

# Leading the Pack

Wildlife artist Mary Roberson captures  
the creatures of the West

WRITTEN BY DANA W. TODD



**NATURE IS ALWAYS REFRESHING**  
OIL ON CANVAS | 12 X 12 INCHES



**PATHFINDERS**  
OIL ON CANVAS | 60 X 40 INCHES

ROBERSON



### AN OBSTINANCY

OIL ON PANEL | 48 X 96 INCHES

**T**HERE'S NOTHING MARY ROBERSON COULD be but an artist, though it seems she was the last to know. “The art field picked me; I didn’t pick it,” she says. “I have vivid memories in first grade of drawing my fellow classmates — not because I was bored, but because I found shapes so interesting. My Catholic school teachers made me stop, but they couldn’t prevent me from sketching during my free time. Then, in high

school, I took all of the required classes but had no idea what to choose for an elective course. A teacher suggested art. I signed up, and that’s all she wrote. Then, suddenly, it was OK to draw my fellow students.”

Despite the joy she found in creativity, Roberson didn’t know what to pursue for her career after graduation. “I was searching for an answer; it never occurred to me that I could work as an artist for a living. My parents



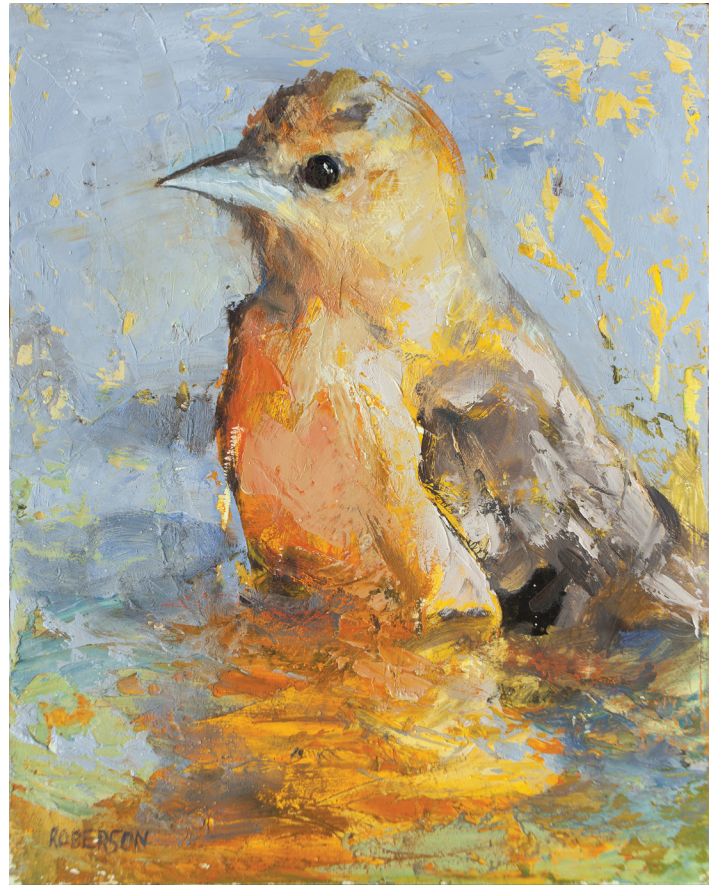
told me I needed to focus on something, so I asked my art teacher what he thought I should settle on. He looked at me, grinned, and said, 'Are you serious? You're an artist.' So I told my parents, and they said, 'It's about time you recognized that.' They were just waiting for me to discover what was there all along."

Now, at age 76, she finds herself as free and loose to paint as she did in her younger years. She embraces her two loves



### UNCONSTRAINED

OIL ON CANVAS | 48 X 60 INCHES



### NEW TO THE BIRDBATH

OIL AND ENCAUSTIC ON PANEL | 9.75 X 7.75 INCHES



### DISTRACTIONS

OIL ON CANVAS | 42 X 62 INCHES

— art and animals — merging them in a career that has spanned decades. Her ability to blend impressionistic and realistic techniques into a style that is truly hers has gained a following in the Western fine art community. Her paintings of bison, bears, birds, elk, moose, wolves, horses, and big cats are realistic, yet painterly, due to Roberson’s slightly abstract technique.

“Mary has been one of the leading voices of Western wildlife art for decades. Her simple, emotive style and passion for all things wild make her work shine. Her muted colors, subtle use of texture and shadow, and authentic storytelling make her work both timeless and continually relevant,” says Jason Williams, owner of Altamira Fine Art in Jackson, Wyoming, which has represented Roberson since it opened in 2009. Dick Idol Signature Gallery in Whitefish, Montana also represents Roberson.

While producing fine art is Roberson’s business, she refuses to take herself too seriously. “The more fun I have,

the more success I experience,” she says. “I’m in this for my own entertainment.” Her unorthodox practices are designed to shake her out of any painting ruts. Sometimes, she uses her left hand to make a brushstroke, even though she’s naturally right-handed. Or she closes her eyes to paint. “I love the element of surprise,” she says.

Her field techniques are a little unconventional, too. She packs a spotting scope and scouts wildlife in the open air near Big Wood River near her hometown of Hailey, Idaho, or she travels to the Tetons, Yellowstone, or Glacier National Park to camp and look for bears and wolves. “I do a lot of observation and can see wolves that are two miles away closely enough through my scope to sketch them,” she explains. “I do blind sketches of the animals first. That is, I look through the scope and not at the paper while completing a contour drawing. It allows me to observe the animals more closely. I don’t want to miss a second of the show. It also trains my mind on the contours of a bear’s head or a wolf’s shape. Then, I later paint from



### THREE BUDDIES

OIL ON CANVAS | 11 X 14 INCHES

that sketch, which allows the abstract elements of the contour drawing to shine through in the finished painting.”

Roberson says she will travel almost anywhere to see birds, although she has created a bird habitat in her backyard to attract tanagers. She has trouble limiting her love of animals to just one favorite subject. “It’s a toss-up between bears, birds, and bison, but I also love to paint the elephants of Africa. It’s hard for me to narrow down my favorite. Whatever has my attention at the moment is my favorite,” she says.

Her great love and respect for nature would occupy much of her time even if she weren’t a painter. She most likely would still be out there on the land, camping with her scope in hand, and gathering details on the animals that linger beside the river or on the grasslands.

Using a brush, palette knife, or unusual tools such as a twig or her hands to create her oil paintings, she takes liberties when painting an animal, perhaps creating an artwork from a dozen different photographs taken over a period of time or using more than one animal as the basis for the subject matter. “I don’t copy photos; I find that boring. I like the abstract and hint at movement in the paintings,” she says, adding that her great respect for wildlife does not allow her to use unrealistic hues for her subjects. “I use colors that honor the animal. My goal is always to express a feeling of respect for wildlife.”

“I’m very opinionated,” she continues. “So many artists paint realistically, and you can’t tell their works apart. That’s not my style; that just doesn’t feel good in my heart because I think it eliminates creativity. I may collect hair fluff left behind by a bison, for example, and touch and feel it to

help me duplicate it in a painting, but I don’t paint in that much detail. I use impressionistic techniques because it’s impossible to recreate perfection when it comes to painting details like hair.”

If Roberson isn’t pleased with an artwork, she stacks it with a few others and returns to it when the mood strikes. “I accept the bad with the good. I’ll finish them one day when I figure out what they need,” she explains. Since her pieces are displayed throughout her home — she calls her entire house her studio — her grandchildren get to see the process of how a piece is created. She teaches them and other teens through classroom instruction about contour sketching and personal creativity. “I tell them, ‘You are worth expressing yourself. You deserve it. You don’t paint in order to be judged. Apply paint to the canvas, and tell your story.’”

Roberson applies that same mantra to her own creations. She is continually surprised at how effortless painting is and how it has won her accolades throughout her life. “I just have to get out of my own way and let it happen,” she says. “I was raised in a farm family and taught to work hard every day, but I no longer put that needless pressure on myself. I just let it go, and it happens naturally. I don’t strive to be unique; I strive to be true to myself.”▲



### AMONG THE WILDFLOWERS

OIL AND ENCAUSTIC WITH EMBEDDED FLOWERS | 12 X 12 INCHES