



TRIBUTE

Remembering Jack Unruh

*Comments from those who knew
and worked with him*

John Cuneo, an illustrator whose work regularly appears in many national publications including *Atlantic Monthly* and *Esquire Magazine*

“Jack Unruh is an artist of protean skills who has somehow, while saddled with a meticulous technique and a withering schedule, also figured out how to play. And not just in between assignments. Whether it’s a somber portrait of an historical figure, a cover illustration for an annual report or a hiking boot advertisement, those same elements of eccentric, ribald playfulness that Jack brings to his life away from his studio also infuse each and every one of his drawings.

Now about some of those drawings. It seems like there have always been the nature studies. Those elegantly detailed landscapes. Those fish, the fowl, the spotted owl. The flora, the fauna, the aquatic iguana. A career long menagerie of all creatures, great and small. And each of them portrayed with that abiding respect and affection for the wonders of the natural world that Jack carries with him always.

I should mention here among all this effusive talk of “play”, that paradoxically, an awful lot of hard work is involved. Nobody puts more sweat and blood and just plain stuff into a Field and Stream spot illustration than Jack Unruh. There are cattails, lily pads, a couple of caricatures, a bass boat and it’s undulating reflection in the water. There is a gray heron, a blue gill, and some frogs, fishing gear, a logo on a hat, a decorative border and maybe a goddamn kitchen sink for good measure. Oh, and there’s a clever concept and a lot of white space. Don’t even ask me about the white space. I stare at these things and try to figure out why they don’t look crowded and I suspect it’s some kind of weird space shifting alchemy he’s employing here, and frankly, it spooks me a little bit. Did I mention the bucket of bait?

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Along with all that I cannot forget to mention the big ticket commissions, the National Geographic spreads, the Rolling Stone and Premiere magazine portraits, the on-location work in exotic locales for annual reports, the myriad of posters, books, and award winning ad campaigns.

Unruh is an artist whose work is an ongoing testament to an unfettered imagination, a life well lived, and an abiding reverence for all the wild things and wild places.

Somehow his attitude and enthusiasm remain mysteriously uncorrupted. Those of us lucky enough to know Jack find this ageless creative vigor almost as inspiring as his drawings.”

Mark D. Ruffner, Advertising and Publishing designer wrote in All Things Ruffnerian, A Design Blog

“Undoubtedly it was his fine illustrations of nature that brought Jack Unruh to the attention of *National Geographic Magazine*.”

One long-standing client reaching back to those early days, **Stan Richards**, of the Dallas- based Richards Group, largest national independently owned agency says

“He always brings an awful lot to the table. He grasps an idea instantly and then executes against it. He’s down-to-earth, practical; he’s got a great eye and a superb hand. He brings a strong philosophical point of view to every piece of work. Jack’s always been an absolute joy to work with.”

Jack Summerford, graphic designer, friend, colleague, and former studio mate, sums up Unruh’s career

“Jack’s been around a while, and he’ll be around long after he isn’t, if you know what I mean. He’ll end up noted as one of the hallmark illustrators of our time. He’s prolific, he loves to draw, and he’s totally dedicated to his work. I’ve seen him take an illustration that’s already been bought, paid for, and published--and rework it, even when it didn’t mean anything—just because he thought he could improve it.”

C. F. Payne, artist-illustrator whose artwork has graced the covers of *Time Magazine*, *Sports Illustrated* and *The New York Times Book Review*

“In the 20 years I’ve known him, I can’t think of an instance when Jack has looked at the glass as half empty. He’s a great storyteller and his work is full of joy. Jack comes from the school of ‘Why not?’ I love the picture he did of Harry Truman in white Bermuda shorts, playing poker in Florida, in which he broke the picture plane with a flock of pelicans. Not many illustrators have the guts to do that. Just brilliant”.

Stuart Frolick, Director, Office of Public Affairs, California Institute of the Arts wrote in *Graphis*

“His imaginary work is informed by an ability to see and interpret the natural world, and is characterized by his thorough command of the structural aspects of composition, and masterful rendering technique.

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Unruh has an extensive file of his own close-up photographic snapshots of anything he may be able to use in a future drawing—weeds, flowers, grasses and the like. He takes a camera with him whenever he goes out hunting or fishing, two of his lifelong passions away from the studio, both of which took hold in his mid-western childhood. Born in Pretty Prairie, Kansas in 1935, Unruh's father was of Russian-German heritage and his mother, of Irish-Scottish. The town of 400 (south of Hutchinson and west of Wichita) still stands and Unruh's 90-year-old mother still lives nearby.

"My dad was in the Air Force; he was always building things—motorcycles, bicycles, race cars, and airplanes—one of which killed him," says Unruh. An Air Force "brat", he moved repeatedly throughout his early years. By age seven he'd been in four different first grade classes in Kansas, North Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida. Two lasting effects he says "are the desire to stay put, and the fact that I've got no friends from my childhood days."

He found his first companions on the radio—The Lone Ranger, Captain Marvel, and Sky King are among the many heroes whose action-adventures captured his fertile imagination. Unruh drew what he heard. "Life could be pretty dull in a small mid-western town, and it was a disaster if you ran out of drawing paper on a Sunday when all the stores were closed." His talent was recognized and encouraged early. Pencil drawings of World War II battle scenes made when he was eight and nine-years-old demonstrate his gifts for visual composition, observation of detail, as well as his need to tell stories through pictures. "I was the one who decorated the classroom blackboards," he says, "and later, my drawing got me out of a lot of stuff in the Air Force and Army."

By age 12 his love of the outdoors had sparked interests in botany and biology, and upon graduation from high school he considered a career as a game warden. Thinking his son wouldn't enjoy the less romantic aspects of that work—like the endless cleaning of cages—Unruh's father suggested that, "Maybe you could make a living drawing pictures."

Unruh enrolled at the University of Kansas to study art. On a Christmas trip to St. Louis in his freshman year he toured the Washington University campus where he was struck by an exhibit of work by recent graduate Bernie Fuchs. Unruh transferred to Wash U, where he majored in magazine illustration. Assistant Dean McKay, who taught basic design, "got me interested in structural design, positive and negative space, and shapes," says Unruh. Illustration instructor, "Bill Fitt taught me how to translate what I saw onto paper." Both were important influences. "I was one of the four or five better artists in my class, when I graduated in 1958," he continues, "but I was sure that I couldn't compete in New York or Los Angeles. I thought Dallas might be the next growth area so with two other guys, I got into a car and headed down there. There was snow and ice on the road when we left St. Louis; when we hit Dallas the daffodils were in bloom, the trees were green - it seemed like paradise."

His first job was a pro bono assignment for the city, a logo and identity system for the "Help Keep Dallas Clean," campaign. A bit later, when he received \$14 for his first commissioned drawing, Unruh remembers putting his feet up on his desk and exclaiming, "If we can just keep this up, we'll make a fortune!" Much of his early work consisted of pencil renderings with watercolor washes for aircraft and electronics product advertisements.

Unruh's work has garnered many awards through the years though he enters only two competitions a year: Communication Arts and the New York Society of Illustrators. In 1998 the Society awarded him its highest honor, the Hamilton King Award for Illustration of The Year.

John Hendrix, Sam Fox School Professor, Washington University in St Louis in the University Magazine

"Membership in the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame has a truly legendary roll call. Norman Rockwell, Al Hirshfeld, Dean Cornwell, Maxfield Parrish, Al Parker, N.C. Wyeth, and Robert Weaver are just a few members of this hallowed fraternity of master pictorial storytellers".

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'I love drawing, it's that simple. I'd enjoy drawing this tree out of my window. It may not be art, but it will be interesting.' His images incarnate this whimsical and unabashed love of drawing. Jack is quick to tell you that his passion for image making runs parallel to his love of the outdoors, and of course, fishing. It takes only a few moments of wandering through his portfolio to notice his affection for drawing nature and its inhabitants. He has taken many exotic location assignments, shadowing reporters through caves in Europe, flying in helicopters over the Valdez oil spill, floating remote rivers in Alaska and even visiting the L.A. Dodgers Fantasy Baseball Camp.

Underneath those spatters of ink and meticulous hand lettered typography are thousands upon thousands of fluttering ink marks. Each one made with a flash of his Gilotte nib (carefully honed with a fishing hook sharpening stone) and the whole herd carrying a calculated visual weight. And then you see how much of the space he isn't using at all! The frame can barely contain the kinetic hum of mark making (like a Durer engraving hit by a Mack truck) and yet, in the midst of this inky explosion is beautiful white space. In the illustration industry, there is no one who puts more work and poetry into a quarter-page spot than Jack Unruh. There is a particular kind of honor reserved for one who will often spend three days on a small spot for Field and Stream. Perhaps that humble work ethic came from his heartland upbringing.

A mark of his integrity in this industry is the astonishing fact that when you bring up his name, people don't talk about his drawings first, but about his genuine spirit."

Richard Bartlett, past International Chairman of The Nature Conservancy's Campaign for a Sustainable Planet and Chairman of The Texas Nature Conservancy wrote in an article, *The Weed File, An Artist's Inspiration*

"To understand the art of Jack Unruh, one of America's leading illustrators is to first understand his weed file, a thick manila folder of photographs and sketches – a lifetime accumulation of noticing. The weed file, the fence post file, the wildflower file, minutia to many are essential visual resources Unruh keeps at hand in his studio. Unruh prefers to work from life whenever possible. His studio is a comfortable habitat reflecting a deep, personal involvement with his world as a sportsman and naturalist. Objects used as life studies – flowers, antlers, leaves, feathers, lures, mounted fish and animals adorn his workplace. An animated visual delight, the studio reveals Unruh's capacity to observe the intricacies of nature."