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The artist who created the White House Christmas card

Landscape painter Tim Lawson re-created the view from the Truman balcony for a holiday card that the Bushes sent to friends and dignitaries around the world.



Brush with history: Tim Lawson, a landscape artist, contemplates a painting in his studio in Maine, where he worked on what he has called the 'biggest assignment' of my life.

(Courtesy of Dorie Lawson/Soldier Creek Associates)

By Todd Wilkinson, Correspondent

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Rockport, Maine; and Bozeman, Mont.

Tim Allen Lawson stood alone on the second-floor terrace, waiting for dusk to bathe the nation's capital city in soft light. Down from Maine for the day, he hurriedly sketched the landscape before him with a 3B graphite pencil, distilling its essence so he could use it as research for an oil painting he would do later in his studio.

Knowing his opportunity was fleeting, he immersed himself in the scene, avoided distraction, and didn't hear the man enter the room behind him. "Who the heck is on my balcony?" a voice bellowed.

Panicked, Lawson turned. When he realized who was admonishing him, he began to stutter: "My name is Tim Lawson, Mr. President. I met with your wife earlier today, and she told me I could be up here. I'm sorry if I'm disturbing you."

President Bush was, in fact, just being mischievous, feigning alarm over an intruder in his private quarters. He knew full well the landscape painter had been commissioned by the first lady to create an image for the 2008 White House Christmas card.

Putting Lawson at ease, Mr. Bush expressed his pleasure that the artist was portraying a view that he counts among his favorites over the past eight years. Lawson's painting, "Evening View From the Truman Balcony," appears on more than two million holiday cards now reaching dignitaries, friends of the Bushes, and citizens around the world.

The painting has added to the visibility of a rising young landscape artist who grew up in a small town in Wyoming and who, to this day, likes to stand out in rainstorms to glean a truer sense of the movement of clouds. Bespectacled and soft-spoken, Lawson spends much of his time now at his home in Maine, but he still exudes a sense of Western unpretentiousness. He was awed by his recent assignment.

"The opportunity to paint this card has been a surreal experience," he says. "Part of me still doesn't believe it happened. It's sort of like a dream."

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Historians say Calvin Coolidge was the first occupant of the Oval Office to send out official White House Christmas cards. Coolidge didn't have much of a card list at the time.

But the practice broadened dramatically in 1953 when President Dwight Eisenhower and first lady Mamie enlisted the Hallmark Company to make the custom official. Since then, many of the cards have featured classic American paintings and works by prominent living artists.

"People are always thrilled whenever they receive a card from the White House," says Ann Simpson, the wife of former US Sen. Alan Simpson (R) of Wyoming. "To have your painting selected for this card at the request of the first lady is a great honor."

Holiday cards (because of political correctness they are no longer called "Christmas" cards) dispatched from the first family have become collector's items, and while the intention always is to strike a cheerful mood, some have evoked somber moments. In November 1963, historians say, John and Jacqueline Kennedy had hand-signed three dozen of their Christmas cards and intended to finish the rest after they returned from a little side trip to Dallas.

The significance of this season, given the challenges in the world, is not lost on Lawson, who harbors a keen sense of history himself. He grew up in small Sheridan, Wyo., located along the wagon-rutted routes of the Western frontier. The Bozeman Trail, which provided 19th-century settlers with an illegal shortcut across native American lands, can still be seen outside town. Just to the north is Little Bighorn, and beyond that the wilderness playground of Lewis & Clark.

Lawson started infusing more history into his work after he met his wife, Dorie. She is the daughter of two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough. In 2004, Lawson and a colleague traced the entire route of the Lewis & Clark expedition in commemoration of its bicentennial. A capstone painting from that series portrays Thomas Jefferson's study at Monticello, where the president did much of the planning for the expedition.

"What I've learned to appreciate from my father-in-law is that history isn't behind us," Lawson says. "Those who made it may have come before us. They are leading the way and we are following in their footsteps."

Lawson had already established something of a footprint in Washington. More than 20 years ago, Susan Simpson Gallagher, an art historian and the daughter of Alan Simpson, had introduced his work to the cognoscenti in the capital. The Bushes became aware of Lawson's artistry through their relationship with the McCulloughs.

As background for the Christmas card painting, Lawson was given a personal tour of the White House by Laura Bush. At the time, the artist said he hoped to convey some of the spirit of the first family on canvas.

He apparently did. The first lady has noted that the Christmas card image reflects the bittersweet sense she and her husband are feeling as their tenure winds down. Others have called the painting a visual meditation. At its unveiling earlier this month, Mrs. Bush described the image as "fabulous" – a "beautiful work."

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The man behind the brush exudes a small-town politeness and modesty. An observer could mistake him for being bookish and nerdy. But he is a former high school football player and father of four young kids who has a reputation among his peers for being irrepressibly hardy and studious about the things he paints.

During winter months, whether in the cryogenic cold of Wyoming or the blustery winds of Maine, the painter rises before dawn and sets up

his easel at isolated locations, rushing to make sketches before his paint tubes freeze.

To convey the misty moods of the rainy seasons, he has braved downpours and thunderstorms, shielding himself and his paint kit with only a green garbage bag.

"Tim now goes out into the field for information and inspiration to bring back to the studio, whereas in the early days the outdoors was his studio," says Ms. Simpson Gallagher, who owns a gallery in Cody, Wyo.

Lawson studied at the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts in Old Lyme, Conn., and the American Academy of Art in Chicago. Even though friends told him it was impractical to make a living as a painter, he persisted. Today his Christmas card image – which he calls the "biggest assignment" of my life" – places him in the rarefied fold of Jamie Wyeth, who painted two holiday scenes for the Reagans, and Ray Ellis and Thomas McKnight, whose originals adorned cards for the Clintons.

"With just a few brush strokes, Tim Lawson has put the emotion and wonder and sense of patriotism you feel [on the Truman balcony] into a powerful little package," says former Senator Simpson. The image, he adds, has "become part of the memory of our country."

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