

# ARTS & BOOKS

**SOUNDING OFF ON THE BEAUTY OF SILENCE**  
**CLASSICAL MUSIC, E10**



**BORDER FOLLY**  
 ARCHITECTURE, E11

**KIDNAPPED BY THE TALIBAN, HIS AND HER ACCOUNTS**  
**BOOK REVIEW, E13**



## CALIFORNIA IMAGERY

# Taking a scenic route

LIESL BRADNER

In 1926 *Touring Topics* (the predecessor to *Westways*), the magazine of the Automobile Club of Southern California, was changing directions.

The editors shifted gears from a solely automobile-related publication, expanding their focus to regional culture and travel destinations. The guiding force behind this transition was editor Phil Townsend Hanna, who initiated the cover art program and showcased images from California artists to reflect the content and mission of the magazine.

More than 40 pieces from the *Westways* art collection are on display at the Pasadena Museum of California Art exhibition, "Scenic View Ahead: The *Westways* Cover Art Program, 1928-1981," through Feb. 21.

Hanna, a former editor at the *Los Angeles Times*, commissioned works from novice and established artists reflecting movements of the period. Beginning with the March 1928 issue, he presented 12 landscape scenes from plein-air artists, including Alson Clark, John Frost and Maynard Dixon. "Dixon was a famous and sought-after artist at the time," said Matthew W. Roth, co-curator and archivist for the auto club. "All 12 covers in 1930 were by him."

Hanna unwittingly became a patron of local artists. From March to December 1929, he hired female artists to paint the covers, including Henrietta Shore, Mary DeNeale Morgan and Donna Schuster.

During the Depression, the covers were scaled back and the name was officially changed to *Westways* in 1934. The '40s brought the vibrant California watercolor movement with artists such as Rex Brandt, Phil Dike and Maurice Logan.

"The paintings followed the theme of neat places to drive to and the landscape as recreation," noted Roth. "When they found artists they appreciated, they stuck with them." One example was Chinese American artist Jake Glee, who contributed 24 covers from 1954 to '78 including images of San Francisco's Chinatown and L.A.'s Olvera Street. "His work progressed from standard illustrations to really abstract visceral pieces."

Another significant shift happened in the '70s when F. Scott Fitzgerald's former assistant Frances Kroll Ring took the helm of the magazine.

"She presided over a real flowering of the magazine, a golden age," said Roth. "At that time there was no outlet for creative non-fiction [on the West Coast] so she brought in Anaïs Nin, Wallace Stegner and Norman Corwin to write essays. She was like a kid on a playground, and the covers went along with that."

The cover art program ceased in 1981 as *Westways*, like other publications, turned to photography for cover art, which continues in its current format with the exception of a few special issues. The content remains focused on travel, California culture, car-related issues and advocacy efforts. The 250-piece collection is housed in the auto club archives downtown.

One fascinating story to emerge from the cover art program is that of Polish émigré Jan Sawka, whose first visit to Los Angeles turned into his first commissioned painting, "Sunset Strip 1978." His tour guide was friend and scriptwriter Budd Schulberg, who dropped him off at the edge of the Sunset Strip one day.

"I took a notebook and markers and walked down Sunset Boulevard," said Sawka, who went on to design album covers, sculptures, and film and theater sets. "It was awful and strangely beautiful how billboards dominated human life." His stroll was interrupted several times by drivers, including a police officer, wondering where his car was.

"It was Sunset Strip at its most decadent period through the eyes of an immigrant," added co-curator and fellow auto club archivist Morgan P. Yates.

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# 'True Grit': a tale of loss and redemption

DAVID L. ULIN

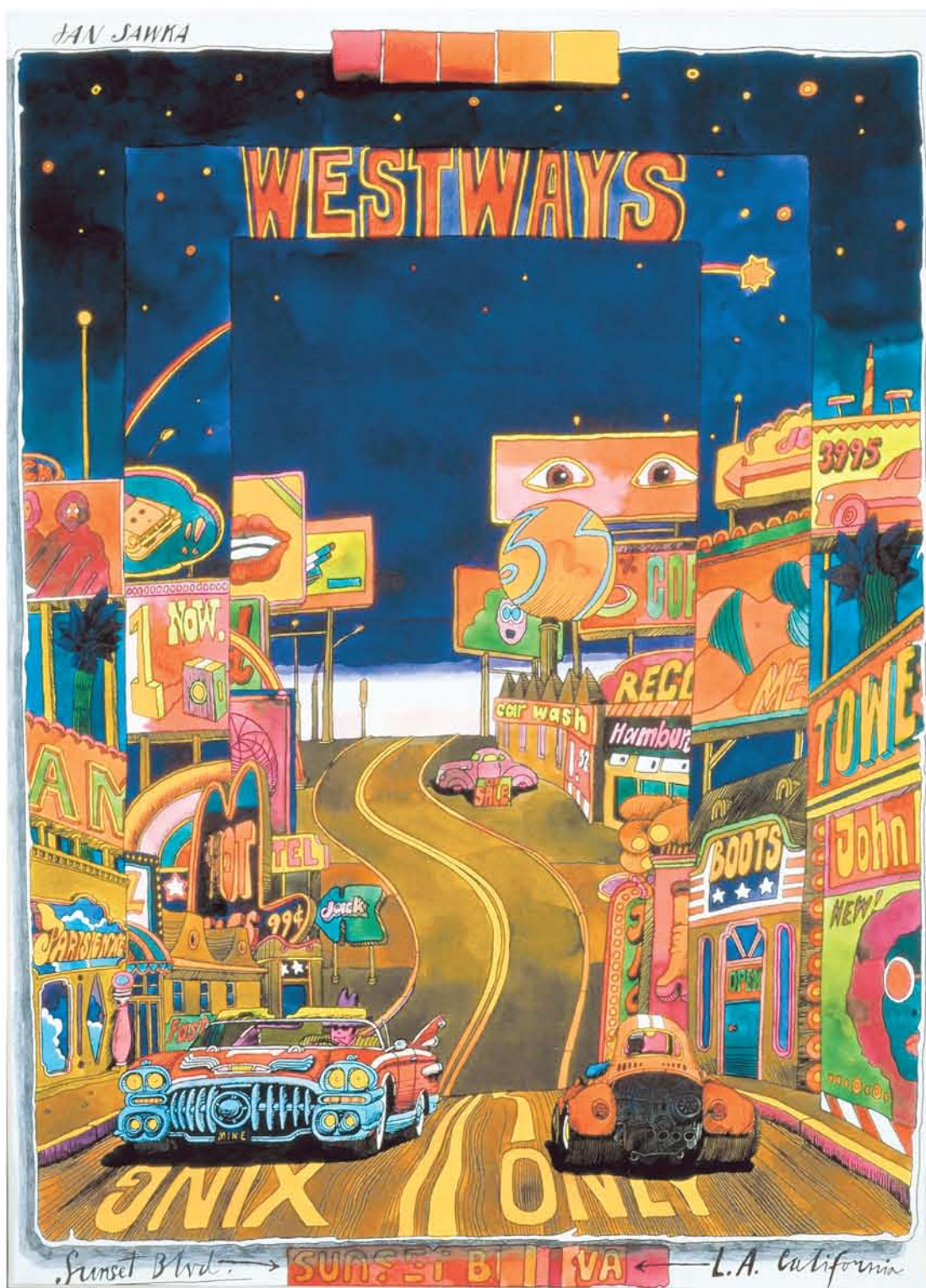
Sometimes you read a book at the wrong time. That was the case for me with Charles Portis' 1968 novel "True Grit" (Tusk/Overlook: 236 pp., \$14.95 paper), which I first picked up in the early 1970s, after seeing the film with John Wayne. Back then, I had no idea what Portis was doing; I read the book as if it were in the vein of, say, Sid Fleischman's "By the Great Horn Spoon!," a novel for young readers about the Gold Rush. Both take place in the Old West, and both involve adolescent protagonists, but there the resemblance ends.

"True Grit" operates in the tradition of Thomas Berger's "Little Big Man" and David Shetzline's "DeFord," both of which were published within a few years of Portis' book. Laconic, Western, trafficking in the substrata of American mythos, it also has a lot in common with "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," as Donna Tartt points out in her afterword to a new edition of the novel released to promote the Coen brothers' movie remake, which opens Wednesday. Like Twain, Portis is a master of voice, of deadpan narration played for comic effect. And like Twain also, he respects his young narrator as a human being with a fully developed moral sensibility, even when the adults in the novel don't.

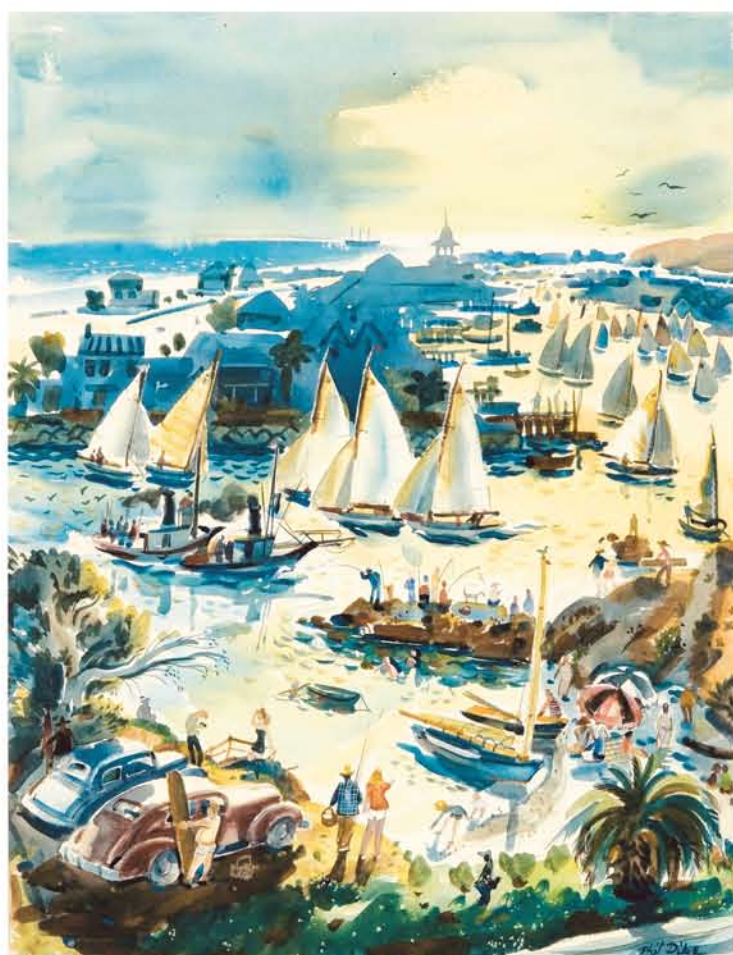
The story is pretty basic: 14-year-old Mattie Ross, of Yell County, Ark., hires a U.S. marshal named Rooster Cogburn to go after the man who shot and killed her father in nearby Fort Smith. It is the 1870s, and the pursuit takes them into Indian Territory, which, Cogburn keeps insisting, is no place for a teenage girl. He's right, but it is Mattie, and not Cogburn — or LaBoeuf, the Texas Ranger who joins them — who is the real adult here, the only one with a sense of what's at stake. "I have never been one to flinch or crawl when faced with an unpleasant task," she tells us in a typical aside.

Mattie will do what's necessary, no matter how challenging or difficult. The same is true of Cogburn, who functions as a kind of opposing axis, a force of chaos and ambiguity. If your only memory of him comes from Wayne's tough yet charming film portrayal, you're in for a surprise; the Cogburn of the novel is resolutely amoral, a former member of Quantrill's Raiders, the Confederate guerrillas who, in August 1863, massacred more than 150 civilians in Lawrence, Kan. Portis is subtle about the implications, but the message is clear: Here we have an untamed man, willing to do almost anything to achieve his ends. That this might also be said of Mattie is one of the potent ironies of "True Grit," which becomes an unlikely love story, the saga of how Cogburn and Mattie meet their match.

All of this comes at a price. Mattie may want revenge, and Cogburn redemption, but both must pay in extreme ways. Portis never flinches from that sense of consequence; his novel is blunt, brutal and imbued with a profound understanding of compromise and loss. Yet Mattie perseveres. As she puts it: "If you want anything done right, you will have to see to it yourself every time."



Images from Automobile Club of Southern California Archives

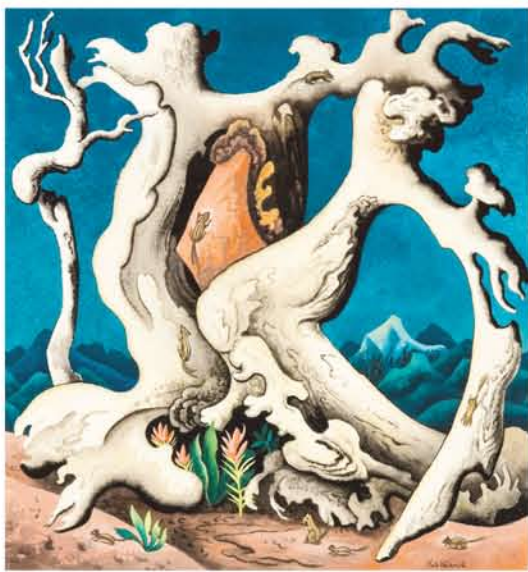


**'SUNSET STRIP':** Polish émigré Jan Sawka made this acrylic/ink piece, above, in 1978 after walking along the fabled stretch during his first visit to Los Angeles.



**'THE AIRPLANE':** Maynard Dixon's gouache piece from 1930 is in the exhibit. Dixon did all 12 covers of the club's magazine that year.

**'BALBOA':** Phil Dike's 1947 work was part of the California watercolor movement.



**'FISHERMAN'S WHARF':** The oil by Donna Schuster was commissioned in 1929 for a cover.

**'ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK':** Vance Kirkland's mixed-media work, left, from 1951, also was used as magazine cover art.