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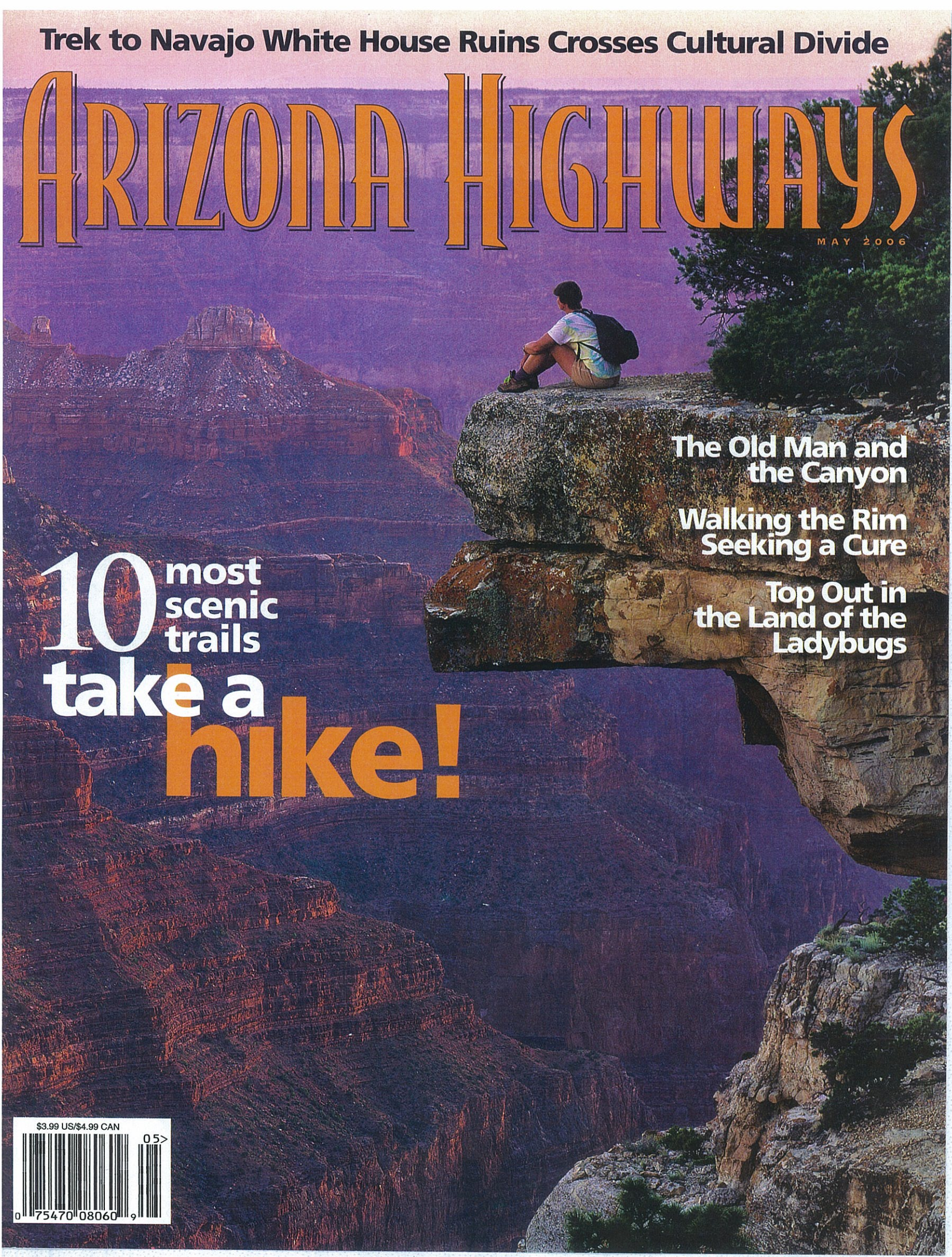
MAY 2006



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PULP FICTION Dreams

R.G. Harris' Illustrations Have Gone From Wildly Popular to Trash to Fine Art Find by Amy Abrams

When Robert G. Harris was 12, he had one of those moments of wildly impractical ambition and passion that would make most parents despair.

He was staring enraptured at the steely-eyed gunfighter and the busty endangered damsel in the pulp fiction magazine *Ace High*, when he said out loud, "Somebody has to do these illustrations, why not me?"

Little did he know that his adolescent moment of clarity would lead him to an improvised career as a starving artist, pulp icon, commercial illustrator, portrait painter and finally an abstract painter living in the altered West of his dreams.

And he owes it all to the pulp magazine art that once caused parental eyerolls, but now fuels a booming business among collectors and people seeking to understand the deep connection between art and our view of ourselves.

"Pulps," as they were often called, reigned in the 1930s and '40s as the most popular form of entertainment in the country. Long before television, these adventurous stories on cheap pulp paper captured the hearts of millions of Americans during the Great Depression. The Western pulps ruled the colorful genre.

Sold on newsstands, the pulps' cover art had to halt potential buyers in their tracks. "Competition was fierce among publications, so the cover needed to feature a stop-action image at a moment of crisis in the story, like a movie-still," explains Harris, still sharp and fit at 94 seated in his sunny home in Carefree.

Success required 20-by-30-inch canvases, brilliant colors squeezed straight from the tube, expert realist technique and a dramatic imagination. "You had to be a dreamer and a ham to paint these pictures," says Harris.

To snare the dime of a potential reader, illustrators depicted sultry distressed damsels,

Realizing a Boyhood Dream
Westerns became the most popular form of "pulp" literature. In 1934, Robert G. Harris created his first cover, opposite page, for *Thrilling Ranch Stories*. It fulfilled a childhood fantasy. Though not a cowboy, Harris, above in his studio, modeled for several paintings. The Kansas City native, now 94, has been listed in *Who's Who in the West*, and moved to Arizona to paint portraits and later retire.

Tough Guy
Harris painted from photographs, including ones of himself in highly dramatic poses, right.

courageous cowboy heroes, hissing rattlesnakes, growling mountain lions and gruff gunslingers. Each canvas needed space for titles like *Outlaws of the West* and intriguing headlines like "Trigger Man from Texas."

Harris and his fellow pulp illustrators and writers helped define the Wild West by romanticizing rugged cowboy individualism and the inevitable triumph of good over evil. The pulps of the 1930s and 1940s followed in the hoof marks of railroad promoters and Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows and prepared the ground for radio serials, television shows, Hollywood Westerns, country-and-western crooners and glamorous rodeo stars.

"We all love the idea of the cowboy," says Kent Whipple, director of Meyer-Munson Gallery in Santa Fe, and an expert in the field. "But most of our images of the West are actually myth. The life of the cowboy was hard and dirty, often not at all glamorous."

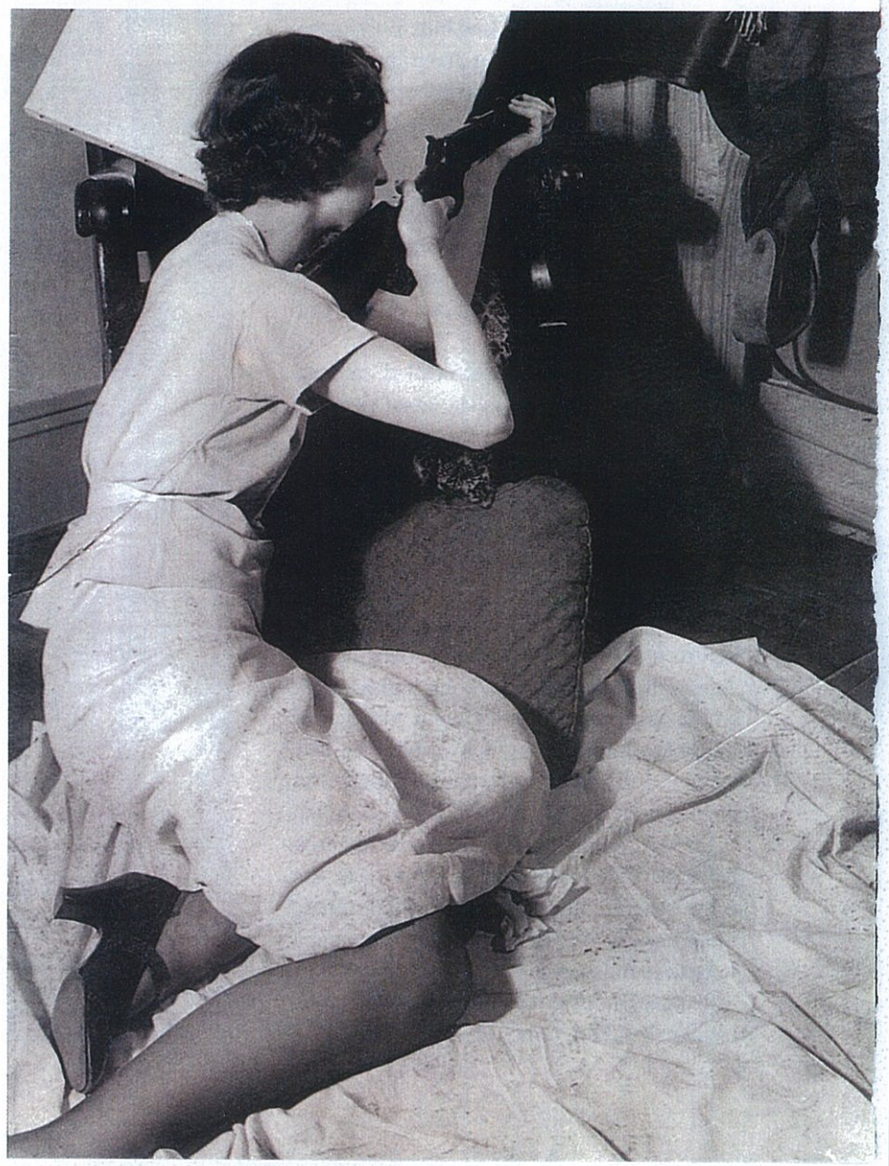
Ironically, only about 1,000 of the estimated 50,000 paintings commissioned for the pulps have survived. The rest were burned, lost or stashed in garages decades before they were rediscovered and treasured as cultural icons. Prices of pulp cover paintings have soared in recent years. Going for as much as $70,000, pulp art has made its way from newsstands to museums.

Over the past 15 years, collectors have clamored for these campy canvases as well as vintage pulp magazines by scouring flea markets...

"Pulp paintings were spicy and saucy and often filled with sex and violence," explains Robert Lesser, of New York, who owns the largest private collection of pulp paintings. "Not the sort of images you wanted hanging in your living room like paintings of flowers or bowls of fruit. So, collectors veered away."

The paintings Harris discarded or sold for a trifle would be worth a small fortune today. "Very few artists kept their paintings. I sure wish I had kept more of mine," says Harris. "We'd give the completed canvases to the magazine's art director. They'd pile up at the publishing house and you'd get a call: 'If you don't come for 'em, we'll burn 'em.' Most of the artists just didn't have room for them. A lot of stuff burned."

When Condé Nast bought pulp publisher Street & Smith in 1959, every artist was asked to retrieve his paintings from the largest collection of pulps ever saved. No takers. A small auction was held. No



Romantic Inspiration
After their marriage in 1935, Harris used his wife, Marjorie, right, as a model for the stories' damsels—swooning in distress or toting her own shotgun. Harris became known for his depictions of beautiful women and romantic scenes.

bidders. Condé Nast finally offered the paintings to their employees, for free; no, thanks. So, the publishing house put the canvases in the garbage.

Over the past 15 years, collectors have clamored for these campy canvases as well as vintage pulp magazines by scouring flea markets, bargaining with book, art and antique dealers and attending pulp magazine and comic book conventions. The market for pulp magazines is strongest for famous authors, like Ray Bradbury, Raymond Chandler, Zane Grey, Dashiell Hammett, Louis L'Amour and Tennessee Williams.

After some success in the pulps, Harris shifted his efforts to the "slicks," the larger circulation, slicker paper, higher paying publications.

"I landed my first 'slicks' commission from the *Saturday Evening Post*," recalls Harris. "With the *Post* exposure, the door was instantly thrown wide open. Commissions came in from *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal* and *McCall's*. Advertising accounts followed. "It's hard to believe," continues Harris with sentimental tears in his eyes. "I was just a kid out of Kansas City."

Born in 1911 in Kansas City, Missouri, to a modest and loving family, Harris never wanted to be a cowboy, but he always wanted to paint them. He graduated from high school and headed for New York where he was mentored by Kansas City Art Institute illustration teacher Monte Crews, who taught the techniques of Norman Rockwell and Walter Biggs.

When he graduated from art school, the young Harris played the part of "cowboy" to get commissions.

"My first time interviewing with a Western pulp art director, at *Thrilling Ranch*, was not a meeting I left to chance. I needed all the ammunition that was available. I thought if I looked like a cowboy it might carry some weight. I had a Western hat, a Tommy Grimes rodeo model, all black, and a 10-gallon size. The art director accepted my Western attire as authentic and the sketches pleased him to the point of buying two."

Harris soon gave up the cowboy costume for sales calls, but often dressed up to serve as his own model. "The mirror is the most wonderful gadget an artist ever had," muses Harris. When he married his wife, Marjorie, in 1935, yup—you guessed it: She posed as the notorious damsel in distress. At nearby stables, he snapped photographs of horses and riding equipment for his paintings.

The couple moved to the outskirts of New York City to raise their two children. As Harris' career accelerated, the constant deadlines took their toll even as photography and television drove the pulps into the sunset.

Harris already loved the West, thanks to a couple of motorcycle trips and jaunts in his own airplane to northern Arizona. So when a friend helped him land portrait commissions in Arizona, the dreams of a 12-year-old came full circle. Harris went West.

In 1953, the Harris family settled into a home on the slope of Camelback Mountain in Scottsdale. "If I showed you a picture of that view, you'd cry," says Harris. As the population boomed, they moved north to Carefree.

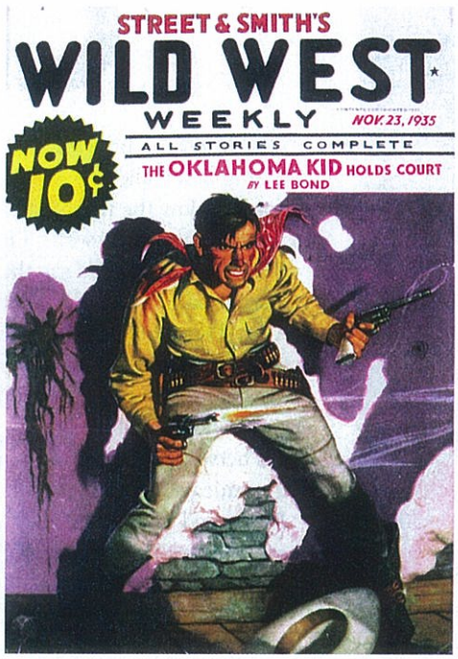
After a second successful career as a portrait painter, the ever-innovative Harris took another bold leap and turned his talent to abstract painting. "After so many years of painting pictures that were very disciplined and directed, I enjoyed the freer style," he says.

Although Harris hung up his brush in 1989, his work is still sought out by collectors, art dealers and admirers.

Not bad for a 12-year-old with an unrealistic dream and a taste for pulps.

Amy Abrams of Tempe can be found rummaging through the dusty shelves of used magazine shops for Western pulp magazines.

PULP FICTION Dreams



The Art of an Era
Pulps are enjoying a resurgence in museums and private collections, including a new paperback line, *Hard Case Crime*. But Harris was a player in the true heyday of the pulps. He created more than 50 covers for *Wild West Weekly*, a publication by Street & Smith, which also put out *Doc Savage*.