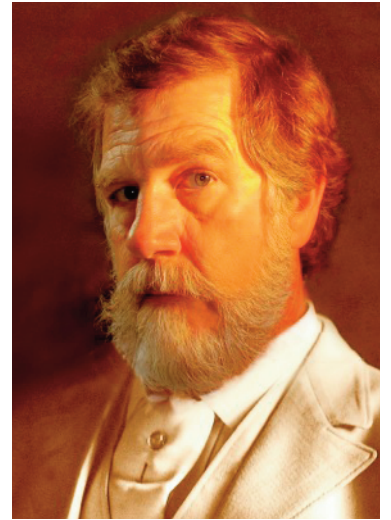


# The Art of Tom Gilleon

By Richard King



Tom Gilleon

**Meeting up with friends at the Jackson Hole Fall Arts Festival this September,** I found myself flowing around the town plaza being led by art consultant, Steve Zabel, from Bozeman, Montana. He not only knew the finest galleries, but also the ones with the finest food and wine for tonight's Gallery Walk. And we were hungry. And mighty parched.

After gulping down some delicious buffalo sliders and elk kabobs, we finally began to slow down and absorb the art. We feasted on hundreds of paintings from the Hudson River School, French Impressionism, Cubism, the Taos School, Pop, Psychedelic, Electronic, Young British Artists, Western, Cowboy and masters from the Russell Skull Society of Artists.

Steve recognized the artist of every painting without reading its title card. I absorbed his flood of information. Each artist's story, how they began, what makes them collectable. And how they're currently priced in the market. Some of these pieces were millions of dollars and some were a thousand. It made for a full evening. Toward the end, we walked down a side street away from the hustle bustle. We had one last gallery to go.

We walked into Altamira Fine Arts and quickly observed the finest contemporary Western art of the evening: Ed Mell, Howard Post, Bill Schenck, Travis Walker, Rocky Hawkins. One after another. All modern. Not traditional scenes of cowboys, horses, wildlife and Indians. Yes, there were cottonwoods lining a river and sweeping billowing landscapes with flat-planed nods to Maynard Dixon, John Nieto and the spirit of the west. But these burned with a new energy. Some with a bit of Picasso and Lichtenstein. Some with soft flourishes to fiery, garish colors. Some with cowboys at the buck rail fence. Some with full faces of hardened Indians. With happy cowgirls throwing lassoes. And topless cowgirls with pursed lips, blowing smoke from the end of a just-fired pistol.

And then I found myself in front of a large colorful painting of three tipis. Lanterns on the prairie, they glowed from within. 8-feet by 5-feet, the painting filled the room. The scene depicted a moment of beautiful peace. Firelight incandescing through translucent hides.



*Native Trilogy*  
2003, Oil on Canvas, 56 x 90"

## Lanterns on the Prairie

The tipis in the foreground popped from the picture as dark grasslands fell back. Clouds deepened into sunset. I felt the cold gathering of night on the prairie. And the people and warmth inside. The sophistication of colors completely captured me. I'd never seen yellows, pinks, blues and greens like this. The simplicity of the composition . . . clean and vibrant.

I was to return to this painting many times over the next month. I could not stop looking at it. One Sunday morning I came to it as if I were going to church. I just wanted to be with it. With no one around. To feel the presence of something so much bigger than myself . . . that I can't explain. I was drawn to it. It felt like a longing. That connected to me the past, present and future. All in one. This painting holds a power to transform me. In whatever frame of mind I'm in, it calms me when I walk into its company. It connects me with everything I know. And to the mystery of things I don't.

**“Technically speaking, Gilleon is a brilliant colorist. And he uses color in unusual ways to communicate the heroic qualities of Western themes, so that they are seen in new and refreshing ways”**

I learned this painting was created by Tom Gilleon. A breath of fresh air in the contemporary Western art movement. “Technically speaking, Gilleon is a brilliant colorist. And he uses color in unusual ways to communicate the heroic qualities of Western themes, so that they are seen in new and refreshing ways”, says Sarah Burt, the chief curator of the C.M. Russell Museum, in Great Falls, Montana. The Russell Museum in collaboration with Altamira Fine Art has organized the first Gilleon retrospective in a museum west of the Mississippi. Needless to say, I drove 8-hours to be in the company of forty of his paintings.

“While I was painting my first tipi, I thought, ‘Who in their right mind would buy a tipi?’” says Tom Gilleon. “I painted it as a study in color and light. But I deliberately set out to fill a huge hole I perceived in Western art. To paint not in detail, but in the silence. And let my colors and composition connect with the viewer in a visceral, elemental way.”

There is a Zen serenity to Tom's paintings. His tipi paintings are not exactly Native American encampments, but settings that infer an encampment. The viewer is invited to dream in the details of Indian life. Where it's simply enough to feel the beauty of the coloring in the tipis and sky and horizon.

“The subject itself isn’t as important as the emotion it evokes. It’s the implication of a story being told, the visual connection between shapes that makes a good painting,” says Tom.

Earlier this year, Gilleon set a new personal price record of \$225,000 for a painting, *Hair Apparent*, at this year’s live auction fundraiser for the C.M. Russell Museum. Founded in 1969 by the Great Falls Advertising Federation, the Russell fundraiser is now one of the premier sales events of Western art in the world.

## Western Art: In the Mainstream

Indeed, scholarship is creating a renewed appreciation for frontier imagery. In a New York Times article in October 2013, *Esteem For The Art of The American West*, by Carol Kino, the art of the American West is profiled as an emerging art form.

“The art of the American West has long been honored in the states whose history it records, but it hasn’t always been accepted in the larger art world. Thirty years ago, it was often seen as an out-of-touch genre, fed by a love of nostalgia and history”, says Ms. Kino.

Not anymore. “Western art should be considered in the mainstream,” says Thayer Tolles, curator of American paintings and sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.



Ms. Tolles helped organize “The American West in Bronze, 1850-1925.” This is the first major exhibition to examine the aesthetic tastes, technical achievements and cultural attitudes that led American artists to create bronze statuettes of cowboys, Indians, buffalo and other symbols of the West. Exhibiting at The Metropolitan Museum of Art from December 18 to April 13, it will then travel to the Nanjing Museum in China.

“The scholarship around the art of the American West has really grown up,” says Thomas Smith, a director of the Denver Museum of Art. He notes that his own Institute of Western Art was founded only 12 years ago. “This exhibition is a moment that shows Western American art’s place within the larger canon.”

In similar recognition of the emerging Western art movement, the C.M. Russell Museum inaugurated the Russell Skull Society of Artists this year - a designation of living Western artists who the Museum honors as best exemplifying the authenticity and spirit of Charles Russell - one of the greatest Western artist of all time. Tom Gilleon was invited to be among its founding group.

Mark Tarrant, owner of Altamira Fine Art in Jackson, Wyoming, describes Gilleon as one of the leading figures in Western contemporary art. “Gilleon is a master of composition and palette. His style produces an immediacy of impact on the viewer,” Tarrant says. “A Gilleon painting commands a room; there is an energy that gets projected, like the sun in the sky. His artwork creates the spirit of enchantment on the American West more powerfully than most of what we see in traditional Western art.”

**“Gilleon is a master of composition and palette.  
His style produces an immediacy of impact on the viewer,”**

Tom does not paint detail like most Western artists. There are no scenes of cowboys working cattle, camped around campfires or shooting it up in the saloons. There’s no wildlife ambling through the woods. Or Indians looking off to a column of American cavalry. He rarely paints people in his pictures and there are few objects.

“Many of my tipi paintings depict a lodge on the plains,” says Tom. “With little or no distant mountains or trees. None of the accoutrements of daily life. And only a suggestion of a fire within a lodge. They have been referred to as ‘hauntingly vacant compositions’. In some paintings, I show a time of year when being on the open plains was not advisable, when shelter from the wind and abundant firewood was a necessity.”

“I am attracted to the elements, to the basics,” he says. “Many of my designs are basic shapes and executed through variations on primary colors - square, triangle and circle; red, yellow and blue.”

His experimentation with geometric format is based on his study of ancient and timeless notions of natural order: Druid, Greco-Roman, Asian, Babylonian, Cartesian and, of course, Native American. “Philosophically, I feel the square denotes fairness and justice. The triangle introduces mystery and intrigue or romance. The flat horizon in many of my paintings is intended to give a feel of stability.”

“The tipi paintings connect to our primal understanding of simple shapes. We all relate to the circle, triangle and square,” Gilleon says. “Using basic shapes might seem a simple formula, but ‘simple’ does not equate with ‘easy’ in the visual arts. Simplicity is the hardest city on earth to find.”

“A brilliant invention, the tipi facilitated a nomadic way of life, while also standing at the center of social, religious and creative traditions. By the very definition of its triangular shape, the tipi symbolizes stability and endurance,” says Sarah Burt of the C.M. Russell Museum.

To evoke a sense of place and its people, Gilleon paints the same symbols and drawings that Native Americans painted on their tipis and war shields: antelope, bear, buffalo skulls, horses and riders. They tell a story, standing out in the quiet expanse of the Great Plains. He reminds viewers that the relationship between nature and humanity is not separable. Then, now or in the future.

In Tom’s paintings, you see Square Butte, a small plateau that juts up from the prairie outside Great Falls, Montana.

“The tipi paintings connect to our primal understanding of simple shapes. We all relate to the circle, triangle and square,”

You see the front of the Rockies from the ocean of grass where Lewis and Clark first looked up and saw the American West. And you see many of the same landmarks chronicled in Russell’s paintings. You feel the spirit of the West.

It’s not surprising. Since 1980, Tom has lived on ranches outside Great Falls, Montana, for 32-years. Since 1880, Russell lived in Montana for 46-years, coming to the region as a bright-eyed sixteen year old. Both have been shaped by this place. In many ways, it still looks like 1805 when the Discovery Corps first witnessed vast herds of buffalo on the Old North Trail - grasslands from Canada to Mexico - where millions of Indians journeyed for thousands of years.

“Russell wintered his horses at a place on my ranch,” says Tom. “In the same barn I keep my horses. A hundred years later, when I walk out my house to the barn, I see the same things he did. And when I saddle up and ride up the hills, I ride beside the same cedar posts he did. Fenced in the 1800s.”

Tom’s grandfather, a Scotsman, immigrated to the United States and became an acclaimed cabinetmaker. His grandmother was a full-blooded Cherokee, descended from the tribe that was traumatically uprooted from its landscape and identity.

Gilleon grew up in Florida. He was recruited to play baseball at the University of Florida and served in the Navy just prior to Vietnam. He used his draftsman skills to land a job with NASA’s budding space program and turned out illustrations of rockets and mechanical parts. His talent for illustration came to the attention of the Walt Disney Company and he was soon designing schematics for what became Disney World in Orlando.



*Shanghai Disneyland*  
2011 Illustration

## From Illustrator to Artist

Recruited by Disney's renowned "Imagineering Studio", he helped design the look and feel for Disneyland's Epcot Center and theme parks in Paris, Tokyo and Hong Kong. In the early 1980's, he and his wife attended an outdoor painting workshop in Montana and were soon buying a small ranch on the Dearborn River. They moved to Montana and paid for construction from income they both earned as illustrators in the Hollywood film industry.

"I was never in need of work and was able to live in Montana while we were building our home and yet still maintain a presence in the industry," he says of his commuting. "I did this for 30-plus years."

When I travelled to the C.M. Russell Museum to see Tom's retrospective of forty paintings, Tom agreed to meet me. I asked him about his transition from illustrator to artist and what defined that difference. He said, "When I worked for NASA, Disney and Hollywood - I created specific images required in a scope of work, to a small defined audience. When I was able to afford the freedom to be an artist - I created my own ideas, in my own medium, painting to an unknown audience. It was a leap. I deliberately set out to free myself of detail. To deconstruct the confines of traditional Western art. To connect with myself and my viewers in a deeper, more elemental way."

As we parted, I began contemplating Tom's arc from illustrator to artist. From a hired hand to being his own man. And how he transformed himself. I walked through the Museum and ran into Sarah Burt, its chief curator. She asked me if I'd seen the Charles Russell exhibition yet. I hadn't, so she volunteered to give me a personal tour. Russell learned mostly by observation. He ventured to Montana in 1880 to cowboy out west. At thirteen, he was already painting cowboys and Indians in watercolors and oils. In the 1890s, his compositional skills steadily improved using diagonals to create drama and energy. At his pivotal trip to New York City in 1904, he began to pick up lessons in color theory by observing professionally trained illustrators Phillip Goodwin, John Marchand and Will Crawford. At this point in the chronology of the exhibition, Russell's oil palette brightens. His watercolor technique shifts from transparent to opaque. And his paintings begin to shimmer with color. His last painting from 1926, *Father Desmet's First Meeting With The Flathead Indians*, was unfinished and unsigned. A wide panorama of an Indian encampment, it's his most colorful painting in the retrospective. Color and composition enabled him new to achieve new heights in his career and I could see the transformation right in front of me.

Both Russell and Gilleon's career took off when they acquired the master skills of an illustrator and applied them to their own brand of art.

“When Michelangelo was painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, it wasn't because one morning he awoke and got inspired to paint a mural on the ceiling of a church. He was an illustrator for the Pope.”

“People still refer to illustrators with a negative connotation,” Gilleon says, musing. “When Michelangelo was painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, it wasn't because one morning he awoke and got inspired to paint a mural on the ceiling of a church. He was an illustrator for the Pope.”

“Looking back, I was probably most influenced by the old era art directors and illustrators, Herb Ryman especially, who had the amazing ability to quickly and simply tell a story or convey a feeling with their artwork. I believe that this simplicity and strength is the key to fine art. Light, color, value, composition and line are paramount in importance. A good work of art is so much more than a copied photograph. In eliminating the unnecessary elements and being as direct as possible, an artist has the opportunity to tell a story, to guide the viewer's eye and emotion.”

Finishing my private tour of Russell's retrospective, I walked back upstairs to see Gilleon's own retrospective one last time.

Visiting his paintings is like going to church for me. He made the transition from a Disney illustrator to a disruptive Western artist. From a craftsman to a unique expressionist. And he had the courage to reinvent himself once again. Tom recently debuted his stunning new-media digital artwork, *Eternal Triangle*, at the Russell Museum.



*Eternal Triangle*  
2013, Digital Art, 49 x 86"

## Eternal Triangle

Presented on a triptych of vertical HD-monitors, the scene is three tipis on the prairie. Twelve different paintings of this scene morph together over a single day and night - in five minutes. Native American flute music plays. Sunlight sweeps slowly across the monitors. At first, you don't know if it's your eyes - or is the scene really changing? As the sun wheels overhead, the shadows and colors of the tipis change with the day. And then, as darkness falls, the moon rises and sets. Peace on the Great Plains. Again, the calmness of Tom Gilleon.

R. King & Co.  
(512) 478-2700  
[www.rkingco.com](http://www.rkingco.com)

December 2013