



TODAY'S
MASTERS

EZRA TUCKER'S FRESH LOOK AT THE WEST

*Bighorn Ram, 20_?, medium/support?, X x Y in.,
private collection, available through the artist,
or...?*





In the world of representational art, Ezra Tucker (b. 1955) is famous for paintings of wildlife, and recently he has remained true to form with beautifully detailed portraits of North American fauna, like his handsome *Bighorn Ram* who lies at rest, gazing at us. An immaculately coifed fox poses in *Desert Dandy*, while a powerful puma watches a flock of birds passing in *Magpie Valley*.

There is pleasure to be found in Tucker's skillful technique, which enhances our appreciation for the splendor of this country's animals. His fascination with their power has been a favorite theme throughout his career. But his life in art has been overshadowed by the dark forces of racism, and his most recent work is an effort to dispel the absence of African Americans from the canon of art of the American West.

AGAINST THE ODDS

Tucker's life as a painter began when he attended the Memphis Academy of Arts, earning a B.F.A. in advertising design. He was under pressure at home, where his minister father was skeptical of his chances for success: "My father always said I was never going to have a career as an artist because those opportunities were not there for Black people. That was just his experience. He was being kind to me, and I'm grateful he paid half of my tuition."

Soon after graduation, Tucker found work in Kansas City at Hallmark, the greeting card and gift company, where he met his comrades in art, Thomas Blackshear II (b. 1955) and Dean Mitchell (b. 1957), sharing with them the challenges of being African-American in an international company dominated by Anglo-Americans. Nevertheless, his father was pleased: "When I got the job at Hallmark, he said, 'Well, that makes sense.'"

Although Hallmark provided Tucker with abundant opportunities to hone his skill as a wildlife artist, his tenure lasted only five years. Told by his boss that he had to slow down, as his quality and speed were embarrassing some artists who had worked there longer, he began freelancing at night, producing covers for Ace books, then resigned.

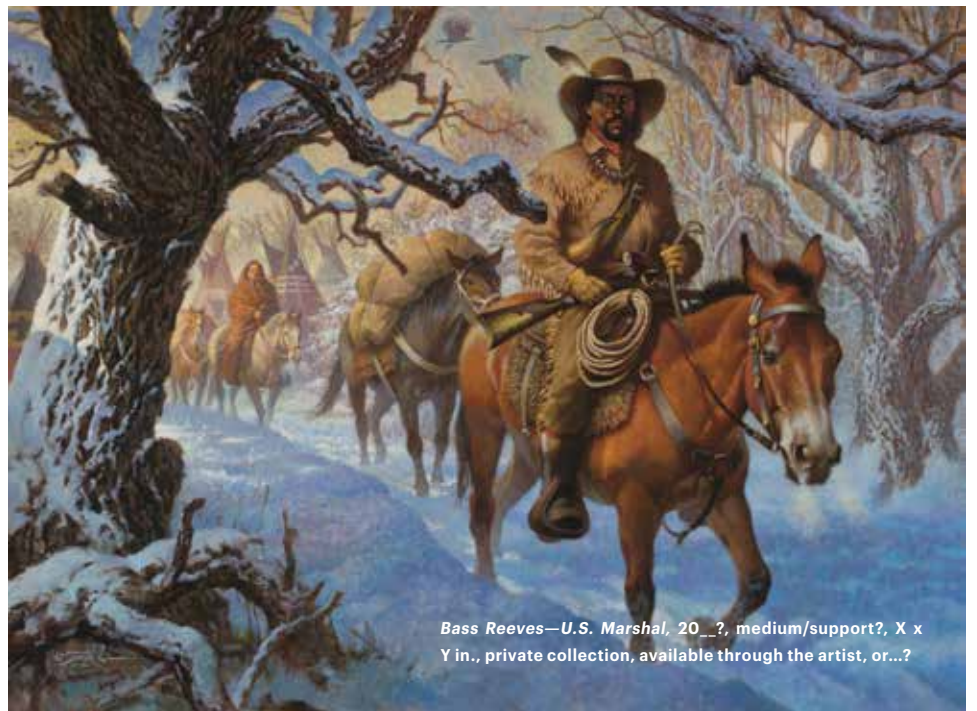
Tucker reflects, "The challenge I've had is to figure out where I fit. I've been a freelance artist since 1982. I refused to go back into a structured environment like Hallmark. A lot of the people who run those types of institutions don't evolve to the positive, in my experience." Tuck-

Magpie Valley, 20__?, medium/support?, X x Y in., private collection, available through the artist, or...?

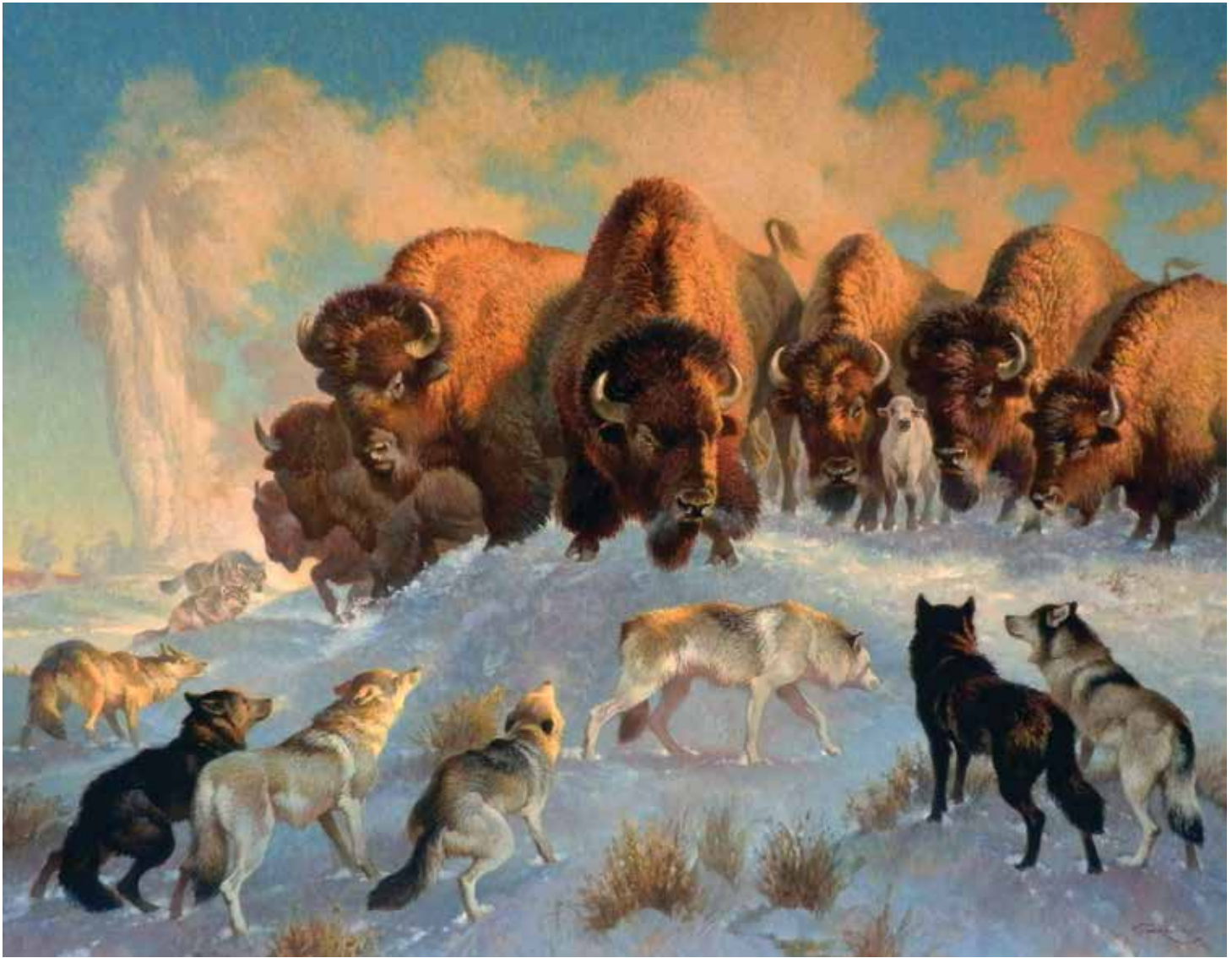
er's skeptical father warned him again that he would never be able to make art and sustain a good quality of life, and that he would surely end up on the streets. But, after he left Hallmark, Tucker's income tripled, and he has flourished as a freelancer ever since.

Fantasy art gave him his first footing. He traveled to Los Angeles with Blackshear, hoping to make a career in the movie business. After a week knocking on doors with his portfolio, and despite pushback from this racist industry, he found an agent. She warned him that the field was ruthlessly deadline-oriented, but she did find him work. Within a year he was landing bigger projects, and the agent asked him to move to Los Angeles permanently; Tucker's bride, Nancy, agreed on condition that he save enough money to fund a year if their adventure failed. "I'm grateful I had her to say that to me," he recalls.

Within a year he was getting the movie assignments he wanted. He loved fantasy imagery, having grown up hooked on comic books, and much of his earliest work for the studios was in that genre. Tucker



Bass Reeves—U.S. Marshal, 20__?, medium/support?, X x Y in., private collection, available through the artist, or...?



Defending the Legend, 20__?, medium/support?, X x Y in., private collection, available through the artist, or...?

designed sketches, story-boards, concept art, and promotional posters, including his first big break, a poster for the Warner Bros film *The NeverEnding Story* (1984), which was ultimately blown up into a huge billboard on the studio building. He also painted classic sword-and-sorcery, beefcake-warrior covers for the rock band Molly Hatchet's albums *The Deed Is Done* and *Lightning Strikes*.

The *NeverEnding Story* billboard advertised Tucker's artistry as much as it did the movie, and more projects followed quickly; he created art for films like *Tales from the Dark Side*, *Romancing the Stone*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Godzilla*, and Stephen King's *Graveyard Shift*. While he was developing posters for *The Overlord*, actor Charlton Heston visited his studio unannounced, and an awestruck Tucker found himself explaining drawing technique to the impressed superstar.

The independent life was not without challenges, as America's obsession with race crept into Tucker's freelance business. "It has never made sense to me, since I was a kid growing up in Memphis," Tucker notes. "The civil rights movement was underway, and I became involved when Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed in Memphis. That was eye-opening because of the upheaval that went on in our city, and our communities. That imprinted on my life how I was going to

adjust to all the things going on around me. I'm still struggling with understanding race, why it's an issue. At the same time, I've succeeded beyond expectations."

OVERLOOKED STORIES

Tucker's defiance of racial oppression has emerged in his paintings, sometimes in subtle ways. In *Defending the Legend*, a herd of buffalos stand ready to fight, protecting a white calf from the encircling pack of wolves who mean to devour it. In the background, a windstorm has swept up a tower of snow. The scene is reminiscent of *Anguish*, the famous painting by the 19th-century Danish artist August Friedrich Schenck of a ewe's pathetic defense of her dead lamb from a group of hungry crows in the snow. Unlike the sad ending Schenck's scene foretells, Tucker's buffalos look ready for a ferocious fight.

Although *Defending the Legend* dovetails with Tucker's wild-life work, it is also an allegory of the West, set on the plains of the Lakota, whose mythology includes a white buffalo calf. Two young warriors are sent into the rolling hills to find the buffalo herds in preparation for a hunt. They spy a beautiful woman approaching and hide in some bushes. One youth is overcome by lust and says he will take her for his wife, but the other recognizes her as *wakan*, a sacred being, and scolds his friend. When she asks what they want, the lustful man springs up to grab her, but she is instantly transformed into a whirling sandstorm that consumes his flesh and leaves only a pile of bones. Returning to her human form, the woman asks the

Chisholm Trail Moonlight, 20_?, medium/support?, X x Y in., private collection, available through the artist, or...?



They Went Yonder, 20_?, medium/support?, X x Y in., private collection, available through the artist, or...?



respectful young man to tell his tribe's leader, Bull Walking Upright, to arrange his camp in a circle.

The *wakan* arrives, producing a pipe that she teaches Bull Walking Upright to smoke during sacred rites, before making treaties, to attract the buffalo, etc. She teaches the people how to walk the earth — their mother and grandmother — in a sacred manner. The Lakota would now be the people of the buffalo, and were to use black, red, brown, and white to decorate themselves for ceremonies. The woman then transforms into a black buffalo, then a red buffalo, then a brown one, and finally a white one. She declares she will return someday as a white calf to bless and warn the people, then she vanishes.

Tucker's clever reference to this narrative in *Defending the Legend* anticipates his most recent paintings addressing the neglected history of Blacks during the westward expansion. Late last year he partnered with Blackshear and Mitchell to exhibit exciting new scenes of Black buckaroos, scouts, and sheriffs at the Broadmoor Galleries in Colorado Springs. (Tucker lives about 20 miles to the north.)

Impressed by the popularity of Western art, the trio noticed that there are few pictures of Black cowboys, even though as many as a quarter of America's actual cowboys had African ancestors. Black characters have seldom appeared in cowboy movies, and it was only in 1990 that Mitchell was invited to show in the prize competition organized by New Mexico's Hubbard Museum of the American West. He offered *Rowena*, an elegant watercolor portrait of an elderly African American, which was purchased by Joan Gale Hubbard herself. He followed with a thoughtful series of Buffalo Soldiers and Black frontiersmen. Blackshear developed his richly decorative Western Nouveau manner and found an eager market for Black cowboys. (See my article on him in the June 2021 issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.)

Tucker sought to paint stories of the Old West as complex narratives that should not be oversimplified. He began with portraits of real people who played major roles in the stories of anarchic frontier life. *Bass Reeves—U.S. Marshal* depicts the first Black deputy to work west of the Mississippi. Quick with a gun, during his long career as a lawman in Arkansas and the Oklahoma Territory, Reeves shot and killed 14 men and made more than 3,000 arrests. *As the Crow Flies—Jim Beckwourth* brings to life the flamboyant bravado of the notorious frontiersman.

The West's anonymous Black figures have found their place in Tucker's art, too. *Chisholm Trail Moonlight* and *Breaking a Maverick* expand the pictorial record to show the racially diverse men who worked the cattle route that ran from Texas to Kentucky. *They Went Yonder* presents a pair of African-American scouts, leading a wagon train of settlers, who have discovered heart-rending evidence of a recent ambush. A child's doll lies forlornly among a scattering of arrows penetrating the golden grass.

Today Tucker sees room for improvement in race relations: "As a freelance artist, yes, I've seen things change and get

better, but I've also seen some of the same things, throughout our culture. It's always present, and I've just figured out how to adjust to it, as it is." ●

Information: Organized by curator David J. Wagner, the 25-painting exhibition *The Art of Ezra Tucker* will begin its U.S. tour on July 1 at the Hiram Blauvelt Art Museum (Oradell, New Jersey). It will move on to Chicago; Grants Pass, Oregon; Stockton, California; Hays, Kansas; Houston; Casper, Wyoming; Coeur d'Alene, Idaho; Redding, California; Murrells Inlet, South Carolina; Fort Wayne, Indiana; and San Angelo, Texas. Details are available at ezratucker.com.

MICHAEL J. PEARCE, PHD is the author of *Kitsch, Propaganda, and the American Avant-Garde* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, May 2023), and professor of art at California Lutheran University.