

LIFE ON THE

Wild Side

Husband-and-wife artists John and Suzie Seerey-Lester share their experiences painting wildlife and working in the field



John Seerey-Lester, *Deadly Shadow*, acrylic, 12 x 24" (30 x 61 cm)

JOHN SEEREY-LESTER

Painting is my passion, and I must paint or sketch every day. I don't want to illustrate an animal; I don't want to just paint a moose in the middle of the canvas. I want to tell a story—to create some mystery and mood. In other words, let the painting have a life of its own.

One of the ways I create my paintings is by sketching my ideas in a small notebook,

which I carry with me everywhere and is on my nightstand when I go to bed. I often wake up in the middle of the night with an idea, so I quickly sketch it out. I have dozens of these notebooks, filled with ideas. When I start a new painting, I will go through some of these books to see which idea inspires me for the current painting. Because

these are just quick sketches to capture the idea, I may also do some thumbnails to come up with the composition and design. With my last two books—*Legends of the*

Hunt and Legends of the Hunt: Campfire Tales—I would often use models to create the scene that is to be produced. We have lots of artifacts, pots, pans, saddles and even Theodore Roosevelt-style glasses, in the studio, along with costumes for the eras I am painting. I can quickly add a travel crate or a cast-iron cooking pot to my composition.

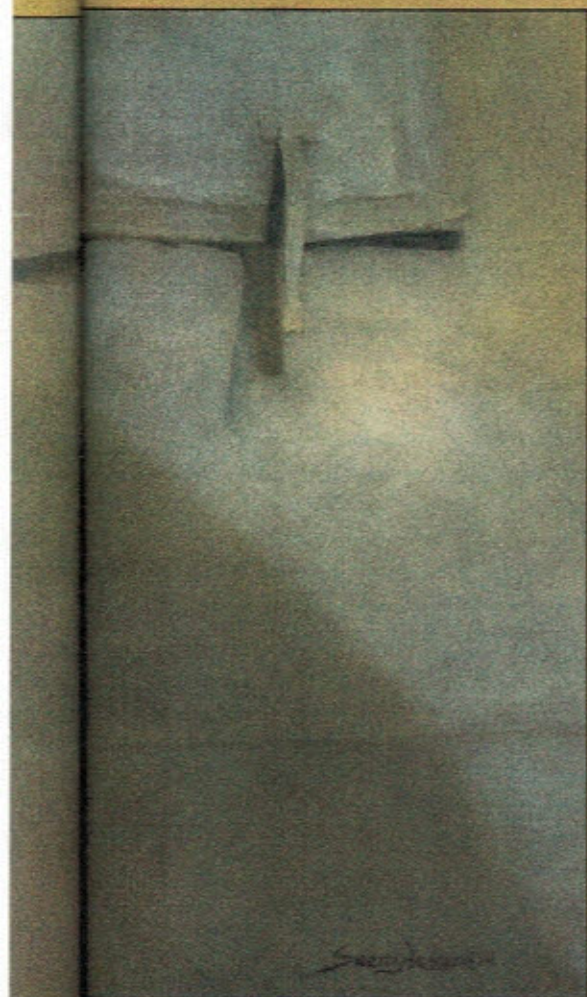
My paintings are based on real-life incidents, which have either happened to me or someone else. The main inspiration for the historical paintings comes from the journals of great sportsmen of the past. I concentrate on an era from the mid-1800s to

mid-1900s.

Alternatively, I am inspired by my experiences in the wild. Every time we visit a wilderness area, something new will happen. No matter where we are in the world, it is always new and exciting. I have visited every continent but one (Australasia region) to research and paint.

Although I am considered a "wildlife artist" I do paint many things and always have—from trains, planes and automobiles to portraits and figurative work. But wildlife has been a constant thread.

Once I have decided the story of the painting, I then determine the mood—is it



A sketch for John Seerey-Lester's painting *Out of Sight*.

night? Is it misty, rainy, dawn or dusk? Once I have established the concept then I choose either oil or acrylics to paint. Acrylics are used for the misty, rainy subdued paintings, where oil is my choice when I want rich vibrant color.

After the telling of a story, the composition is the most important element. They say, no matter what you paint, it has probably been done before. My

self-imposed task is to present it in a different way. Hopefully this is what will make the painting unique.

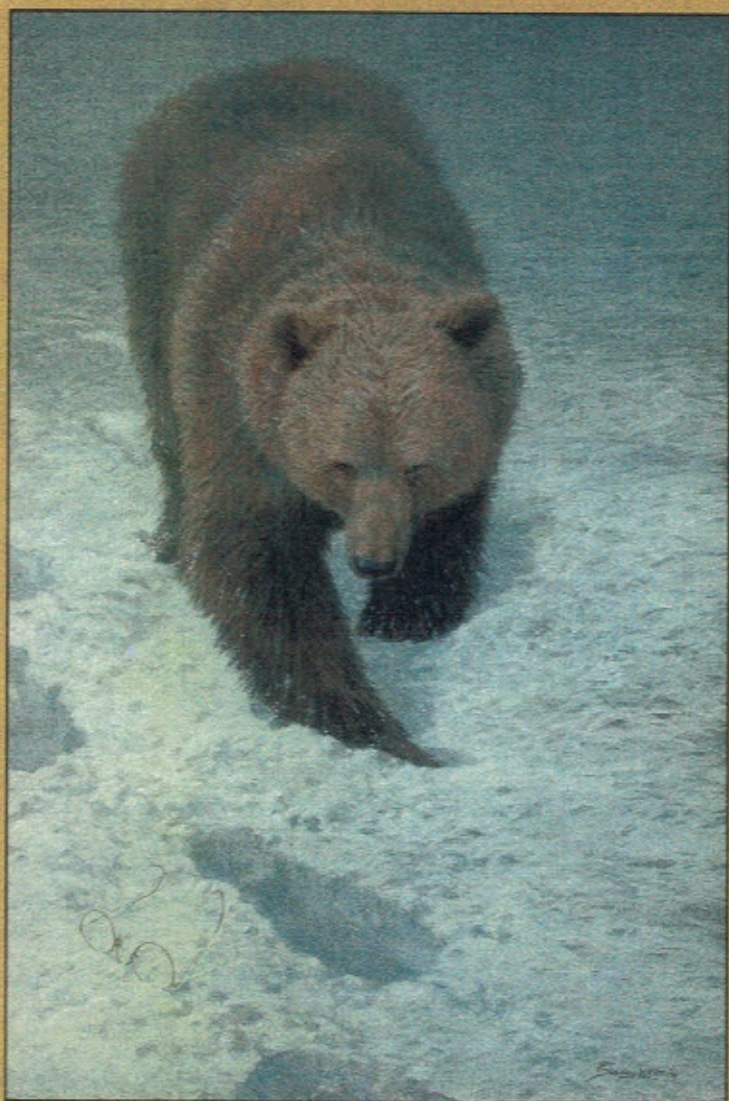
To gain a more full understanding of the subject, I choose to sketch and paint from life. I learn so much more about the subject than if it is simply photographed.

Of course I do use photographs to aid my reference, but these are never copied exactly. I am not a slave to photographs; I use them along with my sketches and field paintings. I change the pose to suit the composition, which I am able to do because of all the years of sketching and observing from life.

I start by blocking in the main subject—starting with the eyes. The eyes must be right; they are

usually the key to my paintings. At this stage it is very easy to move the subject, make it larger or smaller until I am pleased with the composition, design and mood. Because of my technique of using thin washes of color, similar to watercolor, acrylics can be a slow process, layer upon layer, working all around the painting. While one area dries, I move to the next area. The values are established early, and I keep to those values. With oil, it is more direct. I paint wet on wet, so I decide how much of the painting I can complete that day, working the background into the foreground. Finally finishing the oil painting with palette knife work in the foreground, giving the painting a thick rich feel.

John Seerey-Lester, *Out of Sight*, acrylic, 36 x 24" (91 x 61 cm)



SUZIE SEEREY-LESTER

We travel all over the world to paint and sketch animals in the wild. My inspirations are around me everywhere. We also use reserves for reference. In some of these we can see wildlife up close and personal. We see cougars 10 feet away, red fox running between my legs, great gray owl in the thick forest, moose and calf wading in the pond, and the graceful mysterious snow leopard playing on a mountainside. I am in awe every time we go into the field.

I love to paint white birds and black birds

because there are so many different colors in their feathers. That is why it is so important to see and sketch animals in their habitats. You can see how the feathers lay, and the way the paw curls slowly at an angle before it is placed on the ground. You can see into shadows, they are not just black spaces; they are full of shapes, colors and light. It is important to paint what you see, not what you think you see. Look closely; sketch often, your brain will remember much easier



Suzie Seerey-Lester, *Beach Party*, acrylic, 9 x 12" (23 x 30 cm)

if you sketch a subject several times. Each time you will see something different. Photographs do lie, but they are great for additional reference.

I take my own photographs—I never take an animal off the Internet or out of a book, or magazine. Copyright laws protect artists as well as photographers. I may use up to 10 different photographs of a subject to create the painting. I tape them up all over my easel so I can see them all while painting.

Both John and I start

acrylic paintings on a mid-gray panel or canvas. We do this so we can immediately establish the values and light. You are not fighting the white canvas or panel, especially if you are painting a snow scene.

I love to paint old buildings, barns, and falling down structures with an animal or a bird interacting with the edifice. I find that acrylics work best for me in creating wood. I can get the grain of the wood and the light coming thru the slats in the barn; the shadows and holes are fun to paint.



John Seerey-Lester sketches in his sketchbook at Casey Key, Florida.



John Seerey-Lester,
I Think We Have Company,
oil, 16 x 20" (41 x 51 cm)

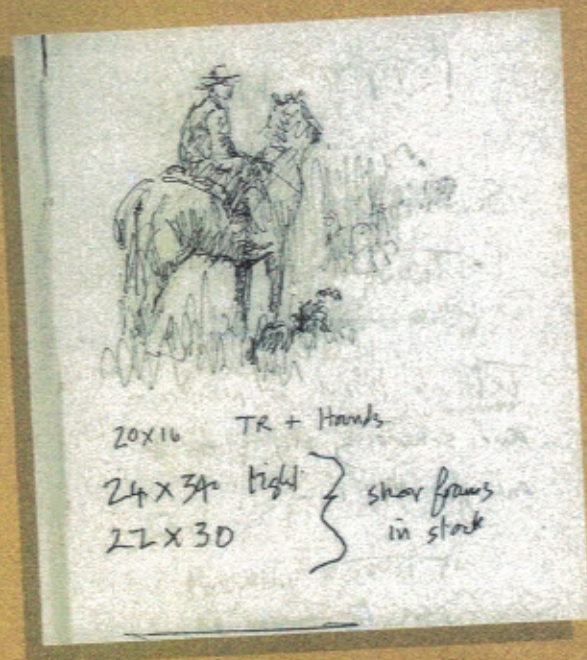
Using vine charcoal, I roughly sketch the main subject, or if something is complex, like a log pile, sketch that in as well. Then I can block in the subjects, and establish the values.

I create several pots of "the magic color"—which is alizarin crimson and viridian mixed together until I get the desired rich gray and then add gesso to create the values that I want. I may have two or three of these pots of different values of gray I will use in each painting. A blob of each of these values is

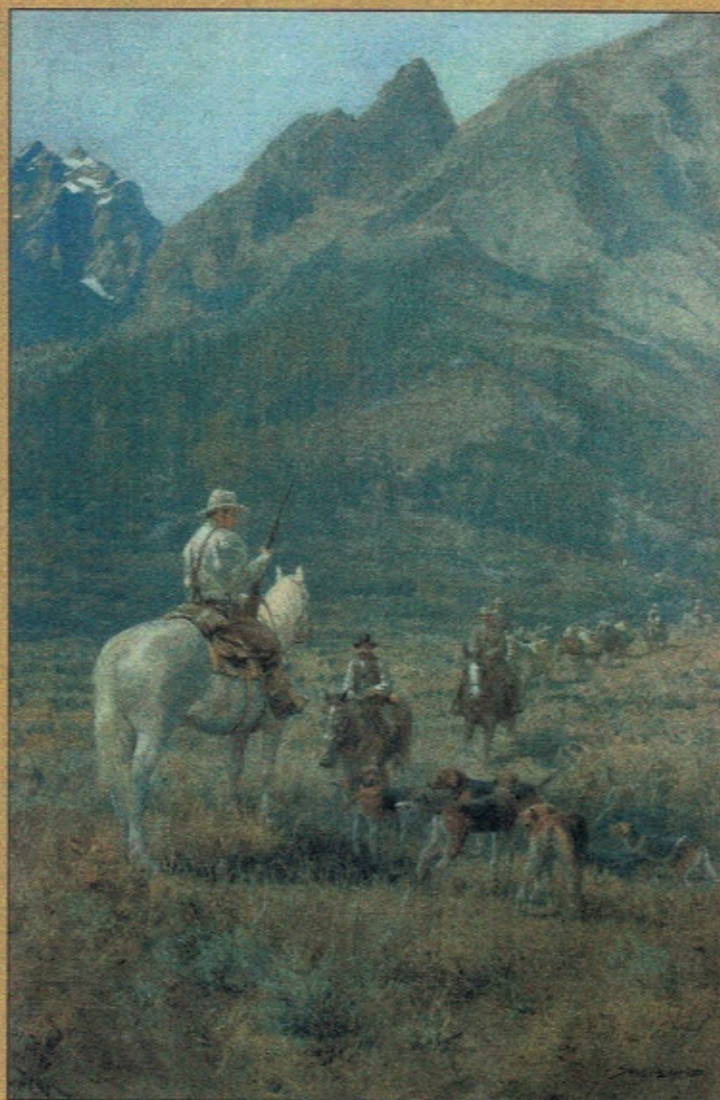
on the top of my palette, then every color that I use in the background, for example, is mixed with the "background magic color" (which is cool and light) to maintain the proper value. Because it is a neutral gray I can mix my yellows and achieve a grayed off yellow, or a grayed off raw umber that doesn't turn green. Everything in a background is painted using that magic color. As I move forward in the painting, I start mixing my color with a different magic color for the value in that area. This way I can

ensure that my coolest and lightest shadows are in the background, and the darkest and warmest shadows are in the foreground.

Working in acrylics allows me to work one area, let it dry, while I move on to another area. Because the values are established there is no problem moving forward, then to the background, then to one side, while a wash is drying. I always know what value goes where. I paint in thin layers so you can see thru the paint, this way I can change things while



Sketch for John Seerey-Lester's *Resting the Hounds*.



John Seerey-Lester,
Resting the Hounds, oil,
 36 x 24" (91 x 61 cm)

working on the painting, move things, alter angles, and adjust the painting until I am happy with it. I will often use a thin transparent wash of burnt sienna on the foreground to warm it up.

We are so fortunate to be able to travel all over the world to paint together in the field. Wherever we travel we have the opportunity to see wildlife in their natural habitats. Some artists don't have the ability or desire to travel, so we suggest going to your local zoo to see the animals you want to paint. Most zoos now are wonderful experiences for artists—you can travel to deep dark Africa, or the jungles of India just a few miles from home. You can sit and sketch for hours as the animals move into different positions. Learn

how they shift, how they move their paws, see the patterns in their fur. No one will bother you, and you won't be chased by bears! Study the animal's anatomy see what they look like, and if you need, adjust your zoo animal—some may be heavier than their cousins in the wild. The more you sketch, the better your initial charcoal drawing will be on your panel or canvas.

Tell a story with your painting; make it interesting, so the viewer will continue to discover things for years to come as they look at your "masterpiece." Do not let a painting leave your studio until it is perfect. Use your friends and spouses to look at your painting; they may see something that you have overlooked.

John and I always paint

our initials into each piece—J + S—this can be a point of interest for people to try to find. One of our artist friends paints a red-headed woodpecker in each piece, another has a raccoon paw print—find something that you, too, can include into your paintings.

We love what we do for a living—and we work very hard. We work seven days a week, up to 10 hours a day. It takes discipline and a passion for painting, and we love every minute of it.

I hope you do as well. 🐾

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

JOHN SEEREY-LESTER

With work hanging at the White House and in permanent, private and museum collections throughout the world, John Seerey-Lester has become one of the most renowned of today's wildlife and historic artists. He moved to America more than 30 years ago, making it his base of operation, and is now a proud citizen of the United States. He has continued to travel the world in search of images, over the years, preferring to paint from life. He has visited such diverse locations as Africa, China (where he painted the rare giant panda in the wild), India, the Arctic and Antarctica as well as Central and South America. It was a visit to East Africa more than 35 years ago that gave birth to his interest in wildlife.

Before this, in his native England, John worked as a journalist, magazine editor and local

government press officer before gaining enormous popularity in his home country for paintings of nostalgic scenes of the Victorian and Edwardian era. Now he has combined that early fascination for historic themes with his continuing interest in wildlife to capture in paint, the golden age of the White Hunter and the hunting heritage of North America. In a new series of paintings, John is revisiting the late 1800s and early 1900s in what is becoming his most successful work.

John has gained a reputation over the years for producing images with a narrative and are both mysterious and mystical. Now he has taken this skill to produce a remarkable series of paintings depicting historic hunts of safari legends.

John has received many awards and much recognition for his outstanding achievements in the

field of wildlife and sporting art. Among them, John was awarded the Ring of Freedom Award by the NRA, and was invited to become a member of the International Order of St. Hubertus. He was knighted this year, by his Imperial and Royal Highness Archduke Andreas of Austria. John's investiture took place in Houston, Texas, on March 23, 2013. He was presented to His Royal Highness Prince Phillip and was commended for his work in conservation.

A book on his life and work was released in November 1991. The book, *Face to Face with Nature: The Art of John Seerey-Lester*, sold out in 1995. A second book titled *Impressions of India and Nepal*, based on his fieldwork there, was published soon after. His more recent book *Painting Wildlife with John Seerey-Lester*, which was



published in 2003, has also sold out. His book *Useppa A Passage in Time* was published in October 2007. *Useppa* won a Silver Medal for its images and outstanding historical content.

His new book *Legends of the Hunt - Campfire Tales* is available now. Today he lives in Florida, with his wife and fellow award-winning wildlife artist Suzie whom he married in January 2000 on Useppa Island, in Southwest Florida.

SUZIE SEEREY-LESTER

Suzie was a professional diver for more than 30 years. As a diving instructor trainer, Suzie traveled around the world as the first woman to teach diving and license instructors. While working for the CIA, she taught CIA agents, secret service agents, US marshals, FBI agents and other law enforcement personnel how to dive, perform search and recovery as well as other "specialized" skills. She taught President Ford's secret service agents, some of those special skills. Traveling gave Suzie the opportunity to see extraordinary underwater creatures up close, (and some scary stories) which she captured in her earlier paintings.

An award-winning artist,

Suzie now travels worldwide to paint, including the rainforest in Guatemala, Africa, England, Spain, Mexico, and Italy also nearer to home, Alaska, California, Florida, South and North Carolina, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, and Maine. Suzie has expanded her artwork to include plein air.

Suzie is licensed by the State of Florida as marine turtle rescue personnel. She walks the beach of Casey Key every morning from May until November, verifying turtle nests and helps rescue baby turtles when they hatch. She releases about 200 baby Loggerhead turtles every year. Suzie received the President's Volunteer Service Award in 2008.

Suzie has been working with the turtles since 2001.

John and Suzie teach MasterClass painting classes all over the United States. Teaching new techniques, demonstrations, sales and marketing information to new students. One class they teach in Montana allows the students to photograph and sketch animals in wild locations, with nothing between you and the animals. Some of the animals are arctic wolves, timber wolves, tigers, mountain lions, fox, lynx, bobcat, otter, grizzly and black bear, just to name a few, then teach students to paint these magnificent animals back in the studio, later in the day.



In January 2000 Suzie married world-renowned wildlife artist John Seerey-Lester and her life has been an adventure ever since. They live, work and play in Florida.

