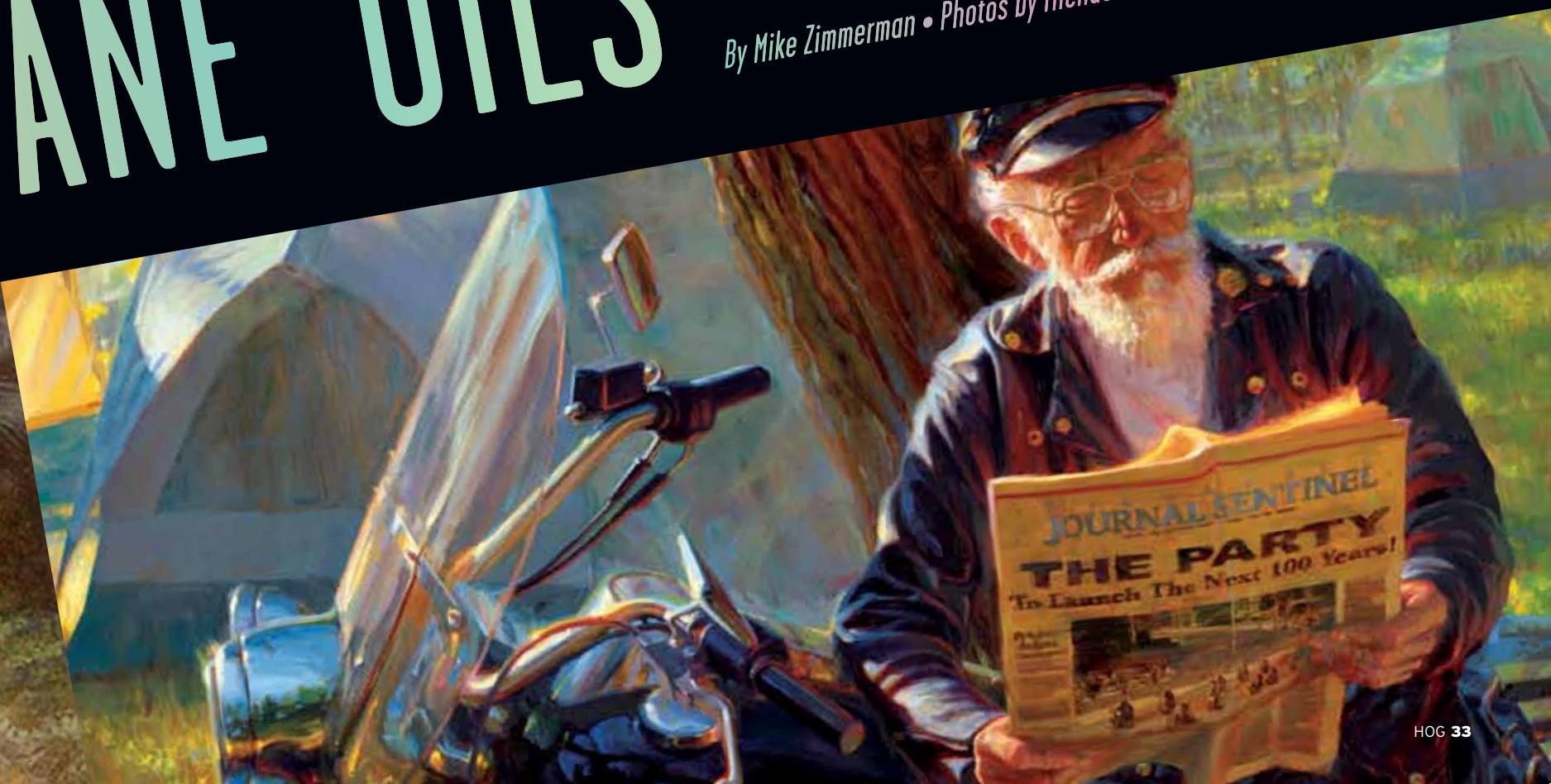
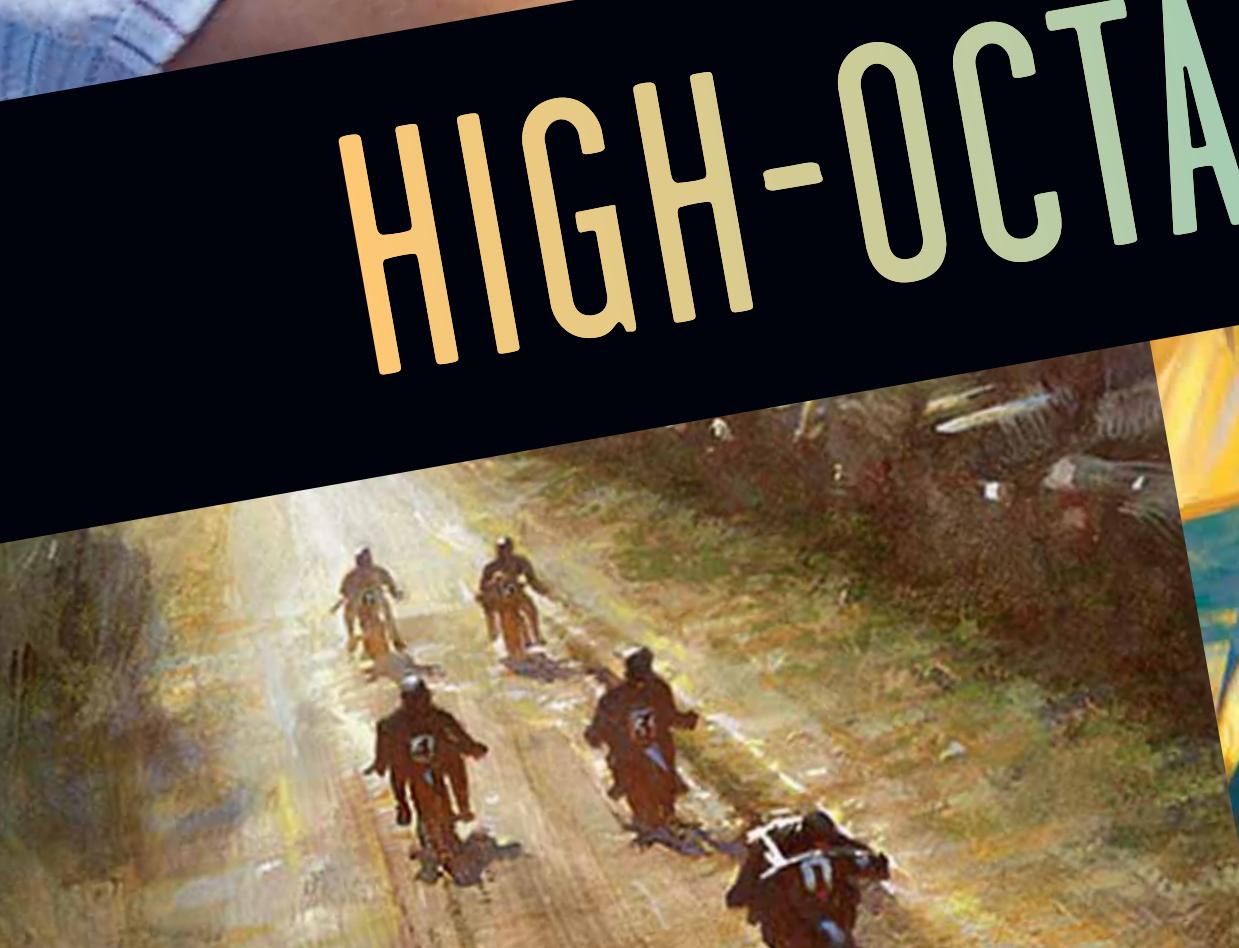




HIGH-OCTANE OILS

ARTIST **DAVID UHL** PAINTS A COMPELLING PICTURE OF HARLEY-DAVIDSON HISTORY
By Mike Zimmerman • Photos by Michael Lichter



IT WAS THE PEN

that launched a legendary career – a simple “19-cent Bic.” Meant for taking notes in class, in the hands of a young and bored David Uhl it became instead a means of escape. Class notes became doodles; the doodles evolved into a unique style. And eventually, that cheap little pen became a tool that helped David carve out a lucrative niche in the highly competitive world of commercial art.

“I went to an all-guys high school,” he recalls. “And senior year I began drawing girls – and selling the pictures to other boys. That’s when I started thinking I could really become an artist.”

After graduating in 1979, without any formal training, David was awarded the prestigious John Jellico Scholarship to the Art Institute of Colorado. It was a tremendous opportunity for a small-town Michigan boy, but a year after enrolling he found himself bored in the classroom again.

“The only classes I wanted to go to were life drawing and illustration. So I ended up quitting and then just started working in the real world.”

That’s when David’s pen became truly mighty. The ballpoint style he had developed was unique – and quickly in demand. He started Uhl Illustration in 1980 and soon found himself with a thriving business. In 1989 he hired another talented illustrator, Danial James, and in 1997 they formed a partnership to create Uhl Studios. Over the years they’ve produced many hundreds of distinctive works for major companies such as Black & Decker, Xerox, Brookstone, FedEx, IBM, Coca-Cola, and, of course, Harley-Davidson.

If you’ve seen more than a few Harley-Davidson T-shirts in the past couple decades, there’s a good chance you’re already familiar with their work. Some of H-D’s most iconic images have come from their Golden, Colorado studio.

The relationship with the Motor Company began in 1992, when a colored pencil and airbrush illustration helped David land a licensing agreement with one of H-D’s major T-shirt vendors. Since then, the pair has created literally hundreds of designs for H-D – with Danial, a wizard with an airbrush and even better on the computer, handling the bulk of those duties in recent years.

It wasn’t until 1998 that David turned most of his attention to oils. After taking some time to sit at the feet of Quang Ho, a renowned Denver artist, he dove in head first – and sold one of his first paintings to Harley-Davidson.

“There was nobody at the time doing classical paintings of old black-and-white photography – really cool vintage stuff,” he explains. “So I called up Vinnie, my local H-D dealer here – we’re good friends – and asked if he had any old pictures or anything of old Harley imagery. He said yeah, sure – he saves everything! So we went looking through all of his shoeboxes and discovered one photo in particular that I really liked. There was

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David Uhl on the “Black Axe,” his custom 1940 Knucklehead motorcycle, outside Uhl Studios in Golden, Colorado.



An example of Uhl’s recent ballpoint pen work. A winged skull, he says, was once considered a symbol of good luck. Today, it more often “represents the spirit of freedom found from breaking with societal rhetoric and embracing the howling winds down the open road.”

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even someone’s handwriting on the back – this couple had taken it somewhere in the Midwest in the early 1940s. So I fell in love and painted it.”

The image became a piece he called “Change in the Weather,” which he says is still one of his favorites. He took it to Milwaukee, showed it to the Harley-Davidson licensing people, and they loved it. After going through a couple channels to become an officially licensed Harley-Davidson artist, he was off and running on a new phase of his career.

A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

“I’ve always been fascinated with the nature of reality,” David says. “What the hell is this place? My perception tends to take me quite deep. So I’ve spent my life studying things like quantum physics, mechanics of perspective, and the way light works. What’s *really* going on here? The idea seems to constantly come up that if you really want to find out, try drawing something.”

The way David sees things, the ability to turn what you see into an image on paper or canvas doesn’t develop through your hands. It has much more to do with how your brain processes visual information.

“It’s really quite bizarre ... if you ask someone to draw something, and it’s sitting in front of them – most people just can’t see it for what it really is. They’re caught between the raw perception and what their mind’s version is telling them, to speed the process along. But if you turn that thing upside down they can magically draw it more accurately. They will then not recognize the ‘thing’ so much as the defining characteristics of the shape they’re looking at. So I spend much of my time just trying to not accept the canned version my brain is handing me for efficiency’s sake, and really see things with all their beauty and nuance.”

In fact, David himself will sometimes turn a painting upside down while he’s working on it in order to give himself a fresh perspective and get past any preconceived notions of how to get an image from his mind to his medium. Mechanical things, like motorcycles, are complicated but pretty straightforward, he says. “People are more challenging, kind of like a moving target ... but I’m figuring that out, too.”

Though art and design is in his nature (search for “Uhl chair” on the Internet, and you’ll find the highly collectible work of his father and grandfather), his love of motorcycles and riding

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AS A HARLEY-DAVIDSON® LICENSED ARTIST, HE HAS ACCESS TO PHOTOS FROM THE MOTOR COMPANY ARCHIVES, WHICH PROVIDES A VIRTUALLY LIMITLESS SOURCE OF MATERIAL.

was nurtured. It wasn't something he grew up with. But his art drew him to mechanical things, and he discovered riding as a result. Today he owns a 2005 Harley® Softail® motorcycle and a 1940 Knucklehead model, known as the "Black Axe," rebuilt by his friend Dennis Goodson, a local bike builder.

"I've always loved the bobbers," David explains. "So I said, 'Let's do a bobber, Dennis.' He hunted down kind of a basket case for me, then we just went through all the details. I worked with him on the drawings, and he put the whole bike together by hand."

One thing he loves about the bike is how convenient it is to have as a model. It's depicted in quite a few of his works, often with his wife, Elizabeth, modeling as its rider.

Like most great painters who depict "real life," David works from a visual source when he paints, usually a photograph. As a

Harley-Davidson® licensed artist, he has access to photos from the Motor Company Archives, which provides a virtually limitless source of material. Sometimes he'll use his computer to make a composite image – a background from one photo, a motorcycle and rider from another. But more often than not he'll work from an existing photo.

One of his favorite sources is the collection of photos done by L.C. Rosenkrans, appointed the first official Harley-Davidson staff photographer in 1911. These photos, taken mostly on glass plates, only became available in 1999, when the Motor Company reacquired them from the Milwaukee County Historical Society. Aside from their significant historical nature, what distinguishes these works is the artistry that went into them.

"[Rosenkrans] composed the pieces like paintings," David says. "They looked like a painting. There was always a focal point, and there was often a nice big muted area for the type that they would drop in. So I really liked a lot of these."

Other significant collections David has produced include official works for the Harley-Davidson 100th Anniversary, Sturgis Commemorative works, the "Graceland Project" (a collection of exclusively cross-licensed Elvis Presley works he created in conjunction with H-D and sculptor Jeff Decker), and a pair of covers for the official Indianapolis 500 race program, including the 100th Anniversary edition in 2011.

In addition to cars and motorcycles, favorite subjects include airplanes, the military, and, of course, beautiful women. "I've got a whole series of pinups that's a tribute to [legendary pinup artist] Gil Elvgren," he says.

Sometimes, several of those themes will convene in one painting, as in "Ruth." This recent work commemorates the service of the Air Force WASPs (Women's Airforce Service Pilots), a team of women pilots who flew airplanes from base to base during World War II. It depicts an "artistic interpretation" of Ruth Helm, a real-life surviving WASP – "the prettiest and most accomplished one I could find," David says. Working from vintage photos, David hired a model that resembled the young Ruth to pose for the scene, which shows her astride a 1940 Knucklehead (the Black Axe, in fact) in front of a plane at "Avenger Field" in Sweetwater, Texas.

ROAD WORK

To help keep the business side of things going strong, David travels the country setting up shop at motorcycle rallies and other events. In addition to generating sales, these events provide the opportunity to meet interesting people, keep in touch with the ever-changing culture, and find new sources of inspiration for his work.

After nearly 15 years as a commercial oil painter, David has developed a good sense of what will sell – though that doesn't always mesh perfectly with what he'd like to do. So it sometimes becomes a bit of a balancing act between making a living and stretching himself as an artist.

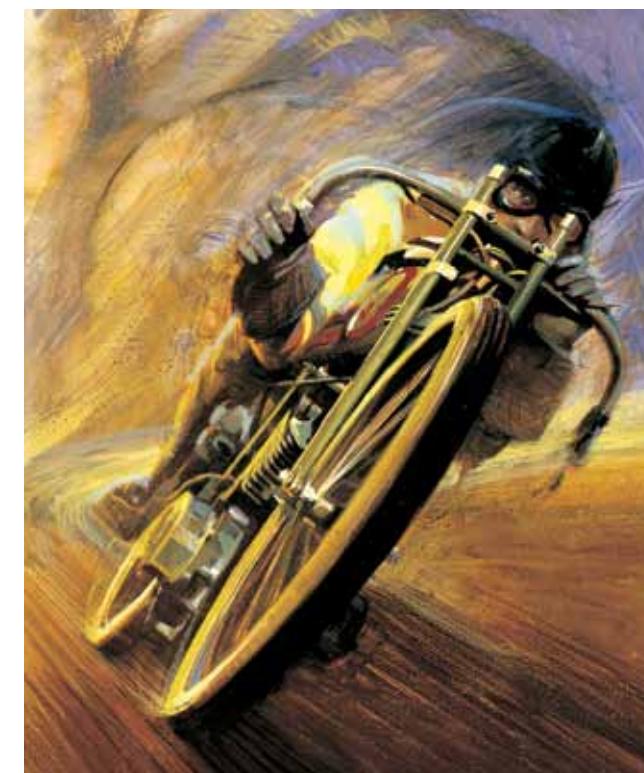
"I have another gallery downtown that has beautiful 'high art,' as Quang would call it, like museum-quality art," he says. "There's generally no story to it, and the subject matter is secondary; so it's just art for art's sake. It's what a painter would create if there were no drive to monetize. I'm going to start doing more of that now that I'm older, but to make a living in the motorcycle art world the subject still reigns king."

Fortunately, there seems to be no shortage of people who don't just like but love his Harley-Davidson artwork. It has earned him great renown, both in the U.S. and around the world. He knows it's a great gig and doesn't plan to stop doing it any time soon. At the same time, he and Danial are also moving forward with a new project – while also coming "full circle" in a very real sense.

"Now I'm doing ballpoint pen drawings again, and they're going on shirts," he says with a note of excitement in his voice. "It's like the old days, what I used to do. And it's really fun because I can do it anywhere there's light. I can just get on an airplane and draw, or sit and watch TV with my kids [Bella, 13, and Sterling, 8] and draw. And I've found I really miss that foundational aspect of it."

What he decidedly does *not* miss are the boring lectures that once accompanied his doodling. And, of course, the cost of his tools has gone up considerably – more than tripling since 1979 ... to a staggering 59 cents. **HOG**

See more of David Uhl's work at www.uhlstudios.com.



Above left: "Ruth." Oil on canvas. Part of Uhl's Women of Harley-Davidson collection. Above right: "Board Blaster." Opaque watercolor. Unpublished. Bottom right: Uhl at "home" in his studio, where he says he'll often lose track of time and work for hours on end. "That's the part I love. That's like my favorite time, ever."