



In Theodore Roosevelt's honor, let us all cry "bully!" to proclaim our common love for the great outdoors. But leave it to a transplanted Englishman—or in this case, painter-writer John Seerey-Lester—to artfully remind American hunters and anglers that their greatest conservation hero still commands towering importance.

When Seerey-Lester started creating historic "predicament scenes" featuring TR a decade ago, he knew he had tapped into something that might possibly arouse the passions of sporting art collectors. Just how much, Seerey-Lester couldn't possibly have imagined.

Today, his nostalgic portrayals of Roosevelt on the hunt in the late 19th and early 20th centuries have put Seerey-Lester's originals at peak demand. They've also fueled a series of sold-out coffee table art books filled with tales by Seerey-Lester of Roosevelt stalking big game in North America, Africa, South America and Asia.

"John's paintings are timeless and appear life-like, as if Roosevelt were still here with us," Yturria says. "They take us back to an era when wildlife in Africa was plentiful and not threatened by poachers and ivory merchants—an era when going 'on safari' really meant something. Long live those days."

Perhaps the most satisfying endorsement Seerey-Lester's received to date, besides that from collectors, is the ongoing vote of confidence that's come from direct descendants of the Roosevelt clan. They've been so impressed with the painter's devotion to historical accuracy and research, including getting every detail from safari attire to gun models down pat, that Roosevelt family members offered Seerey-Lester unfettered access to TR's personal diaries. Observations penned in Roosevelt's own hand, which he made at hunting camps in Kenya and the American West, have provided the artist with colorful gripping fodder for new portrayals of the 16th president never before told through art.

Tweed Roosevelt, TR's great grandson, believes the works hold historic value in bringing more details of the president's hunting expeditions and campfire talks that shaped today's conservation movement into fresh light.

"TR was ahead of his time and his wisdom is directly applicable to our time," Seerey-Lester said recently while working behind the easel on an oil painting showing Roosevelt taking aim at a charging bull elephant in Kenya in 1909.

Roosevelt harvested the giant tusk while on an expedition funded by both the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. where collected wildlife specimens were mounted and put on public display.

"TR not only recognized the connection between hunters and the vital conservation role they play as passionate defenders of the game animals they love," Seerey-Lester said. "He led by example in supporting movements to rescue species such as bison and elk that were pushed to the very brink of annihilation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries."

No one with as much authority and hands on experience as an outdoorsman had existed before. And he foresaw the necessity of protecting habitat, a cornerstone of the North American model of wildlife conservation.

Counted for decades among the top wildlife artists in the world, his Roosevelt period pieces are the finest of his career for they bring together his greatest strengths as a painter: expert draftsmanship especially in drawing human and animal figures, an incredible knack for creating moods, and an ability to seize our attention by capturing turning-point moments of action.

Born in England in 1945, the year that brought an end to World War II, Seerey-Lester worked as a commercial illustrator and distinguished himself by painting flashback street scenes of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. His realistic interpretations of 19th century people, buildings and life laid the groundwork for his success today.

continued on page 52

BY TODD WILKINSON

Art

OF THE HUNT

Painting Roosevelt

*In dramatic fashion,
John Seerey-Lester brings haunting
adventures of TR to life*

A third book titled "The Legendary Hunts of Theodore Roosevelt" is scheduled to be out in time for the coming holiday season and much to the delight of TR fans the volume will feature several new paintings and stories scheduled for unveiling at the 2016 SCI Convention in Las Vegas.

"I have a hunch that given the subject matter and places I'm exploring in these new works that the curiosity of those at Safari Club will be whetted," Seerey-Lester says. "Retracing TR's footsteps has been an adventure and thrill."

Well-known Texas businessman, rancher, hunter and art collector Fausto Yturria was riveted by Seerey-Lester's paintings of TR the first time he saw them. He owns several works and eagerly looks forward to those debuting at SCI.



During his twenties, Seerey-Lester traveled to Africa and fell into the company of conservationist/paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey (a year Seerey-Lester's senior) who later became head of wildlife management for Kenya and launched a game warden program to combat elephant and rhino poachers. Seerey-Lester supported conservation campaigns through the sale of artwork.

Back in England, the artist began painting wildlife almost exclusively and showed particular promise with predator and prey predicament scenes. Eventually, he moved to the US and expanded his portfolio with North American big game, gaining a huge following among people who bought wildlife art prints through publisher Mill Pond Press based on 400 different paintings. Today, he shares a life with his wife, Suzie, also a talented wildlife artist.

"John isn't as much of an art celebrity as say, Robert Bateman, but he really knows what to do with a paintbrush and he's very versatile," observes art historian David J. Wagner. "Those two characteristics, along with the strength and boldness of his work, have established him among the top wildlife artists of the day. And it seems that he just keeps getting better and better."

Last year, a group of collectors flew into Vegas for the SCI Show just to watch Seerey-Lester complete a number of quick-draw studies live at the Call of Africa Native Visions Gallery booth, the sole representative of Seerey-Lester's originals. The painter plans to be back in 2016 doing it again.

"There are some damned fine sporting art painters, but there are not a lot in the world who can set up their kit and put together very competent pieces in front of a live audience in a short period time," says Ross Parker, Call of Africa owner.

"But John can do it, and that skill is an extension of his early training as a street painter in London. The studies, by themselves, are sweet and collectible. But when you see his large finished easel paintings that he's spent months completing, you know why they are museum worthy. And that only enhances that reputation that SCI has for offering its members access to high-caliber art."

Not all of Seerey-Lester's newer works are based in Africa. He and his wife not long ago took a rugged trip up Two Ocean Pass in Wyoming's Absaroka Mountains to witness the same vistas Roosevelt did when he hunted elk there. "It is amazing to, with one hand, be reading TR's journals and then to be looking out on the places he visited and to realize they are wilder now than when he encountered them thanks largely to the vision he charted as a conservationist," Seerey-Lester says.

The discerning eyes of SCI Members, in turn, have also helped Seerey-Lester broaden his own understanding of guns. "Hunters look at the weapons in his paintings and they appreciate the rifles precisely reflect the period and so in that sense his works are historic," Parker says. "They hold up to intense scrutiny."

When I spoke with Seerey-Lester, he was surrounded in his Florida studio by eight different works in various stages of completion, from Roosevelt pursuing elephants, rhino, Cape buffalo and lions.

Over the years, Seerey-Lester has helped raise millions of dollars for conservation efforts and he's proud, he says, to be affiliated with SCI. He was one of the first artists to paint the giant panda in China, his work has hung in the White House, he's received the NRA's Ring of Freedom Award and not long ago he was bestowed with a knighthood by his Imperial and Royal Highness Archduke Andreas of Austria.

One of his proudest achievements, he said, was becoming a naturalized American citizen. "I grew up holding Winston Churchill in highest admiration but the more I've discovered about Roosevelt, I place him in the same league," Seerey-Lester says. "I believe we need to revive the spirit of TR to confront enormous challenges facing the animals we love in Africa. I hope my work, in its own modest way, can help make that happen."

Art of the Hunt columnist Todd Wilkinson is a lifelong sportsman and longtime outdoor writer. He is author of the new book "Grizzlies of Pilgrim Creek, An Intimate Portrait of 399, the Most Famous Bear of Greater Yellowstone." 🐻

