

**“Wild Escape”, 1936. Pruett Carter, American 1891-1955  
Spotlight Paperby Carol Adney**



**Pruett Carter Background:** Born: Lexington, MO. 1891, Died: 1955 in San Fernando Valley, California. Pruett Alexander Carter is known for his empathetic women’s magazine illustrations and as an educator. Carter was a realistic artist with painterly impressionistic effects and atmospheric foreground and backgrounds.

**Education/Training Experience:** Pruett Carter was born in Missouri, however at the age of 5 his family moved to a Native American Reservation in Wyoming where his father ran the trading post and his mother taught school. Naturally, this experience influenced his Western scenes. When he was old enough for high school, his family moved to Los Angeles so he could attend high school. He became interested in art, which led to his attendance at the Los Angeles Art School.

After graduation, he moved to New York for a job drawing decorative borders at William Randolph Hearst’s *Journal American*. Over time he worked his way up to art director, and courtroom artist. As the art director of *Good Housekeeping* and the *Atlanta Journal*, he planned magazine covers which considered the entire content of the cover: graphics, borders, illustration, text, and colors. Frequently competing magazines were displayed side by side on newsstands. The objective of the illustration was to grab the attention of the viewer so that a magazine would stand out from other competing publications. His background in publishing and as an art director served him well throughout his career allowing him to understand and anticipate the constraints and demands placed on art directors, printers, and magazine publishers.

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Some of the magazines he illustrated for were *Woman's Home Companion*, *Life*, *McCall's* and *Ladies Home Journal*.

**Influences:** In Los Angeles, Carter met and was encouraged by cartoonist James Swinnerton. (The Palm Springs Art Museum has a Swinnerton Western painting currently on exhibit in the Nicole and Kenneth DeGiorgio Gallery.) Stylistically, his major influence was from Walter Biggs with whom he studied. Biggs was an illustrator whose work was very painterly, usually depicting interior scenes. During the earlier part of Carter's career the painterly style of the two artists was very similar.

In New York, Carter studied with the well-known and revered artist Robert Henri. Carter was a colleague of Arshvile Gorky, N.C. Wyeth and Harvey Dunn at Grand Central School of Art.

His big break came in 1918 when Henry Quinn of *Ladies Home Companion* hired Carter to do his first illustration. As his teaching career continued over the decades he was no doubt influenced by the new approaches and trends of the young students. That influence must have encouraged his evolving style and anticipated new trends which kept his work popular throughout his career.

Carter also served in World War I which was an influence on every person who served. What form that influence took is something that couldn't be determined.

**Art Movement: Golden Age of Illustration:** The Golden Age of Illustration was from the late 1880's until the 1930's or 1940's/40's. Accurate and more sophisticated printing processes became available and affordable for magazines. In simple terms, before the Golden Age illustrations were previously made with hand carving techniques on metal plates, stone, or wood blocks which limited the number of quality copies that could be derived from a single carving. Unprecedented advances in technology were made during the 1880's. By 1900 half tone refined images were being utilized in mass media allowing printers to not be limited to simple line drawings, instead they could use shading and eventually color. Price efficiencies developed due to reduced costs of producing paper and printing technology. Distribution via railroads increased circulation exponentially. Due to the economy, the general public had expendable income to spend on the increasingly popular magazines. Publishing those periodicals became a very profitable business, and illustrators earned vast sums for their work. In contrast, fine art was primarily purchased in Europe where the center was in Paris. The New York art market was in its infancy, and there was normally little money to be made there. Illustrators were highly compensated, work was plentiful, as well as recognition for the artists. In the 1920's, Maxfield Parrish was among the popular illustrators who sold framed prints. Carter was a contemporary of

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Maynard Dixon who illustrated Western scenes for *Sunset Magazine*. (Palm Springs Art Museum has both originals and publications of Dixon’s work.)

During the Golden Age of Illustration “*there was no stigma to working as an illustrator as there often is today within the fine arts community. In fact, artists were delighted to see their work disseminated to such a broad public.*” [www.rafoxsociety.com](http://www.rafoxsociety.com). Books with illustrations became popular, particularly in children’s literature. Pulp novels were commissioning illustrations. Throughout this time Carter’s niche was illustration of women which continued to be fashionable throughout his lifetime. In the 1940’s and the 1950’s the demand for illustrations diminished when photos came into the forefront of publishing. Today there is an emergence of graphic novels and the illustrators of those works are recognized as co-authors.

**Medium:** Most of Carter’s work was in oil or watercolor, commissioned for reproduction in national magazines. He sometimes changed from the medium of oil (1920s-1930s) to the faster drying gouache of the 1940s. He usually worked on smaller canvasses, in the range of 28.5”x 42”. In oil, the work was wet on wet, and later wet on dry. He was perhaps the first illustrator to courier his work from the West to the East coast on a tight schedule. To meet the production demands he had paint chemicals specially manufactured so the paint would stay wet for 5 days while he worked. Then it would dry in 2 days. When the wet work was finished, he would ship the unstretched canvas in a special container on a Tuesday. The paint would dry in transit so it arrived in New York on Thursday as a dry oil painting.

In his illustrations, he would often work with the celluloid method of placing acetate layers over one another to build up the final effect. This was a technique used by animators. The basic drawing would remain on the bottom layer, and subsequent layers would change the illustration with color, shapes, line, and detail. *Wild Escape* does not utilize that technique.

**Technique and Methodology:** Carter would first read the story to be illustrated and then begin to plan the concept based on his interpretation of the narrative. He needed stimulating images that would draw the reader’s interest. His technique was highly organized, tidy, and thorough. There are published drawings of the exact colors and where he always placed them on his pallet. He was a professional, diligent, and hard worker. Carter went to great lengths to have the final work appear fresh, as though it was freely “dashed off”. His desire was to not show the intensive hours and studio work involved.

Carter went through many sketches and drawings before he started on the final version. For covers and stories he would sometimes send several drafts of concepts so the art director would have a choice. As a businessman, he had to “sell” each illustration to the publisher. He knew the various art directors and publishers, so he submitted works based

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on his knowledge of the art director's style and constraints of the specific magazine. This is one reason why his background in art direction on the East Coast was so helpful. He was very successful.

In his studio, he worked on an easel in full vertical position from models who were lit by artificial light at one end of the studio. Carter's easel would be at the other end and he viewed the models through an opening in black curtains which eliminated extraneous studio materials from his sight. He worked in natural light from a skylight over the easel. The models were often extras (actors) dressed in costumes rented from the film industry. He explained to his colleagues back East that models and costumes were better and more cost effective in the Los Angeles area due to the film industry. He used photography as an aid, sometimes shooting 24 – 36 frames for one modeling concept, later using different parts of the photos to complete the painting.

### **Artist's Impact on the Art World:**

**Impact on Illustration:** It can't be emphasized enough how influential Carter's work was within the homes of the general public. As one of the foremost illustrators of his time, his work was prominent in magazine covers and publications throughout the United States. Carter's magazines and illustrations were ubiquitous, read in tens of thousands of homes as a primary source of information and entertainment before television entered the scene. Every month, and sometimes every week, abundant new images would arrive in homes across the country. The artists were celebrities in their own right. For example, Norman Rockwell was a well-known and well-recognized illustrator, as was Maynard Dixon.

Early in his career, Carter painted one in a series (1926-28) about Abraham Lincoln commissioned by the Lincoln National Life Foundation for their collection. Paintings from that series traveled throughout the country and were reproduced extensively. He received national recognition for *Lincoln Visiting the Wounded*. Another from the series, *The War Is Just About Over* was published in *Ladies Home Journal*. In this series, Carter was admired for his sympathetic portrayal of Lincoln and his heavy burden as Commander in Chief during the war.

Carter was inducted posthumously into the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame in 1988.

**Impact on Teaching:** Throughout most of his career he also taught. At Grand Central School of Art in New York his students included Nelson Wilbur and Perle Fine. Perle's work is in the *“Women of Abstract Expressionism”* exhibit at the Palm Springs Art Museum in 2017. Carter moved back to Los Angeles in 1930 and taught at Chouinard Art Institute where he headed the illustration department for many years. Mary Blair, whom he

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mentored there, became very well recognized as a premier Disney artist, creator, and stylist. Her work was celebrated in an exhibition at the Walt Disney Family Museum in 2014.

**Fine Art vs. Illustration:** Illustration is sometimes defined as a visual aid, or an example serving to visualize or clarify something. Illustrations are produced by commission, and are created for reproduction and publication. Artists also illustrated products for marketing and advertising. When illustrating a story, the images necessarily stayed very close to the story line. Fine art, on the other hand, is defined by Google as objects to be appreciated primarily or solely for their imaginative, aesthetic or intellectual content. I would add: fine art is created by an artist inspired with his/her own incentive and creative interests. Often the fine artist is motivated by their desire to ultimately sell the work.

*“Pruett Carter is quoted as saying: ‘The illustrator’s first function is a problem of composition, of pattern, of design – including the rich contrast of the illustration itself with the type matter and the headlines of the story. Actually, the illustrator may be likened to the director of a motion picture...He must live the part of each actor. He must do the scenery, design the costumes, and handle the lighting effects.’ This statement reflects his Los Angeles location and indicates an artist with a grasp of the contemporary. By the fifties, Carter, was an old hand in the business, and convincingly remained a very modern illustrator. “Frederic B. Taraba, Masters of American Illustrators.*

His was a career in a highly competitive market, working on tight deadlines, and busy production schedules while also teaching. Carter was among the very few illustrators who left the East Coast where the magazine publishing companies were centered. He and his wife preferred living in California and the varied landscape there. He also valued the relative isolation in California from the “publishing scene” in New York.

### **My Impression and Analysis of *Wild Escape*:**

*Wild Escape* is an image which is frequently reproduced online and in articles about Pruett Carter. I was unable to find any specifics about this piece in reference documents. Much of his work is not titled.

**The subject matter in the painting:** This painting is set in a rather barren desert landscape with a lone cactus, and wide open spaces in the background. It includes two figures involved in a gunfight while mounted on horses. From the shape of the hat, a Cordobes, we know that the larger figure is a Vaquero. He is wearing a casual shirt and green pants with a red neckerchief and sash. That figure is riding a horse, is leaning back, turning to his left. The Vaquero appears to have just shot, with a revolver in his hand, a

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figure that is chasing him from the rear. The rear figure is smaller and to the right. It appears that that figure is in the military due to a sword that hangs from his belt and two rows of shiny buttons down the front of his shirt. The military figure is falling backward off the horse. He pulls back with the reins and the horse's head is turned and seems to be rearing back. The rider gives the impression to have just been shot. There is an obvious connection between the two figures in conflict that the heroic Vaquero is winning. One imagines this takes place during the Mexican Revolution or during the Maximato period after the revolution. During these times, there were disputes over land ownership. Vaqueros were known to have been involved with Pancho Villa's efforts, however I could not determine an exact event or even period in history. The original intention of the painting could have been a leisure time painting done for the artist's own pleasure, or a story illustration. When the provenance of the work becomes available it should be obvious if the work was first owned by a publication for reproduction.

In *Wild Escape*, and in many other works, Carter rendered the faces more clearly than other parts of the canvas to emphasize the psychological aspects of the situation. He said that the successful illustrator was a keen observer of human nature. He explored the relationships and reactions between the figures in his illustrations. His subject matter is known as being emotionally and intellectually stimulated and generally “gentle.” *Wild Escape* is an exception. Carter said that the artist becomes a student of psychology to determine the relationships between the subjects. Carter became known for his sympathetic roles of women in his work.

**Techniques:** The form of the figures utilizes three-dimensional shading to convey perspective in this realistic scene. The proportions of the horses and figures also shows perspective, with the primary figure much larger in the foreground. The artist's palette uses all the secondary colors. Most final colors are not bright nor primary. Instead, the many colors are muted with tones of gray and tints of white further conveying the chaotic atmosphere. Many of the colors are transparent with layer upon layer creating an indistinct sense of danger by leaving much to the imagination. The viewer is encouraged to conjure what has gone on before this image and what will happen in the next moment. There is tension and drama in this “snap shot” from a narrative. Many of Carter's illustrations show moments of tension in relationships. However, this extremely dramatic life and death interaction is unusual in his works.

The balance of the two figures is asymmetrical. Dark tones in the lower portion ground the painting. The lighter color in the background indicates distance. The red on the cactus in the lower right portion balances with the red on the horse and the red neckerchief and sash in the middle.

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The base line is the top edge of the lower 1/3 of the painting. The hooves of both horses are at this line.

The middle ground contains the focus which is the horse and rider in the upper left quadrant. This focus is emphasized by the intensity and contrasting colors of the green pant leg of the first figure against the reds on the horse. The diagonal lines on the tack, leg, gun, and horse legs create a sense of conflict and retain the eye on that location. The front horse's eyes are wide open in either fear or determination. The horse's neck is stretched out in front conveying speed to race headlong out of the composition. The rider is still astride but the body is twisted in what could be an impossible configuration, however he is firmly seated in the saddle. This Vaquero is an adept horseman.

Particularly arresting are the horizontal lines created by the heroes' red neckerchief and sash from his waist, plus his arm. All these draw the eye to the second figure further back and to the right side of the painting. The line of the reins on the second figure pulls the eye back left again to the first figure. However, the sword hanging off the second figure catches the eye inviting further investigation of that military figure.

The heroic Vaquero figure is emphasized by the white tint of color surrounding the right side of the man and his horse. The light creates a halo around the figure contrasting with the darker tones of the horse and rider. The contrast of these light and dark areas creates a middle emphasis in the center of the painting. The hero is on the left opposite the evil military figure on the right.

The painting background has cool colors of blue and green, with almost transparent layers of indistinct landscape in the background. Here is a sense of vast space which is Western in nature and where a Vaquero would be found. There is texture and distinct layers of brushstrokes which are impressionistic. I call this “A notion of motion.” The action in these brushstrokes creates movement and a dusty atmosphere of fast activity and chaos.

The painting foreground is the bottom third, and has warm tones with the addition of two darker and indistinct purple areas on the left and the right. Those areas are shadows, balancing and grounding the entire painting.

The left shadow is apparently the shadow of the horse and heroic rider; however, the right shadow is coming from an object which is not visible, and is off the right side of the canvas. The source of that shadow is not visible. There must be at least one more figure in this scenario, but only two have been included in this painting. That shadow is a warning. More danger lurks off to the right, and this scene is just one part of a larger conflict.

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**The Vaquero:** The Vaquero was a commonly overlooked figure in Western art. However, Carter’s youth spent on a reservation gave him a close experience with those living and working in the West. The Vaqueros were known as superior horsemen and cattle men compared to the cowboys of the time. They revered their horses and were deservedly proud of their expertise and impressive skill in roping and handling of both horses and cattle. The Vaqueros had more stable personalities than the cowboys. Usually they lived in one area, established families and valued their livestock. In local rodeos they displayed their horses, working skills, lassoing, and craftsmanship with leather equipment. Cowboys were known to be independent, roving individuals who infrequently settled nor commonly developed skills at the same level as the Vaqueros. As a piece in the Museum’s collection, I feel this honored depiction of Mexican horsemen and cattlemen is appropriate and beneficial for this museum’s audience experience. Discussing the heroic Vaquero during a tour can be an important feature of *Wild Escape*

**Compare and Contrast Art Work:** *The Yearling*, by Walter Ufer, is oil on canvas, and painted in 1929. *The Yearling* is adjacent to *Wild Escape* in the Western Stories exhibition.

*The Yearling* is a calm, peaceful depiction of two Native Americans on horseback resting while their yearling horse nurses. The colors are cool compared to the heat in *Wild Escape*. The emotion in *The Yearling* is difficult to determine and there is no sense of immediacy or danger. The figures look resigned, remote, and peaceful. Perhaps they are on their way to a reservation. On the other hand, the young horse may signify the fresh beginning of youth, which would imply hope for the future. *The Yearling* is a quiet composition centered on the canvas like a portrait. In contrast, *Wild Escape* is “in your face,” implying action out of the picture frame, and is all about the emotion and a dramatic struggle between men and horses during an instant in time.

**Conclusion:** Pruett Carter is known primarily as a women’s magazine illustrator. He worked in oil and watercolor in a painterly style. He began his career in 1918 in New York and remained popular until 1955 when he died. His working habits were intense involving frequent 10 – 14 hour days in the studio. No expense was too great, nor effort too large for him to achieve his final product which he always wanted to appear “easy.” He was exceptional because he could advance his style smoothly within the quickly changing women’s magazine market. He understood the role of illustration and had an insider’s appreciation for the demands of the magazine publication process, plus the market requirements and trends. Working with young students no doubt influenced him to sometimes even foresee movements. This ability to evolve is one of the strongest aspects of Carter’s work. Only the best and most self-confident artists have the willingness and interest to transform along with the vernacular of popular culture. In fine art, Picasso is the

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perfect example of a strong, self-confident artist whose work grew and changed throughout his life.

Sadly, Carter’s life ended in tragedy. In 1955 he committed suicide after a domestic dispute during which he shot and killed his wife Theresa, and his disabled son, Deal. At the time, they were selling the family home in the San Fernando Valley in California, and moving to Carrolltown Georgia.

**Ownership:** 75th Anniversary promised gift of Elaine Hill and John Schoettler. Not accessioned as part of the Palm Springs Art Museum collection.

**Western Stories Art Exhibit:** When the West was new and railroads first built, many artists were hired by developers to illustrate magazine covers and stories which promoted the new West and territory newly accessible via railroads. Although not recognized as a primarily Western Artist, Pruett Carter was one of the most popular illustrators during those times. *Wild Escape* fits into the Western collection and the *Western Stories Exhibit* due to its unusually impressionistic and painterly style that depicts the desert landscape and characters who lived there.

The exhibit explores the West in terms of: Land and Body, Spirituality, Desert, and Western Icons. *Wild Escape* illustrates the following quote from the exhibit wall text:

*“The desert from a distance is as tranquil as any other landscape, except for the light. As I get close the place becomes wild. Everything in sight is up-tempo and jumping with a thousand branches, a million thorns... altogether becoming a maze of order new and crazier in every turn, bathed in light that defies description.... It’s a place, the desert, out of control in the norm of places.”* By Lee Friedlander, *The Desert Seen*, 1996.

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### **Bibliography/Sources:**

Although he was a foremost figure in illustration throughout his life, only Masters of American Illustration has more than a few paragraphs about Pruett Carter.

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[cont. see “Summer Land” illustration on the next page](#)

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Double Page Illustration for a story called “**Summer Land.**” White clouds on left is space for text and title. No known date or publication.