

# HUNTER'S ★HORN



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# THE MAGIC of Jaco van Schalkwyk

*Houston Safari Club's Artist of the Year*

BY TODD WILKINSON



THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

LEOPARD: REGAL ONE



Hunters know in their guts and hearts what is authentic in art and what isn't. I'm not merely speaking about accurate anatomical representation, correctly portraying the way an elephant or Cape buffalo appears, or the distinctive body language of waterfowl when descending into decoys, wings locked for landing.

Those details are important, but getting them right doesn't always make for a great painting, nor is it the reason, frankly, why so many of us put art on the wall. What matters more are artists who can convey the spirit of an animal, the magical ambience of a setting, and all of the other nearly indescribable things that stay with us long after we've come home. Superior art speaks to the bigger mental space belonging to daydreams, memories that sometimes extend back into childhood, and even trips into wilderness that have not yet happened. Jaco van Schalkwyk is a South African in the ascent of his career as a wildlife artist. He's someone to watch closely. Not only has van Schalkwyk actually observed animals like leopards, lions, elephants and rhino personally in the bush, but the work he creates, based on those experiences, often sell within hours after they cross the Atlantic and arrive in Ross Parker's Call of Africa's Native Visions Galleries located in Jupiter and Naples, Florida.

"This young man is brilliant," Parker says. "In terms of his technique, he's painting with a level of maturity and discipline that you ordinarily only see in artists during the prime of their 50s, 60s and 70s." Van Schalkwyk's actual age: 36. Born in Benoni, South Africa, in 1981, the artist said in an interview that exploring wild country was a natural extension of his upbringing, like learning a language. As a young man, he worked on a dairy farm and gained a keen understanding of animal anatomy and physiology. It was complemented by regular pilgrimages to the region's iconic parks and game preserves.

His work today is always inspired by direct observation. Besides being influenced early on by Robert Bateman and Ray Harris-Ching, van Schalkwyk's aspirations have been shaped more, he says, by Dutch masters such as Rembrandt and Vermeer. "Their dramatic, theatrical use of light and shadow still inspires





THE HUNTRESS - ETOSHA



DESERT MONARCH



AN AFTERNOON STROLL

me today," he says. A few years back, van Schalkwyk joined artist friends Marie Vermeulen Breedt and Margaret Gradwell (also a personal mentor and former art professor at the University of Pretoria) on a tour of European museums. An indication of his talent, van Schalkwyk has had a major exhibition of his figurative work (paintings and drawings of people) in Cape Town and it won rave reviews. "Being a wildlife artist here has its pros and cons," says van Schalkwyk, who lives near Johannesburg, noting that animal painters struggle for critical recognition in South Africa — as they do everywhere else. The reputation of wildlife art suffered in recent decades as a result of many lesser artists, deciding they would paint wildlife, flooding the market to try and turn an easy buck.

"In fact, savvy collectors are very discriminating," van Schalkwyk says. "You can't fool people who spend a lot of time in the bush. Luckily, knowledgeable art dealers and buyers can still identify 'true wildlife art.'"

"Jaco doesn't project images onto a wall and then trace the outline. He draws his animals freehand, based upon what he knows up here," Parker says, pointing to his head. To master any skill, experts say, one needs to practice it 10,000 times. The memory that van Schalkwyk possesses not only of animals but how they actually look in the landscape comes from patient observation. "He breathes this stuff in," Parker says. "He's as familiar painting large mammals in Kruger National Park as some of the acclaimed North Americans, who have their work today in museums, are painting in Yellowstone or Alaska." Van Schalkwyk can paint scenes of animals filling the frame and most definitely those works appeal to certain clients, but the pieces that have attracted the most interest from experienced collectors are his moody landscapes that bear a resemblance to works painted by old European masters. In terms of van Schalkwyk's style, Parker says he is reminded of the late Lanford Monroe (daughter of noted *Hook and Bullet* magazine illustrator C.E. Monroe and close friend of Bob Kuhn) who didn't make "wildlife paintings," rather; she was praised for creating incredible landscape paintings that featured wildlife in the scenes. "Mostly I prefer to paint with a soft color pallet, reflective of the landscapes that the great Bateman has given van Schalkwyk accolades." Moreover, the youngster has earned rare unanimous respect from other African painters Parker represents and who have avid collectors at SCI — artists such as David Langmead, Margaret Gradwell, Kim Donaldson, James Stroud and John Seerey Lester. "They are capturing split moments in time," Parker says. "With some of the game preserves and species being affected by serious poaching and civil unrest, these artists are presenting scenes that may never be the same again, or at least not for a very long while. The sun is beginning to fade. In that sense, Jaco is a witness to history, which adds to the powerful feeling you get from his work."

More often of late, it's a history that has brought heartbreak to those living on the front lines of species loss occurring largely out of sight and mind of Americans. Every week, van



PATHFINDERS



A MOTHER'S LOVE

Schalkwyk hears more tales of rhinos being poached for their horn, elephant for their ivory and lion by black market traders because the consumption of parts from the big cats is thought to make those who ingest them more virile. Van Schalkwyk's beautiful oil portrayal of a lion, "Noble One," is a tribute to the living king of the jungle.

"Sometimes it feels as if nature is going to lose the battle against human greed. I feel wildlife artists can help in this battle to at least create a sense of awareness," van Schalkwyk says. "That's why it gives me great pleasure to hear that my paintings are popular among the people of SCI. They're in a position to help us save our wildlife heritage before it is gone."

Jaco is currently on his second residence at several German museums, by invitation. He recently won South Africa's most coveted artist award. His three months there will give him time to complete works he started back in Africa. "It will be a great inspiration to be painting amongst the world's greatest. I would like to thank sponsors who made this national award happen for me," says Jaco. "I'm hoping my new collection of works for the American audience will be as well received as the last." ★