to develop his own style in his paintings.

Lupetti also gave Acheff a sense of confidence by telling him, at the age of 22, to never take less than \$50 for a painting. When a gallery offered him much less for six months of work, Acheff walked out of the gallery and never returned.

**W**hile many of Acheff's Prix de West contemporaries extoll the value of *plein air* painting, Acheff much prefers the quiet, solitary routine of painting still lifes in his studio. "I tried *plein air* painting with Paul Strisik for a week in Yosemite. It was most frustrating to me although I had fun and felt like I really learned something.

He said, "I paint the way I want something to be, not what it may really be. It's my interpretation." And he is a master of the *trompe l'oeil* technique, which gives a three-dimensional depth and quality to his work.

The technique was used by William Harnett (1848-1892) and his contemporaries, although Acheff has surpassed his mentor in his own

display of the technique.

A typical day for Acheff would be to rise early, have hot water ~ no coffee ~ and either exercise or meditate, which he does twice a day.

"Then I start painting. Some days, I don't even start my car to go to town. I will usually work non-stop for a couple of weeks, then I'll take a break. I don't stop painting until I have established the main elements of a piece. I don't tough the set up until I'm almost finished.

"Then I will start something else and come back to the other painting a few days later with a fresh eye. I paint only one painting at a time," he said.

Acheff is quite at home in Taos' multicultural environment. With an ethnic background that includes Georgian, Russian, Scottish and Dutch ancestors as well as Athabascan Indians, he is continually inspired by the culture of Taos and the Native Americans there who provide him with a variety of inspiring subject matter to portray.