

20 May 2006

Dear McDavids,

Ralph Carr called me from his sabbatical in Taos to inform me of your interest in my White House landscape painting titled "Sanctuary". It is the picture I painted at the request of President and Mrs. Bush and which now hangs in the private family quarters of the White House. It hangs along with my brother Scott's landscape "Cathedral". Both paintings measure 36 inches by 42 inches unframed and 47 1/2 inches by 54 1/4 inches framed. Both are dry brush watercolors depicting a lovely secluded box canyon site on the Bush Prairie Chapel Ranch near Crawford, Texas.

Scott's painting depicts the sixty foot high waterfall (in the dry season) at the far end of a cul-de-sac. My painting shows an area near the box canyon's entrance. The site is a truly special, even sacred place. When the weather is good, religious services with a guest minister are actually held here when President and Mrs. Bush are in residence. This is why the Bushes have named the place "The Cathedral."

In the lower left corner of my painting "Sanctuary" are two small inca doves which inhabit the ranch. I observed them there when President Bush drove Scott and me around the ranch one hot August afternoon in 2001, just about three weeks before 9/11 changed everything. I particularly liked the fact that the dove is not only a symbol of peace, it is also a Christian symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit. When I was with Mrs. Bush last October, the first thing she said to me was how much our paintings have meant to her and the president during recent trying times.

Both pictures hang in the solarium, a small room on top of the White House just above the rounded, columned south portico. It is a cozy room where the president is allowed to smoke his cigars with intimate friends or watch television and Mrs. Bush has tea parties with her closest friends and answers her personal daily correspondence.

My dear friend, Katherine Armstrong, on whose ranch the Cheney quail hunting accident occurred, was asked by the president to persuade Scott and me to paint the pictures for the two empty spaces in the solarium. "Tell the Gentlings that some really important people go up there" he told her, tongue in cheek.

It was Mrs. Bush, however, who actually jump-started the project. (We thought we were simply too busy at the time to immediately do their paintings.) On JANuary 6, 2002 - at the unveiling of Scott's portrait of Mr. Bush for the Texas state capitol dome, she personally asked Scott and me if we could paint the two landscapes. She invited us to come to Washington to see the space where our paintings were to hang. When I told her that I had already been shown photos of the solarium walls and that we didn't need to come, she pressed my hand gently and said, "The president and I really want you to come."

Well, you don't say "no" to that kind of invitation, and so on January 28th, 2002, I flew to Washington with my friend and assistant Nancy Ferguson. Scott had to meet an important deadline and simply could not go at that time. He hoped Laura would understand that my eyes were all that were necessary to see what was needed.

A shiny black car with driver was waiting for us at the Washington airport. It took us directly to the White House, through the east gate without a security check. We entered the White House via the diplomatic entrance and were whisked upstairs on a tiny elevator where Mrs. Bush greeted us. She gave us a

tour of the family quarters before we went upstairs to the solarium for tea and cookies and to catch up on mutual friends. I took photos and measurements of the solarium and discussed the nature of the paintings we were going to do. When our visit was over, Nancy and I walked to our hotel which was only two blocks from the White House. Our bags were waiting for us. We checked in and rested before preparing for dinner with President and Mrs. Bush promptly at 7 o'clock.

Our dinner that night was certainly one of the most memorable events in my life. We joined the Bushes in the presidential study for a pre-dinner drink. Ken Blassingame, a dear friend of the Bush family and also their decorator joined us for dinner, but the evening was really for Nancy and me. I really had no idea that we would be dining alone with Mrs. Bush and the President of the United States, since this was the evening before his much anticipated second State of the Union speech. I simply could not quite grasp that I was sitting in the presidential study discussing world events with the most powerful man in the world.

The table upon which my drink rested - and upon which were propped the president's running shoe-shod feet (He was dressed in workout clothes while Nancy and I were dressed fit to be buried.) was the very table upon which Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation!

Dinner was wonderful. The conversation pleasant and relaxed. After dessert the president took Nancy and me on a private tour of the Oval Office. After that we ended up on the south lawn playing with the Bush dogs, Spot and Barney in complete darkness. The security men, of course, were nearby but discreetly out of sight so that I could not help but feel that we were all alone out there. It still seems like a strange dream, just sitting on the cool grass on a beautiful evening with two misbehaving dogs and the president of the United States.

Barney wandered off and disappeared. The president called out into the darkness, "Barney? Where is that damned dog?" He then whistled exactly like my father used to whistle to call us in on summer nights from playing "kick the can." I remember how his whistle loudly echoed off the distant buildings. Out of the darkness came an agent's voice, breaking my illusion of solitude. "Barney's at the third holly tree from your right, Mr. President."

I have a lot more stories about that special trip and the interesting relationship that Scott and I have had with the Bushes over the years. I would love to share them with you. It seems odd to me now, but at that time I did not realize that our private dinner at the White House was not just to inspire us to begin on the solarium landscapes. It was payback to Scott and me for Scott's wonderful portrait of Mr. Bush now hanging at the Texas State Capitol Dome. It is beyond a doubt the best governor's portrait in the dome.

Needless to say, I returned home inspired and immediately went to work. Scott did too. It was almost a race to see who would finish first. We finished our paintings - the largest landscapes we had ever done - in about three weeks. We worked night and day from photographs I had taken on our Crawford ranch visit on that hot summer day in August. I still don't know how we did it, but we managed to complete the paintings, get them framed and shipped off to the White House on schedule.

Close mutual friends have called us on occasion to tell us how pleased the Bushes are with the paintings and that they really made the solarium a special place of peace and a refuge in troubled times when a vision of their beloved ranch could be enjoyed through our pictures. I have two letters from the Bushes thanking us for the loan. Should you purchase "Sanctuary," I will give you copies of our correspondence with the White House.

You know, of course, that Charlie and Kit have bought Scott's painting "Cathedral." They and their families have been Gentling friends and patrons for the better part of five decades. By a rather odd set of circumstances Scott and I ended up selling that painting for much less than what we thought it was worth. Because of that I feel that I can not in good conscience sell you "Sanctuary" for much more than what we charged the Moncriefs. So the price of "Sanctuary" will be \$38,500 plus sales tax.

Since the painting will have to remain at the White House until President Bush's term expires, it takes a special patron who will appreciate the honor and historical significance of having loaned art to the President of the United States, especially since that art will have been at the White House for almost two complete presidential terms. This painting will also occupy a prominent place in our forthcoming book from The University of Texas Press titled "From Time to Time."

If you buy the picture, I will give you a special giclee print of your painting that is only slightly smaller than the actual size of the original. The print is beautiful and so accurate that you will literally be able to enjoy your picture until the original painting is returned.

The photograph that I am enclosing with this letter will give you some idea of the painting, but I would love for you both to come and visit our studio to see the large print for yourselves, framed and hanging on our gallery wall. It is a very special painting for me personally. If you come, you will also be able to see Scott's personal Crawford Ranch portrait of President Bush which the president loves. President Bush has asked Scott to paint the official White House portraits of both him and Mrs. Bush.

I don't know if you have heard about our studio. It is a very special and magical place that I would be delighted to show you. Since Ralph Carr will be out of town for the next

several days and perhaps weeks, please feel free to call me at my home, 817 - 738 4427, and we can set up a time for you to visit.

By the way, I read the excellent article on you both in the Star Telegram and I almost feel like I know you already. And, of course, Ralph is a fan of yours. Also, congratulations on your new association with the Bass Performance Hall. One of Scott's favorite double portraits, a painting of Perry and Nancy Lee Bass, hangs there in the Founders' Room. We did all the painting designs for the Great Dome and the rest of the theater and I designed the wings for Marton Varo's huge angels on the theater's front facade.

Scott is currently working on a double portrait of Ben and Kay Fortson to hang in the Kimbell Art Museum, a great honor for a living artist. And I should add that he recently finished a very special portrait of the great American artist Andrew Wyeth who posed for us on his island off the coast of Maine. Scott is, as far as I know, the only non-family member ever allowed to paint Andrew Wyeth.

I do hope that we can get together. Until then I remain

. . .

Sincerely yours,