



STORY

Justin Franz

THE ART OF CURATING



Clockwise from upper left,
photographs by Justin Franz

The Hockaday Museum of
Art in Kalispell, Montana, on
October 23, 2019

Pat Roath and Rob Akey hang
a painting by David Tutwiler on
September 24, 2019

Nearly 400 people attended
the opening reception on
September 26, 2019

Rob Akey paints the entry wall
for *Hear the Whistle Blow! Art
of the Railway* on September
24, 2019



AN ART EXHIBIT

Railroad paintings at Montana's Hockaday Museum of Art



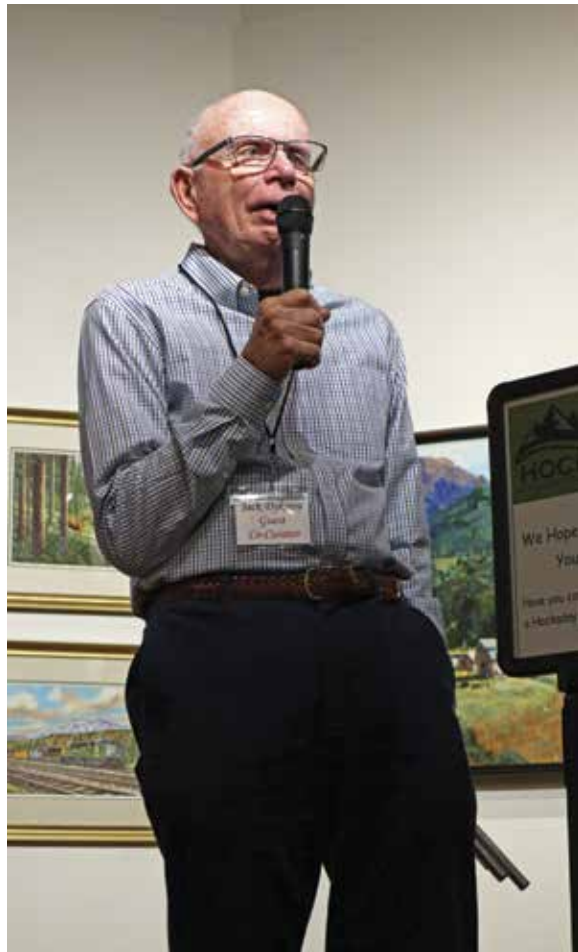
COUNTLESS PHONE CALLS AND emails, hundreds of conversations, and two years of hard work have come down to this moment for Jack Dykstra and Rob Akey.

On a crisp September afternoon, Dykstra and Akey are standing in the middle of the Hockaday Museum of Art. Museum employees have just taken down an art show about Glacier National Park and now four dozen railroad paintings are scattered on the edges of the gallery along with numerous railroad artifacts. Dykstra, Akey, and the Hockaday staff have just two days to hang the show and complete the countless other tasks that need to be done before the opening reception.

Dykstra and Akey could not feel more different.

“I’m going to be nervous until it opens,” Akey says as he climbs down a ladder from where he was painting a title wall.

“I’m relieved!” Dykstra counters, walking through the galleries. “The art is all here!”



Right: Co-curator Jack Dykstra welcomes attendees to the opening reception. Photograph by Justin Franz

Opposite, above:
Jack Dykstra
Morning Daylight, 2019,
watercolor, 13x13 inches

Opposite, below:
Jessica Glenn
Northern Pacific Locomotive 1818,
2019, watercolor on paper,
7¾x8¼ inches
Collection of Peter J.C. Mosse

Bringing railroad art to the Hockaday

In the fall of 2019, the Hockaday Museum of Art—a small art museum in Kalispell, Montana, not far from Glacier National Park—hosted a one-of-a-kind art show titled *Hear the Whistle Blow! Art of the Railway*. The show featured fifty-three historic and contemporary works from thirty-one different artists, including twenty who produced pieces exclusively for the show. The lineup included well-known contemporary railroad artists like Gil Bennett and J. Craig Thorpe (both past presenters at the CRP&A’s *Conversations* conferences) and historic painters like Ted Rose and Howard Fogg.

While the Hockaday had never hosted a railroad-themed art show before, the railroad has an indirect role in its primary mission to preserve the artistic legacy of Glacier National Park, a place heavily influenced by the nearby Great Northern Railway.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many railroads hired artists to help promote the scenic wonders along their routes and the Great Northern was no exception. Among the artists the railroad engaged in the 1910s and 1920s were Australian-born landscape painter John Fery and German-born portraitist Winold Reiss. The latter produced hundreds of paintings of the Blackfeet who lived on the east side of Glacier.

The Hockaday, founded in 1969 by a local group of artists, has at least one original Fery piece in its permanent collection and a number of Reiss prints. It also has more than a dozen murals the Great Northern commissioned in the 1910s to decorate its lodge in East Glacier Park. The murals were unceremoniously trashed during a remodel in the 1950s but a few years ago turned up in a garage in Billings. The paintings were donated to the Hockaday, which has been slowly restoring and displaying them.

The museum has four galleries and brings in new shows ten to twelve times a year. “It’s an ambitious schedule for a museum of our size,” says curator Pat Roath, adding that it can take two to five years to put a show together.

Roath says that besides the museum’s mission of preserving Glacier-related art, it is also driven to meet the needs and desires of its members, including people like Dykstra and Akey.

Dykstra, seventy-nine, is a life-long railroad enthusiast who grew up in southern California and had a career in commercial art before retiring to Whitefish, where he lives with his wife and continues to paint.

Dykstra works in watercolor and primarily produces landscape and floral scenes but has also completed many railroad scenes over the years. He particularly enjoys painting *en plein air*, and it's not unusual for him to venture trackside with his easel and brushes.

Akey, sixty-two, grew up in Whitefish and worked in commercial art and design before becoming a painter full-time in 2005. Akey says he's not a railroad enthusiast but "more of an admirer," although trains often appear in his landscape work (see p. 28-29).

Dykstra brought the idea of a railroad-themed art show to Akey, who is currently on the Hockaday's board, two years ago. The board liked the idea and asked Dykstra to put together a formal proposal. After some discussion, the board approved the idea with Dykstra and Akey as co-curators.

While Dykstra and Akey had both previously put together their own shows and helped organize a few art auctions, they had never curated a show on the scale of *Hear the Whistle Blow!* Their first task was to figure out the story they wanted to tell. While they could have focused exclusively on Montana railroads or Montana artists, they wanted the show to tell a larger story about how railroads have both inspired and used artists—not just in Montana or the Pacific Northwest, but around the world.

"The imagery had to be varied in its style and geographic spread," Akey says. "The spirit of this show is to demonstrate a broad concept of how the railroad has inspired so many artists over the decades."

Dykstra and Akey knew they wanted to start the show with a print by the nineteenth century British painter J.M.W. Turner titled *Rain, Steam and Speed* that depicts a Great Western Railway train in the 1840s. The painting is believed to be one of the earliest depictions of a locomotive in art. "We're using that as a jumping off point to show that from the very onset of the industrial revolution, the railroad has inspired artists," Akey says.

Dykstra and Akey are both members of the Montana Painters Alliance, and through that organization they knew a number of local painters they wanted to have in the show. However, they also wanted to secure work from well-known railroad artists outside of Montana. Soon after they began putting the show together, Dykstra was preparing for a trip to California with his wife when he decided to send an email to Gil Bennett in Utah. Although Dykstra didn't know Bennett personally, he had been an admirer of his work and asked if he could stop by his studio for a visit.



The two immediately hit it off. “Gil and I talked the same language; we both love railroads,” Dykstra says.

During the visit, Dykstra asked Bennett if he was interested in participating in the show. Bennett agreed and also connected Dykstra with James Porterfield, acting executive director of the American Society of Railway Artists, a group formed in 2013. Dykstra says Bennett and Porterfield helped connect him with other potential artists for the show.

Bennett painted two pieces for the exhibit: one of a Northern Pacific 4-8-4 leading a passenger train up Montana’s Bozeman Pass and another closer to Kalispell’s roots that depicts a Great Northern freight train climbing Marias Pass. The Great Northern made an appearance in multiple paintings in a nod to the hometown railroad.

J. Craig Thorpe offered three different Amtrak paintings. One of the paintings was a brand-new piece produced just for the show depicting the *Empire Builder* along a foggy Mississippi River titled *Will the Fog Ever Lift?* in a reference to passenger rail’s murky future in the United States.

The show also featured the work of a number of non-railroad artists including Diana Brady and Jessica Glenn, both from Montana. Brady lives in central Montana and taught art before becoming a full-time watercolor painter. Her work usually focuses on the landscapes east of the Continental Divide and for the show in Kalispell she painted *Big Iron Under the Big Sky*, inspired by some of the long railroad trestles found in that part of the state.

One of the most unique pieces in the show was produced by Glenn. While thinking about what she would paint for the show, she found some old railroad paperwork from the late 1800s and early 1900s. Glenn used a Northern Pacific expense bill as the canvas for her watercolor painting of a 2-8-2 locomotive, inspired by a photograph taken by noted Montana railroad photographer Ron Nixon. Peter Mosse, a member of the CRP&A’s board of directors, quickly purchased Glenn’s painting during the show’s opening reception.

Dykstra and Akey also wanted to feature historic works. Dykstra provided an original Ted Rose from his own collection, and the co-curators obtained loans of several notable historic paintings. Those included a Howard Fogg painting of a Northern Pacific “Challenger” steam locomotive rolling along the Clark Fork River; a signed print of a Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad painting by Otto Kuhler, one of the

best-known industrial designers in American railroading during the first half of the twentieth century; and a large piece called *Locomotive* by abstract expressionist painter Robert Goodnough.

Dykstra says he and Akey considered dozens of pieces but ultimately his driving goal was to assemble a show that wasn’t just good railroad art but good art in general. “My number one criteria for including a piece was asking myself, ‘If you put your thumb over the train, is this still a good painting?’” Dykstra says.

The public responds

In mid-September, artwork from across the country began to arrive at the Hockaday. The staff decided to split the show into two different galleries, one full of contemporary art pieces that were for sale and another full of historic pieces on loan. Along with the historic pieces of art, the museum set up a display of artifacts from the Stumptown Historical Society in Whitefish to help tell the story of railroading in northwestern Montana. Included in the gallery were pieces of railroad china, a dining car chime, date nails, switch keys, and a wooden train order hoop. Also on display were posters and wall calendars showing how railroads like the Northern Pacific and Great Northern used art to promote the scenery along their routes. Informational panels throughout the gallery helped put the exhibit into context and included a brief overview of Montana railroad history. Akey says he and Dykstra worked hard to ensure the panels were informative yet interesting to a general audience. “It’s hard to resist the urge to over-educate,” he says. “It’s not a railroad history show though; it’s an art show.”

On September 26, more than 400 people attended the opening reception for the show. The crowd pleasantly surprised Dykstra and Akey, who noted that it wasn’t just railroad enthusiasts who came to the event but many who only had a small connection to the industry or none at all. Follow up events, including a gallery talk by Thorpe and a curator discussion, were also well attended. “The acceptance of this show just blew me away,” Dykstra says.

Thorpe says he was also surprised at the turnout. He says that is good news for people who are interested in the creation, preservation, and presentation of railroad imagery. “That so many people came out to see a show like this tells me that people are interested in railroads,” he says. “When something like this is offered, the general public responds.” •

J. Craig Thorpe
Will the Fog Ever Lift?, 2019,
oil on canvas, 16x20 inches

Diana Brady
Big Iron Under the Big Sky,
2019, watercolor, 15x22 inches





Christian Oldham: A new outlet on the canvas

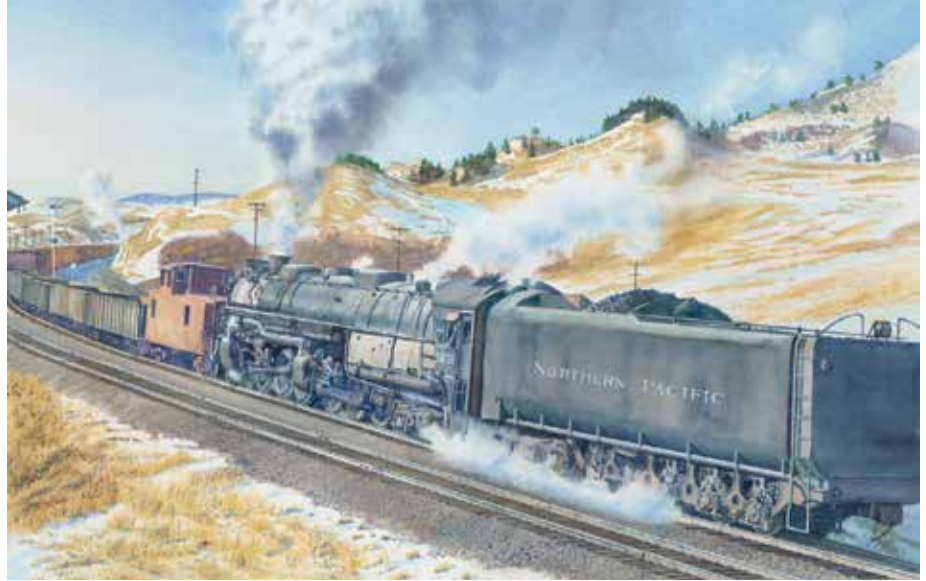
Christian Oldham needed to find a new creative outlet. In 2006, the then-forty-six-year-old Seattle attorney was in a creative rut. The demands of his career and family meant he didn't have time to pursue photography like he had in his youth and his model railroad—a freelance Appalachian coal hauler loosely based on the Lehigh Valley Railroad—just wasn't cutting it anymore.

So Oldham picked up a brush and started painting. He had tapped a natural talent, and within three years he quit his job as an attorney to focus on painting full-time. Since then, his work has appeared in numerous publications and exhibitions, most recently at the Hockaday Museum of Art in Kalispell, Montana. He is also a founding member of the American Society of Railway Artists.

While Oldham picked up a brush just a little more than a decade ago, his interest in railroads dates back to his childhood. Oldham was born in Texas but moved to Denver at a young age. As a child, he loved to build models—of airplanes. It wasn't until his tenth birthday that railroads sparked his interest, thanks to the gift of a model train set from his parents. That interest was cemented that same year when his father took a job in California with the Union Pacific Railroad's coal mining subsidiary. In the early 1970s, Rocky Mountain Energy's offices were located next to Union Pacific's yard in Los Angeles. Oldham says the highlight of any visit to his dad's office was a stop at the nearby engine facility.

A few years later, the family was back in Colorado. Oldham, now armed with a driver's license, began exploring the region's railroads, most notably the UP in Wyoming and the Joint Line south of Denver, then home to the Burlington Northern, Santa Fe, and Rio Grande. Oldham also skied as a teen and fondly remembers riding the Rio Grande's weekend *Ski Train* to Winter Park. Oldham later attended Tufts University near Boston and law school at the University of Michigan, graduating in 1984. His railfanning took a backseat to studying during those years, but he still occasionally went out to photograph the Boston & Maine and the Detroit, Toledo and Ironton. After graduation, he took a job at a law firm in Seattle.

After more than twenty years of practicing law, Oldham was looking for a change and painting offered it. Oldham says painting did not come out of the blue—as a kid he loved to draw and his parents



loved to collect art. When he decided to start painting, railroads seemed like a natural subject.

Living in a number of places over the years, Oldham has developed a wide range of interests related to railroading, which are reflected in his paintings. However, steam and early diesels show up the most in his work. Oldham said he likes to look through old photographs for inspiration, and once he settles on a particular idea, he begins to research it extensively.

“Sometimes I get a bug in my brain to paint something, like ‘Oh I should do a Union Pacific or Santa Fe painting,’ and once that happens I just start looking through books and magazines until something captures my attention,” he says.

He also references old timetables and Google Earth to make sure he uses the correct sun angle on a specific train. Oldham says he doesn't go out of his way to paint “every nut and bolt,” but that he wants to make sure his works are historically accurate. “I want to be faithful to the locations I paint,” he says.

For *Hear the Whistle Blow*, Oldham painted two Northern Pacific scenes: one of the *North Coast Limited* with F-unit diesels and another with a “Challenger” steam locomotive shoving a heavy freight train. Knowing the exhibit would take place in the heart of Great Northern country, Oldham wanted to make sure Montana's other Hill Line was represented.

For more information about Oldham's work, visit: www.chrisoldhamart.com

—Justin Franz

Christian Oldham
Helper Job at Muir, 2019,
watercolor, 16x26 inches

Opposite: Gil Bennett
Top of the Pass, 2019,
watercolor, 16x20 inches

Michael S. Turrini has
sponsored page 26

Rob Akey: The accidental railroad painter

Rob Akey says he is not a railfan, but he probably knows more about the front end of a Great Northern Railway S-2 4-8-4 locomotive than even the most die-hard steam enthusiast.

On a late summer morning, Akey sits in a comfortable studio behind his home in Whitefish, Montana, his face just inches away from the oil painting that has been the focus of most of his time recently. On a computer beside the oil-covered canvas, he has enlarged a detailed picture of an S-2's cross-compound air pumps to fill the screen.

The Great Northern ordered fourteen of the Baldwin Locomotive Works 4-8-4s in 1930 for use on its most prestigious passenger trains: the *Empire Builder* and the *Oriental Limited*. While the side of the S-2s were as sleek as any high-flying passenger locomotive, the front-end was a mess of air pumps. "A thoroughbred horse with the face of a bulldog," former *Trains* magazine editor and CRP&A board member Kevin P. Keefe once wrote of the S-2.

In Akey's mind, the S-2 that he has painted on the canvas in front of him was taken off one of those fast passenger trains for some light repairs in the Whitefish roundhouse and is about to lead a troop train over the mountains on a cool September morning. Mist obscures the distant peaks and steam hangs in the air; anyone who has spent a cool fall morning down at the yard knows the feeling.

"It was important to me to get all the nuts and bolts right—because I know someone will point it out if something is wrong—but it's also important to get that feel right; a chilly, early fall morning in Whitefish," Akey says. "That's as important to me as getting the locomotive right."

Akey was born and raised in Whitefish—a rare claim these days in a growing resort town not far from Glacier National Park—and has spent his entire career in art in one way or another. Akey has been drawing all his life, but not until college did he consider turning art into a career. While at Montana State University in Bozeman, one of Akey's instructors urged him to put together a portfolio and apply to art school. He enrolled at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, in part because the *Empire Builder* offered a direct trip to and from his hometown.

The railroad also offered employment during the summer breaks when he was home from school, and for three years, Akey worked on a Burlington Northern steel gang helping lay rail up and over Marias Pass.

Akey attested to the backbreaking nature of the work, but it paid well. "You smelled like creosote for three or four months," Akey says. "It was a lot of hard work but it did a good job of making sure I stayed in college."

Akey graduated with a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1982 and got a job with Tonka, where he designed packaging and eventually became director of creative services. He stayed at the company for a decade before taking another job in Colorado for a few years, and then moving with his wife back to Whitefish in 1993. There, he opened a custom embroidery shop. In 2005, he sold the business and took up painting full-time.

Akey predominantly paints landscapes, particularly those he encounters around northwestern Montana and in Glacier National Park. "I have a philosophy," he says. "Paint what you know and paint what you love."

Sometimes a train crosses into that landscape, and Akey estimates he probably does eight to ten railroad paintings annually out of the eighty or so he produces.

"You can't go out and observe the landscape around Whitefish or northwestern Montana or up through Marias Pass without observing a train rolling through it once in a while," he says.

Akey loves focusing on the details of modern diesel locomotives, and he has become particularly adept at painting BNSF Railway's modern General Electric locomotives, which are staples at the Whitefish roundhouse these days.

For the Hockaday show, Akey wanted to do something different and paint a historic subject. From the beginning he knew he wanted to do something set in his hometown, and the S-2 locomotives that frequented it during the steam era were the perfect subject. With the unique air pump setup on the front-end and the green boiler, the S-2s were uniquely Great Northern.

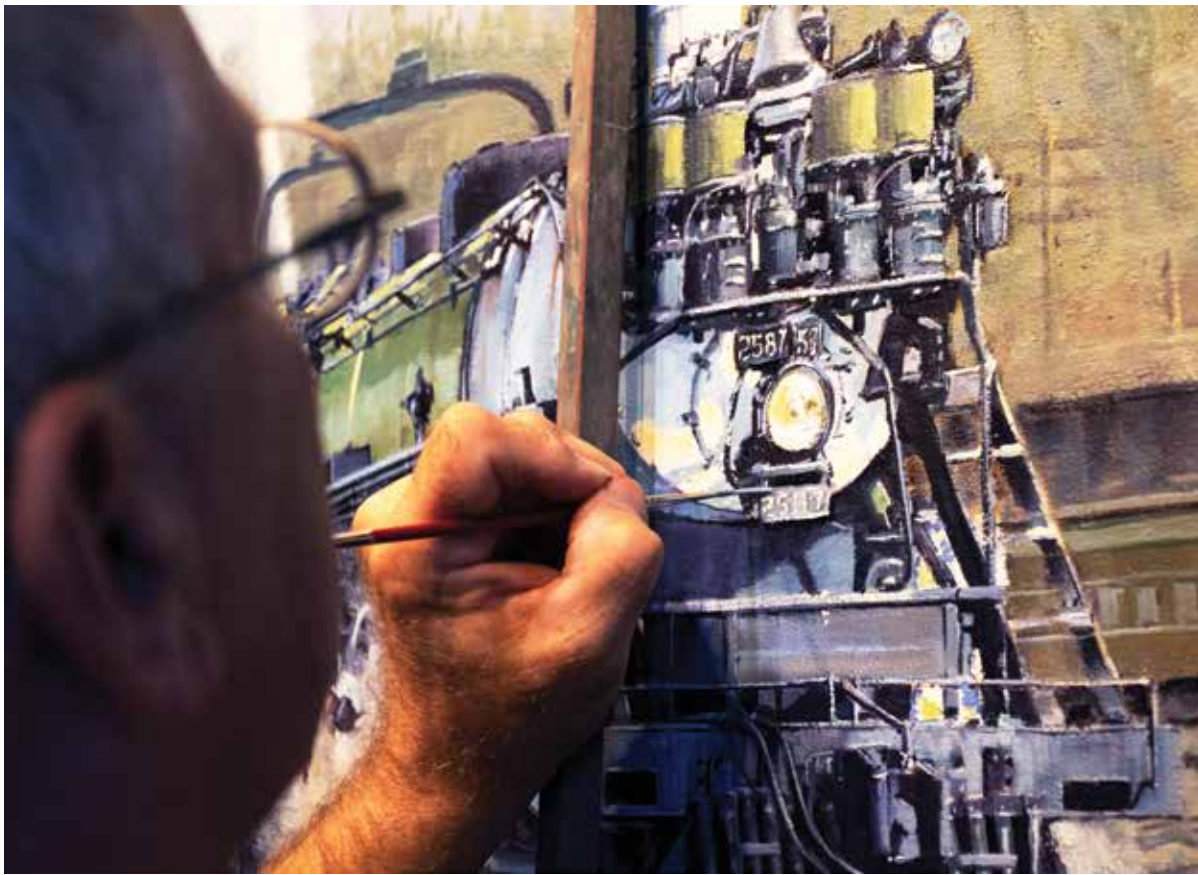
He says the research process is always one of his favorite parts of his painting, and he spent weeks studying the locomotives, making sure he painted every nut and bolt accurately. Despite that attention to detail, Akey does not consider himself a railroad enthusiast.

"I'm more of an admirer," he says. "That's as close as I get. I'll stop and watch a train go by because I love the sound and the feeling, but I'll never be the guy who knows everything about a certain type of locomotive."

Unless, of course, it's a Great Northern S-2.

See more of Akey's work at: www.robakey.com

—Justin Franz



Rob Akey puts the finishing touches on his painting, *Fall of '44*, in his studio at his home in Whitefish, Montana, on August 28, 2019. Photographs by Justin Franz

