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# He Has Horses Down to a Fine Art

Mark Maggiori is an amateur rider. He'd like to get in the saddle more often, but for now, his focus is on painting horses. Not riding them. He paints cowboys, too. And the broad landscapes of the Southwest.

He's not the first to do so, but his artwork, which ranges from photorealism to expressionism, is unmatched among his peers, and it's inspiring a resurrection of Western art in popular culture.

**BY KELLY VAUGHN**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUGLAS MERRIAM

**N**EAR THE END OF THE MUSIC VIDEO for *L'instinct et l'envie*, Mark Maggiori carries a red suitcase and a shovel into the desert. He's wearing jeans, a blue T-shirt and green sneakers.

He digs a hole.

As Maggiori holds a long, high note and the beat of the drums intensifies, his hair falls into his face. He buries the suitcase, abandons the shovel upright in the dirt and walks away. The song, performed by Maggiori's band, Pleymo, fades out as the screen goes dark.

The last verse of *L'instinct et l'envie* translates this way: "Eyes toward the sky, my soul in the sun / I am sure to be alive / I have two feet on the ground / My soul in the sun, I have instinct and desire."

"Soul in the sun" stands out. Because more than a decade after the song was released and the video produced in the desert, Maggiori often finds himself in the sun — literally and figuratively — as one of the finest Western painters of his generation.

Born in Fontainebleau, France, in 1977, Maggiori showed an early proclivity for art. And for the American West. "My grandparents were Italian," he says. "And the Western films were pretty big in Italy. My grandmother always called me 'Little Cowboy,' and my grandfather would create games for me with cowboys and Indians. And, you know, I think it's just little things like that that just kind of mark you for the rest of your life."

His first trip to the United States, at the age of 15, left a lasting mark on him, too. Nearly three decades later, he remembers watching the American

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Artist Mark Maggiori followed a winding path from his native France to Taos, New Mexico, where he lives and works today.

landscape unfurl through the windshield of his uncle's car as they drove from New York to San Francisco. Along the way, he saw the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley and Canyon de Chelly for the first time.

"Back then, I don't think I really noticed as much as I should have," Maggiori says. "I mean, I was just on a road trip. I was just a teenager. But I think that trip really kind of re-emerged for me later in life. It created a very important, nostalgic thing, and that, I think, is now transcribed to my work."

**P**AINTING IS THE TRANSLATION of memory, a fragment of time that moves from brain through shoulders and forearms and wrists and fingers and into a brush. Painting is prophetic and kinetic. The brush drinks color. Strokes become shapes. Shapes become figures. Memory achieves permanence.

Pablo Picasso said painting was really no different than keeping a diary. He also said, "Painting is a blind man's profession. He paints not what he sees, but what he feels, what he tells himself about what he has seen."

If Maggiori's paintings are his diary, it is one written with strokes of honesty and romance. Clouds consume landscapes. Cowboys are heroes. Manes fall across horses so authentically, you want to run your fingers through the fringe. And so, the question presents: *How can a Frenchman paint the West this way?*

Maggiori was formally trained at Paris' Académie Julian (by then part of ESAG Penninghen) — the same prestigious school where Western painters Joseph Henry Sharp, Bert Geer Phillips and Ernest L. Blumenschein studied. In Taos, New Mexico, they later formed the Taos Society of Artists with E. Irving Couse, Oscar E. Berninghaus and W. Herbert "Buck" Dunton, becoming members of the "Taos Six."

More than a century later, Maggiori finds himself living and working in Taos, too, although his path to acclaim as a painter wasn't exactly linear. In 2000, he turned down an art director position with Disney to focus on directing music videos — for Pleymo and other bands — and taking on photography and animation work. The band split in 2007, after touring for a decade under contract with Epic Records, and Maggiori made his way back to the United States with a film camera in hand.

He spent months in the South, bounced around the rest of the country directing music videos and finally landed in Los Angeles to direct one for a British artist. During that trip, he met his muse. And the trajectory of his life shifted exponentially.

Maggiori works on one of his Western-themed art pieces in his studio in Taos. His fascination with the genre dates to his childhood.

Petecia Le Fawnhawk was working as a visual artist in LA, but she was born in the desert — in Chloride, an isolated Northwestern Arizona silver mining town with a population of fewer than 400 people.

"I was looking for a remote place to shoot this music video — something very desert-looking, with trailers," Maggiori recalls. "She goes, 'I have just the place for you.' She had grown up in this desert, and I really loved it. For me, as a Frenchman, it had a totally different look than it did to her. She had kind of a hard childhood there. But for me, all of a sudden, I just wanted to spend a lot of time there. And I guess she kind of rediscovered that old area through my eyes, because it was so exotic and so amazing and so full of romance to me."

In 2010, with Le Fawnhawk's assistance, Maggiori wrote and directed a film titled *Johnny Christ*, starring Arizona-born Mark Wystrach, the lead singer of Grammy-nominated country band Midland, in the title role. (We profiled Wystrach in the April 2017 issue of *Arizona Highways*.)

"Chloride, Arizona — that's where we are," the narrator says in an online trailer. "If you want to be left alone, this is the place to be." The narrator, Vera, and her husband find the title character by the side of the road, battered and bloody. They take him in, and Johnny Christ has "strange effects" on the family.

The film was distributed by Blackpills Productions in late 2017, but the filming had finished years earlier.



BOYS OF THE LAND



HIGH NOON

That's when Maggiori and Le Fawnhawk went to Oklahoma City to tour the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. Maggiori decided then and there to begin painting the American West.

After several years of traveling back and forth between the United States and France — where Maggiori has two daughters, Shalom and Scarlett, from a previous relationship — he and Le Fawnhawk were married in 2012.

“Our love was born in the desert of Arizona,” Maggiori writes in a 2019 Instagram post. “We were fire and gasoline, we pushed the boundaries of a relationship to the extremes, only to explode and be reborn with a better understanding of ourselves. ... I deeply believe in human beings’ capacity to adapt, learn and improve themselves. Hold on to the one you love, if your heart tells you that it is worth it, then fight for it. There is no greater reward than a long-term relationship and the book it writes.”

The couple lived in Arizona for a stretch before relocating to Taos. Their towheaded, bright-eyed daughter, Wilderness, was born there in 2019.

Still, Maggiori is pulled to the Grand Canyon State.

“I am really drawn to the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley — I have Monument Valley tattooed on my arm — and Glen Canyon,” he says. “I was kind of bothering my

Maggiori navigates a road near his Taos home in his vintage Ford truck.

wife a few years ago to buy a place nearby. She was like, ‘There’s nothing there.’ I said, ‘I know, but there are the cliffs.’”

**A**ND SO, THE CLIFFS APPEAR in some of his work. So, too, does the Grand Canyon. And the red sandstone features of Navajoland. The paintings are poetry and music. One in particular, *Purple Haze*, feels like Frédéric Chopin’s *Nocturne in C-Sharp Minor, Op. 27, No. 1*. It has story and movement. A rise and fall. Two cowboys ride the high desert in front of what looks like the Canyon. The sky is rich with the golds, purples and salmons of sunset. The horses are muscular and powerful. The whole scene is a result of dozens of studies.

“When I first started painting Western scenes, I didn’t know a lot of people,” Maggiori says. “So, I would find people and have them dress the part. But as I got deeper and deeper into these subjects, I started to meet more subjects who actually lived this way. Now, I find people who are living the life that I want to paint. I photograph the cowboys in their environments, and I photograph the landscapes.” He sketches them first, then begins the painting process.

As for the horses, Maggiori is an amateur rider himself, but as Wilderness begins to take lessons, he finds himself among the animals more and more.

“She’s riding a big horse with a teacher, and I feel like





this is going to be a big part of her childhood,” Maggiori says. “I think that at some point, I have to get on the saddle more to be able to support her and be around her and, you know, help her follow her dream.” Presumably, those experiences will augment his studies of the animals and, in turn, his depiction of them in the art.

*Purple Haze* won the Don B. Huntley Spirit of the West Award, given in honor of the most outstanding work in cowboy subject matter, at LA’s Autry Museum of the American West in 2019. And it’s one of hundreds of Maggiori paintings that resonate with his social media audience.

Danielle Solomon, a Phoenix-based attorney, and K.C. Badger, a Portland-based artist, are aware of Maggiori because of his Instagram account, which, at press time, boasted more than 200,000 followers. And as a marketing tool, Instagram has served Maggiori remarkably well.

“I love his work because, to me, it seems simultaneously classic and modern,” Solomon says. “Parts of it are incredibly detailed and animated — this realism, to me, seems very classic. And then there’s something else

Recently, Maggiori has incorporated more and more Black cowboys into his work, a move that resonates with collectors and fans.

about it that’s so fresh and soulful. Maybe it’s the colors — or, if this makes any sense, the geometry of the backgrounds and plants — that feels very modern.”

Solomon, like Badger, has a Maggiori print prominently displayed in her home, the result of print sales the artist’s LA gallery, Maxwell Alexander, hosts a few times each year.

“We own three prints,” says Badger of himself and his wife, fellow artist Kayla Lockhart. “I think that Maggiori being French, and having this very romanticized view of the West and Western culture, really shows in his work. I also think that, technically, his portrayal of light and textures, especially through his night scenes, is unparalleled. I love how obsessed he is personally with the culture — his lifestyle and his art prove it. I also think that his popularity through social media and to a younger demographic is a big reason for the resurrection of Western art in popular culture.”

Indeed, the artist seems to embody the West. His personal photos celebrate the landscape of Taos, and his

Maggiori puts the finishing touches on one of his pieces. Critics and consumers rave about the artist’s diverse depictions of the American West.

home and studio are in the traditional Pueblo style. His clothes are rich with American Indian patterns, his jewelry an homage to craftsmen and craftswomen. Bowman Hat Co., rooted in Costa Mesa, California, even created a hat, the Maggiori, in honor of the artist’s style.

More than this personal aesthetic, though, critics and consumers alike praise Maggiori’s approach to the diversity of the American West. Dr. James Burns, executive director of the Arizona Historical Society, notes his depiction of the West both as it was and as it is today — “a multiplicity of cultures.”

“His work is inclusive, representing the full spectrum of the demographics of the American West, past and present,” Burns says. “The significance of that cannot be overstated. His repertoire is vast: nocturnal scenes, unique perspectives and multiple artistic styles, from photorealism to expressionism.”

Recently, Maggiori has incorporated more and more Black cowboys into his work, a move that resonates with collectors and fans.

“Depictions of Native Americans and Mexicans are not rare in previous generations of Western artists, but African-Americans, which made up a huge percentage of cowboys, are almost, if not totally, absent,” says art aficionado Shad Kvetko, who follows the artist closely from his home in Dallas. “Maggiori did a wonderful piece for the Briscoe [Western Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas] depicting them. I’m finding more and more creatives — many of whom are congregating up around Taos and Santa Fe, but also spread across Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California — that are taking up these classic Western tropes and adding their own perspective to them, often without the political baggage sometimes associated with the genre and the lifestyle. It’s an exciting time for lovers of Western history and culture like myself.”

As with any artist, inspiration runs deep for Maggiori. He is, of course, influenced by Maynard Dixon, who treated clouds and landscapes similarly. But he also draws inspiration from the Taos Six, Henry Farny and Bill Owen.

“I’ve always tried to understand the lifestyle that some artists had, and that’s one of the reasons we moved to Taos — because of the society,” Maggiori says. “After moving to the States from France, I thought it was interesting to see what they experienced here in the West. So, when I go to Tucson and drive around, I like to look at rocks and think, *Hmm. Maybe Maynard Dixon was here. Maybe he painted this space.*”

Regardless of parallelisms with other artists, one thing is clear. Mark Maggiori has found his spot in the sun. **AH**

For more information about Mark Maggiori, including details about upcoming print sales, please visit [markmaggiori.com](http://markmaggiori.com). To learn more about the Maggiori hat, please visit [bowmanhats.com](http://bowmanhats.com).