

ART & ETC

# LARGER THAN LIFE

*From celebrating Theodore Roosevelt to other legendary hunting explorers, John Seerey-Lester leaves behind a new book and trove of great art.*

BY TODD WILKINSON



*Polar Intrusion* by John Seerey-Lester, 24 x 36 inches, acrylic.

**D**ead men tell no tales—or so the age-old buccaneer’s expression goes, the one that basically means secrets perish when their holders pass on to the happy hunting ground. Fortunately, it doesn’t apply to the late John Seerey-Lester.

**OVER THE COURSE OF HIS DISTINGUISHED** career as a wildlife and sporting artist, Seerey-Lester did indeed possess a swashbuckler’s mystique. “To say that, in some respects, he had the personality of a pirate is spot on,” his widow, Suzie Seerey-Lester, also a nature painter, told me recently from the home and studio they shared in Florida.

Between the stylish hats her husband wore—he had more than 200—and his coiffed beard, gold earrings and British accent, “he was a character,” she says. He was a character much

beloved who earned a distinguished presence among artists whose work we like to put on our walls.

One thing Seerey-Lester was not is a politically-correct dandy who evinced airs. Serious, smart and acclaimed for the visual narratives he created in the final stretch of his career—especially adventure “predicament scenes” depicting Theodore Roosevelt and others—he had a penchant, too, for being wickedly wry. Although Seerey-Lester was a raconteur of the first order, he didn’t joke around when it came to painting. He was generous in

sharing the secrets of techniques he had perfected across four decades, and his portrayals of famous conservationists, explorers and legendary big game animals brought historic figures back to life.

His work hung in the White House, and he was knighted, earning the title, “Sir,” by Imperial and Royal Highness Archduke Andreas of Austria for Seerey-Lester’s contributions to wildlife conservation.

Succumbing to cancer in early summer 2020, Seerey-Lester was remembered as a giant of modern sporting art, but his death wasn’t his last act. What few people realize is that he was in a race against time, attempting to complete easel paintings for the fourth installment of his acclaimed “historic hunt” book series. In fact, he toiled right up to his mortal limit, finishing intensely-researched compositions for the new

book, *Legendary Hunters and Explorers* that has met with acclaim. This volume, published posthumously, features a trove of 110 paintings, studies and drawings of Lewis & Clark, Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, Teddy Roosevelt and others hailed for their derring-do.

The works, when seen in the pages of *Legendary Hunters and Explorers*, are like a celebratory posthumous exhibition. “Boys’ Night Out,” for example, is a haunting nocturne of the African bush with ten glowing eyes of five lions in tall grass. “Midnight Frost” is an homage to a polar bear and “Polar Intrusion” shows a big white bruin entering a tent. In “The Stage is Set,” a bison family is confronted by a pack of wolves.

Wildlife art historian David J. Wagner told me that Seerey-Lester was worthy of comparison to Philip R. Goodwin, the student of Howard Pyle (dean of the golden age of illustration) and painter who was a favorite predicament scene artist of Teddy Roosevelt.

Accompanying the visuals in the book is a text that Seerey-Lester also wrote, a testament to yet another aspect of his life not widely known. In his early years in England, he had been a journalist.



*India Ink* by John Seerey-Lester, 36 x 36 inches, acrylic.



*No Where to Hide* by John Seerey-Lester, 12 x 24 inches, oil.

**I GOT TO KNOW SEEREY-LESTER** a long time ago. My first interview with him happened in the late 1980s at the height of the limited-edition print buying frenzy that swept across wildlife art. We met at an art exposition attended by thousands of collectors in Minneapolis and I followed him over the subsequent decades.

“John was a pillar in the modern popularity of wildlife art,” said Robert J. Koenke, who founded *Wildlife Art News*. “What made him unique is that, as an Englishman, he painted African animals, but he really found a home in America.”

Born in 1941 in England, Seerey-Lester underwent not one but two artistic reinventions. The first phase of his career involved being a painter of human portraits and nostalgic architecture scenes of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. After that, he painted African wildlife, but took up North American species after he moved to the U.S. permanently in 1980. His sensitive depictions of mammals and birds won him awards and recognition from the Society of Animal Artists and Leigh Yawkey Woodson’s prestigious Birds in Art Show, as well as a publishing deal with Mill Pond Press to produce limited edition reproductions

of original paintings. Most of all, he gained an enthusiastic base of collectors, none the more ardent than hunters who identify as conservationists.

As the limited-edition wildlife art print market started to wane and the market for originals became flooded, many painters found themselves at a crossroad. Some 20 years ago, Florida-based fine art dealer Ross Parker, a native of Zimbabwe, reflected with Seerey-Lester on how so much wildlife art was uninspiring. He proposed that the painter consider commemorating hunting stories for the ages.

“At first John was a little reluctant,” Parker says. “He didn’t want to do anything that might be misconstrued as gimmicky. After he poured himself into researching Theodore Roosevelt and the hunts he went on in Africa, South America and the American West in the Dakota Badlands and the wild country near Yellowstone, he told me he was intrigued. Of course, the paintings he produced formed the basis for his first books had tremendous appeal.”

Not only that, but Tweed Roosevelt, great-grandson of TR via TR’s son, Archibald Bulloch Roosevelt, praised their accuracy and gave Seerey-Lester



*Safari Writings* by John Seerey-Lester, 12 x 16 inches, acrylic.



*Leap of Faith* by Suzie Seerey-Lester, 36 x 18 inches, oil.

accessibility to a motherlode of TR’s notes and journals. Tweed told me years ago that John “had added something important to the legacy of Roosevelt in a way that had never been done before.”

The Seerey-Lesters were invited by members of TR’s descendants to take tours of Sagamore Hill where he lived. “What did he appreciate most about Roosevelt?” Suzie asks. “That he was a man’s man, a hunter, a writer. He would do anything, and he was gracious and thoughtful and honest. Most of all, John was attracted to the fact that Teddy Roosevelt’s values united people.”

**ANOTHER BURST OF WIND** in Seerey-Lester’s sail was a personal decision that came after the start of the new millennium: Suzie says John stopped drinking in 2003 and it led to him being more prolific and producing



Sir John and Suzie Seerey-Lester.

the finest work of his career. His teaching seminars at the Susan K. Black Foundation’s annual Artist’s Rendezvous and Workshops in Dubois, Wyoming, were highlights for veteran and new painters alike.

At Safari Club International conventions and NRA exhibitions, Seerey-Lester would complete paintings live, attracting crowds as he composed works from the mountains of research he stored in his memory. He would converse with fans while delivering a stunning work that sometimes turned into a bidding war.

Art collectors from around the world would show up at the SCI booth operated by Parker’s Call of Africa’s Native Visions Gallery that has spaces in Naples and Jupiter, Florida. “He could paint anything. It was so amazing. At SCI you have all of these legendary hunters and guides, but John as a painter was a rock star all his own,” Parker says.

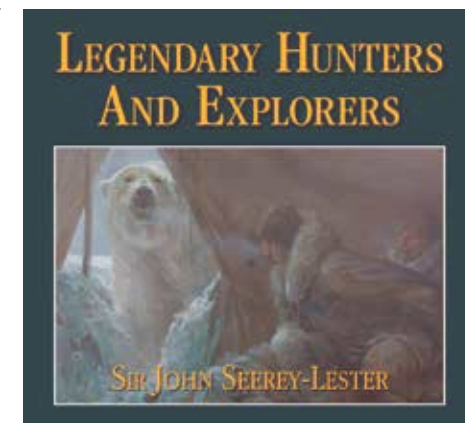
Over time, as Seerey-Lester was working to become a U.S. citizen, he became more adamant in believing that Constitutional rights need to be protected, but he didn’t preach. He was particularly devoted to using wildlife and hunting scenes as a way of engaging viewers and getting them to reflect on the importance of protecting habitat.

Seerey-Lester and Suzie were together for 25 years. “We met 200 feet up a tree at four in the morning in Guatemala,” she told me, describing a painting retreat that involved a pre-dawn hike in a cloud forest and the arrival of a jaguar on a trail that sent them scurrying. During that time, they painted side by side every day. “We spent 24 hours a day together and never took vacations apart,” she says. “He was always generous with his time. Whenever he was interacting with another painter, he wanted to help them make their work better and give them information they could take with them and use.”

Seerey-Lester completed almost all of the paintings for the new book before he passed, but hadn’t put the book itself together, which was a problem, Suzie says. “I knew what he wanted, and it took me about a year to get it together. Chuck Weschler (now Book Editor) at *Sporting Classics* did a wonderful job helping in getting it organized and proofed.” Weschler had played an instrumental role in the first three books and was convinced Seerey-Lester was making meaningful contributions to the intersection of art, sporting and conservation history.

**TOGETHER WITH PARKER**, Suzie is slowly making the last of his paintings available half a dozen at a time. “Many of them speak to an era, they spark conversations when you see them on the wall, and yet they are timeless,” Parker says. “John always had so much sympathy not only for his human subjects, but also the animals. His paintings invite us to inhabit their untamed world.”

Dead men tell no tales, but the secrets of John Seerey-Lester didn’t depart the physical world with him. What we have is a pirate’s treasure trove of paintings that inspire our passions, of a master painter’s personal knowledge that lives on in students and colleagues and historic figures who now seem even bigger than life, inhabiting places in our imaginations that words alone could not accomplish. ■



**NEW BOOK!**  
**LEGENDARY HUNTERS AND EXPLORERS**

BY SIR JOHN SEEREY-LESTER  
HARDCOVER WITH DUST JACKET | \$60

Finishing the final book in the iconic Legends series, *Legendary Hunters and Explorers* is the epitome of Sir John Seerey-Lester’s spirit. Filled with over 120 paintings and 45 descriptive chapters, the new 200-page book relives the stories of 25 acclaimed hunters and explorers, including Theodore Roosevelt and Winston Churchill.

All of the men and women featured on these pages shared an unquenchable thirst for adventure, and a remarkable ability to survive in the face of extreme hardship and dangerous encounters in the wild outdoors. Spanning the years from 1800 to the mid-1900s, the careers of these dedicated hunters and explorers were filled with all sorts of adversity and challenges, which they somehow managed to overcome.

*Legendary Hunters and Explorers* is available in the Sporting Classics Store at [SPORTINGCLASSICSSTORE.COM](http://SPORTINGCLASSICSSTORE.COM) or by calling (800) 849-1004.