

HARRY JACKSON





LARRY POINTER AND DONALD GODDARD

# HARRY JACKSON

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Commentaries by Harry Jackson

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# CONTENTS

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FOREWORD by Peter H. Hassrick	7	River, Road and Point (1965– )	216
INTRODUCTION by John Walker	9	Pony Express (1963–80)	234
Chapter 1. THE STUDIO	13	Admiral Lord Cochrane (1969)	246
Chapter 2. BORN AGAIN COWBOY	23	The Marshal (1969–80)	248
Chapter 3. TO THE SHORES OF TARAWA	33	Cowboy Subjects of the 1970s	256
Chapter 4. CALL OF THE SHE-WOLF	43	Washakie and Sacagawea (1976–80)	270
Chapter 5. TO EUROPE, ON THE WAY WEST	57	CHRONOLOGY	291
Chapter 6. PAINTING INVITES SCULPTURE	73	SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	293
Chapter 7. TO JACKSON POLLOCK	93	LIST OF EXHIBITIONS	296
Chapter 8. RIVER, ROAD AND POINT	105	TECHNICAL APPENDICES	
Chapter 9. ENTERING FROM THE CENTER	117	Lost-Wax Bronze Casting	298
Chapter 10. THE FRONTIER WITHIN	127	Security Archive System	300
PLATES: With Commentaries by the Artist		List of Bronze Editions	302
Early Western Subjects (1958–61)	152	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	303
The Coe Commission (1958–66)	173	INDEX	304
Music and Dance Subjects (1959–64)	204	PHOTOCREDITS	308





2. Harry Jackson

PETER H. HASSRICK

## FOREWORD

When America seeks a moment of reflection on her past and future essence, there is a place and a time to which she may justifiably turn—to the West and its remarkable legacy. Embodying the interaction of free space and free men, the West has provided one of the important generative forces for the American spirit, for there survive in the West and its history many of the elements which are fundamental to the American experience.

There is a saying that history exists as a force because it is created here and now. In like manner, the West retains its sway because it maintains relevance in the mind and character of the American people. There is a continuity with its past that allows the West to provide an exceptionally fertile ground for vitality in interpretation. It is understandable, then, why it has for generations been a favored province for visual artists and why Harry Jackson, whose demand for vitality in art is unceasing, has found his place at the heart of that region, Wyoming.

The story which unfolds within the pages and illustrations of this book reveals a man of extraordinary vision, dedication, and talent. Jackson has achieved a perspective on art and the West that honors both the man and the place. His career represents a conscious and sustained effort to transform the substance of Western life into the language of art. His mentor, Thomas Hart Benton, believed more than anything else that he had wanted "to make pictures, the imagery of which would carry unmistakably *American meanings* for Americans and for as many of them as possible."

Though separated by a generation from such Regionalist sentiments, Jackson has felt the impact of such persuasion.

Like Bertton before him, Jackson knew the sway of other artistic directives before turning to realism. Abstract Expressionism, in which Jackson worked successfully and boldly for many years, could never satisfy his need to reconcile life and art. There was a remoteness in this form of expression. Too much of oneself was exposed with too little response possible from the viewer. The iconography of the West, particularly the simple independence of the cowboy which Jackson so admires, does not allow such distance.

Today there is a plethora of artists whose work relates to the West, but precious few who accomplish their task with real knowledge of the elements of art. In this context, Jackson's work is refreshing and meaningful for many reasons. First, he understands that sculpture requires the delineation of form and concept, not merely a devotion to detail. He knows also that honesty of purpose and transformation of the inner man, rather than compromises with the consumer audience or reworkings of popular themes, provide the cornerstone of artistic relevance. And, finally, though Jackson is very much a Western man, he has avoided the pitfall of setting forth his lifestyle as a rationale for his art. He has known the pinch of a saddle, the stretch of a dally, and the lather of a working horse beneath him. Nonetheless, he does not use this to explain his place as an artist, only as a man.





3. Jackson working on the original wax model for *In the Wind*. June 1980

JOHN WALKER

## INTRODUCTION

Harry Jackson, physically and artistically, is a brave man. As a Marine he fought in World War II and was twice wounded; he has broken horses on the range and broken himself in the process; he has challenged the art establishment; and he has defied the cartel of art dealers. This is a remarkable record, and he is a remarkable person, as this book proves.

I came to know Harry because I was impressed with his *Range Burial* when this milestone of modern painting was shown at the National Collection of Fine Arts, a part of the Smithsonian Institution. Later I saw *Stampede* and was equally impressed. To find a painter with the ability to work in a representational style at a time when we were all surrounded by abstractionists and to find him capable of creating works of art as moving as these two immense canvases was a startling revelation.

A modern painter with such courage fascinated me. I was in my youth absorbed in contemporary art, and I still am, although I spent some 30 years as Chief Curator and Director of the National Gallery of Art, which during my régime did not exhibit modern painting or sculpture as it does now. When I was at Harvard in the 1920s I joined with two other undergraduates to found a gallery, located in Harvard Square, where we showed avant-garde art. It was the only place in Boston or Cambridge where Braque, Picasso, and the whole School of Paris could be seen. How unbelievable this now seems! But their work was under a taboo imposed by one of Boston's greatest collectors, Dr. Denman Ross, a member of the Harvard faculty. His influence was so powerful that he was able to prohibit almost entirely the exhibition in the Boston Mu-

seum, the Fogg Museum, and the Boston Art Club of the work of modern artists he considered decadent.

It was fun fighting against him. This was before the establishment of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which put to rout the taste of Dr. Ross and his friends at the Century Club. But the fanaticism we felt for the avant-garde developed its own snobbism.

In those days we would have rejected Harry's Western paintings and sculpture as old-fashioned and therefore worthless. The truly creative artists, we agreed, were those painters and sculptors ultimately to be selected by Alfred Barr to show at the "Modern." More and more of these consecrated geniuses turned to abstraction. Realistic art seemed to be finished.

Harry Jackson belonged to this avant-garde. He was a pupil of Hans Hofmann, a friend of Jackson Pollock, and was at one time married to Grace Hartigan. His abstract paintings received the highest praise. He was a significant part of a movement which became fashionable to the exclusion of every other style. It was particularly popular with museum directors who liked to hang abstractions in a way that produced charming patterns, something they could not do as tastefully with figurative work, where representation hampered their creativity. Consequently, acres of abstract painting covered exhibition spaces everywhere, like wall-to-wall carpeting. And in the long run these immense canvases proved just as boring. The general monotony weakened the impact of even the best work. This is particularly sad, for a number of these paintings are superb.



Harry Jackson and I came to the same conclusion at about the same time: abstract painting is a blind alley. But my disillusionment had no consequences for me. Harry, on the other hand, had to face the collective enmity of the abstractionists and of the critics who backed them. When he showed his first realistic painting, Jackson Pollock exclaimed, "Harry, you can't do that!" It was treason. Harry had gone the wrong way round. While realistic painters were increasingly joining the Abstract Expressionists, he was leaving Abstract Expressionism for realism. His New York friends thought he was carrying self-expression too far. They knew he was an individualist, a loner, but they felt betrayed.

Harry, however, believed there was something in America he had to express. At fourteen he had hitchhiked West, drawn to a ranch to become a cowboy. Neither the shot-riddled beaches of the Pacific nor the smoke-filled studios of Greenwich Village could dim the vividness of these youthful memories. As he rode to rope and brand cattle, gazing on the plains and mountains around him, he felt that here was the quintessence of America. This landscape and the activities of cowboys have an indestructible appeal, not only in this country, but also abroad. "Westerns" which filled movie houses decades ago still enthrall viewers of television all over the world. People crowded together in urban centers long for the wide empty spaces of the West. Paintings and sculpture depicting this prairie life will always touch some subconscious desire of the trammled modern personality. But since Remington no significant artist until Harry Jackson has satisfied this craving. It is appropriate that his best portrait should be of John "Duke" Wayne, the movie actor, who has become a symbol of America's love of the West.

It was in Italy that Harry learned the meaning of tradition. Like nearly every great artist of modern times he studied in the museums, scrutinizing masters from Giotto to Goya, teaching himself the language of art, which he intended to apply in his own way. In his journals there is an entry written on a freighter coming back from Italy: "Went to bed early and began to dream about painting, the images jumping from the most directly realized, subjective, tactile ones of my last eight years work, with the Paris and New York influence, to the images of cowboys standing singly...to the most wonderful violent tumult of men and horses and cattle. It was a kind of natural blend of Rubens and Charley Russell, Delacroix with Frederic Remington, the figures of Velasquez, Monet, Winslow Ho-

mer and Eakins." These images, and others from museums where he had sketched and copied, were the matrix of his style. From these antithetical influences, which he blended together, he created his own individual manner.

He discovered also that when painting large pictures some painters in the past had modeled three-dimensional figures, which they could move around to help them solve compositional problems. He started to do the same. In this way his sculpture began. For some time it was only a subordinate part of his painting. But gradually, like De-gas with his waxes of ballet dancers, he found his figures of cowboys and pioneers increasingly absorbing. He had some cast, sent them to a dealer, and they were sold at once. He was now both a painter and a sculptor; and following in the footsteps of his precursor, Remington, he turned more and more to work in bronze.

The problem of satisfactory casts has always pre-occupied him. Italy, where he found an ancient tradition of bronze casting and excellent craftsmen trained to carry it out, seemed the most satisfactory place to establish his own foundry. He now has a staff of 30 foundrymen at Camaioire, which is the center of his production. When a mold has been made by these superb artisans, the potential number of duplicates is virtually limitless. But bronzes cast under the artist's own supervision are different from mass-produced replicas. Harry Jackson has always insisted on the highest possible quality of casting. Each piece is an individual work of art. It is discarded unless he is satisfied.

Nevertheless, the number of potential casts has always troubled dealers. To maintain high values they have insisted that duplicates be limited and recorded. Harry Jackson did not want anyone telling him what he could or could not do. If the public wanted his work, it should be available. He was interested in quality, not in arbitrary numbers. When his contracts with commercial galleries had run out he decided to organize his own distribution. This upset the art dealers as much as his desertion of abstraction had shocked artists. It meant setting up a remarkable organization, one of the first of its kind, described in detail in the text.

Even this innovation, however, had roots in the past. Many of the great seventeenth-century painters, Rubens for example, would have been successful entrepreneurs in our own day. They handled the distribution of their work without recourse to art dealers. Harry Jackson is trying to revive this system. Only a very successful artist can attempt

such a daring enterprise. But Harry has been successful beyond everyone's expectations. He has startled Greenwich Village, where he is looked on as a deserter; he has thwarted the dealers, who long to get him back; and he has frustrated the critics with their objurgations of commercialism.

One cannot but admire his bravery and his energy. His enterprise, Wyoming Foundry Studios, compels him to commute between Wyoming, the source of his inspiration, New York, the location of his business organization, and Italy, the center of his production. Will such activity diminish the artist's creative power? At present Harry Jackson shows no sign of mental or creative fatigue. If he continues to produce good work in spite of the life he leads, he will be unique in the annals of art.

This time-consuming effort to distribute his work free from the shackles of dealers raises the problem of contemporary patronage. I was personally involved in one of Harry's commissions, which, through what must have been a misunderstanding, ended in a distressing waste. When I was the director of the National Gallery of Art, the trustees of one of the largest Pittsburgh foundations, that of Richard Mellon, turned to me, because of my background as a Pittsburgher, for advice. They wanted an artist to decorate Fort Duquesne, an eighteenth-century building at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers where they form the Ohio. The pictures were to narrate the history of Pittsburgh during the French and Indian Wars. The space to be decorated was magnificent, requiring a mural 56 feet long. I said without hesitation there was only one possible person to whom the commission should be given, I was convinced with such a superb opportunity that Harry's paintings would make Pittsburgh a pilgrimage site for anyone interested in modern painting. Harry alone among contemporary artists, I felt, and still feel, had the skill and talent to carry out the project. My recommendation was acted on and a contract drawn up and signed. Un-

fortunately I did not follow developments. I knew that Harry was at work on a number of canvases at his studio in Camaioire. I thought when finished these might well be the most important historical paintings in America, and I awaited their completion with the greatest eagerness. An emissary of the foundation, I was told, had gone to Italy to see Harry because the work was progressing so slowly. I was not told, and I did not know until I read the text from this book, that the representative of the trustees insisted that the work be in fresco. I am still surprised that my friends in Pittsburgh would be sophisticated enough to differentiate between fresco and oil. In actuality the use of fresco would have been a disaster. In 1973, as Harry feared, the two rivers flooded and inundated the museum. If the walls had been frescoed water would have destroyed or badly damaged everything; whereas if the pictures had been on canvas, they could easily have been removed. As a consequence of the argument over technique, according to the authors, the work has never been completed and the half-finished canvases remain stacked in the studio. Still troubled by the possibility of flooding, Harry proposed, I believe, a compromise in the form of a metal bas-relief, but this too fell through. Now there are only the floor mosaics, the half-finished canvases, and a few studies for what might have been another landmark in American Art.

It is distressing to think that an artist of such remarkable ability has only twice received patronage worthy of his talents. Those two important and successful commissions were from the Hon. Robert Coe for *Stampede* and *Range Burial* and from Mr. Richard Cashman for the *Sacagawea* monument. Otherwise, apart from a few portraits, Harry Jackson himself has had to find purchasers for his work, first with the help of dealers and now on his own. True, the Jackson collectors over the years have become legion. But to gain this support, what effort has been required of the artist. In the Renaissance he would have fared much better!