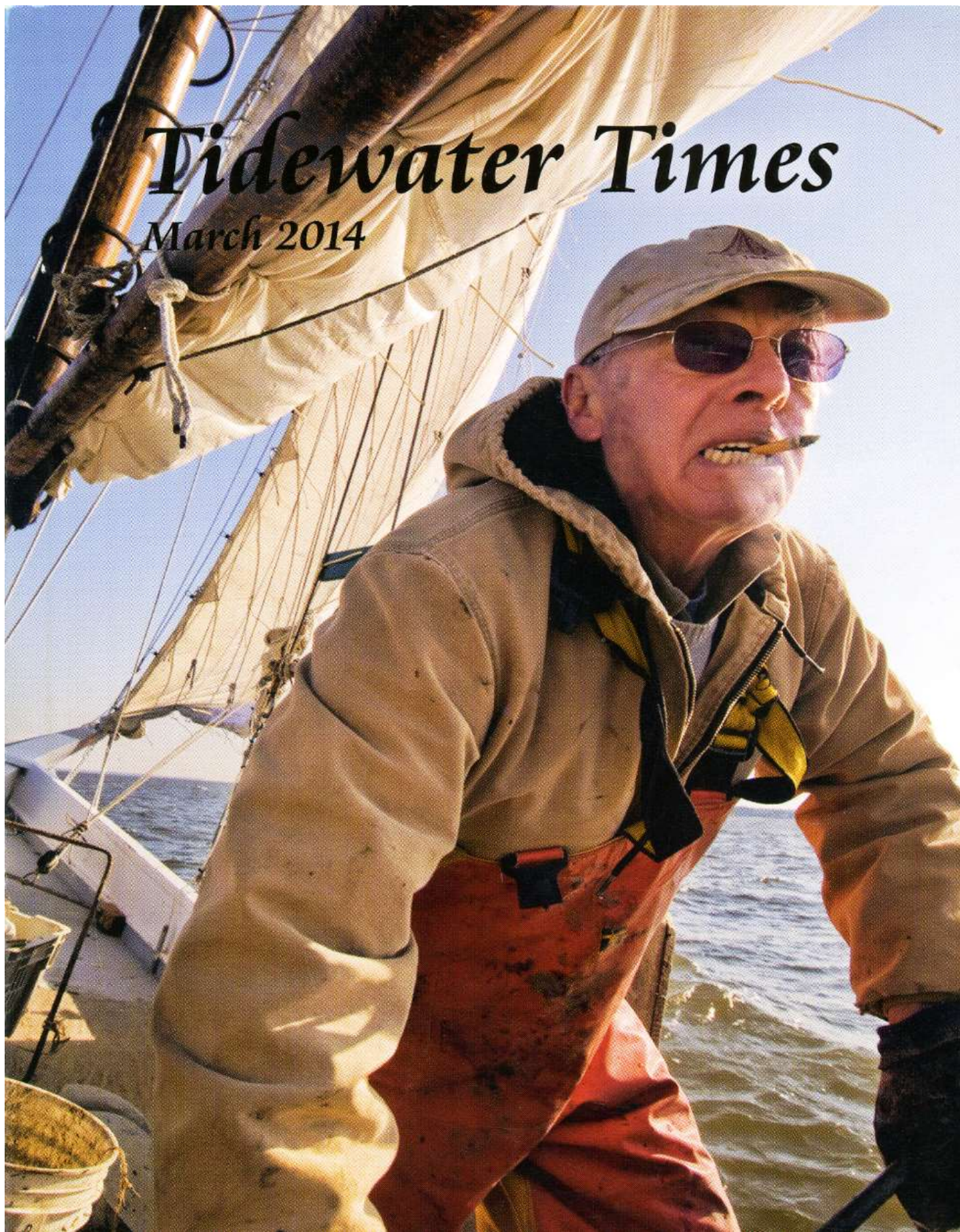


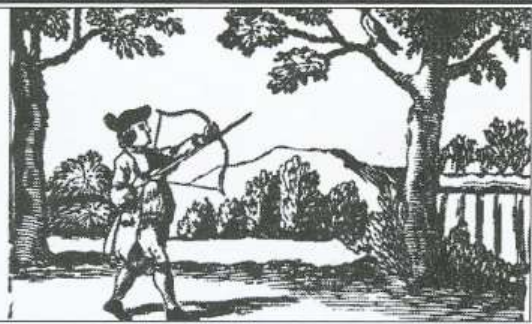
Tidewater Times

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Tidewater Review

by
Anne Stinson



***Schenck in the 21st Century: The Myth of the Hero and the Truth of America* by Amy Abrams. Western Skies Press. 197 pp. \$65.**

Gene Autry sang *Happy Trails to You*, and housewives all the way from the Great Plains to Texas and

across the southern borders to California dreamed of romance. They had visions of those tight-muscled, tall-in-the-saddle men who would always call her ma'am. And it wasn't just the plump ladies in their aprons who had fantasies. Men went to the movies and came home thinking about escaping from the dull

SCHENCK IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY AMY ABRAMS



THE MYTH OF THE HERO AND THE TRUTH OF AMERICA

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routines of town jobs, complaining wives and noisy children. By God, they wished they had a horse, and that they looked like John Wayne. As kids they played cowboys and Indians, and as adults they practiced saying, "Git them wagons in a circle!"

There's nothing new about the popularity of the story of taming the Old West, the period when Horace Greeley advised his newspaper readers to "Go West, young man!" Even young Huck Finn determined to run away into "the territory." It's exciting American history, both shameful and admirable.

The settlement of "the territory" was a time of dramatic adventure



Loose Lips Will Kill You

and discovery hatched from the curiosity of Thomas Jefferson when he sent Lewis and Clark to map all that land between the big Mississippi



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Big Sky Country

River and the Pacific Ocean. Jefferson knew that there were some pretty high mountains in the way, but “see if there’s a way to follow the water going down-hill in that direction. And, oh yeah, you fellows, draw and send me back some pictures.” (This is not a direct quote, but his order went something like that.)

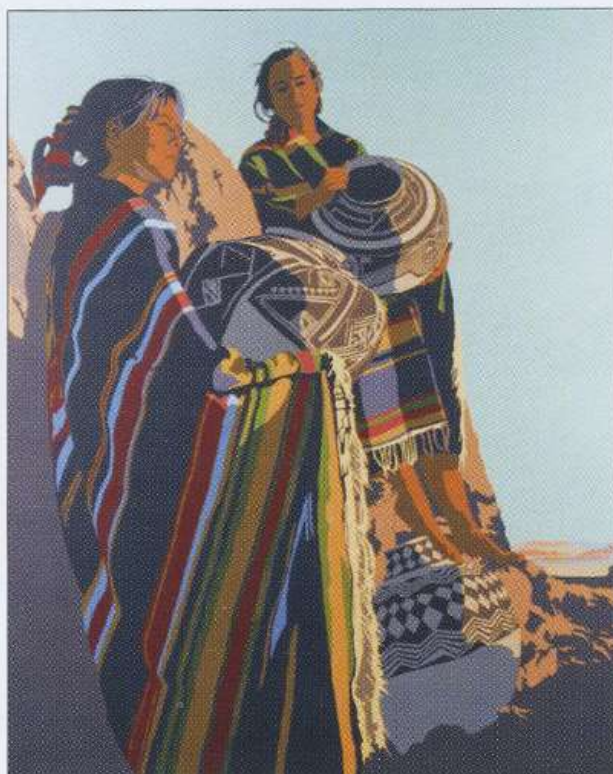
More than 200 years later, there’s still a strong demand for art that celebrates the land and the people of the West. Amy Abrams has studied Billy Schenck’s paintings from a period of 40 years in which he painted the images reproduced in this coffee table book. Abrams’ text illuminates the path that influenced the artist to his present status. His works are in 41 museum collections, and numerous corporate and private collections.

Unlike paintings of western landscapes, Native Americans, and cowboys captured on canvas by 19th

century classic artists, Schenck is one of the modern revolutionaries in the art world. At the same time that Andy Warhol was startling galleries and collectors with repeat images of soup cans in the 1960s, Schenck was part of the new movement, Pop Art.

Abrams’ keen comparisons show the parallels in both pioneers altering the old molds, with the label “Pop West Art” to clearly define, one might say, the difference between looking at soup cans on an invisible shelf, Marilyn Monroe in weird colors; and in the other pew, dazzling sunsets over the desert and silhouetted men on horseback.

Like his contemporary Warhol, Schenck dropped the old European technique of endless detail in a portrait; every fold of cloth defined by



Hills of Bidahochi

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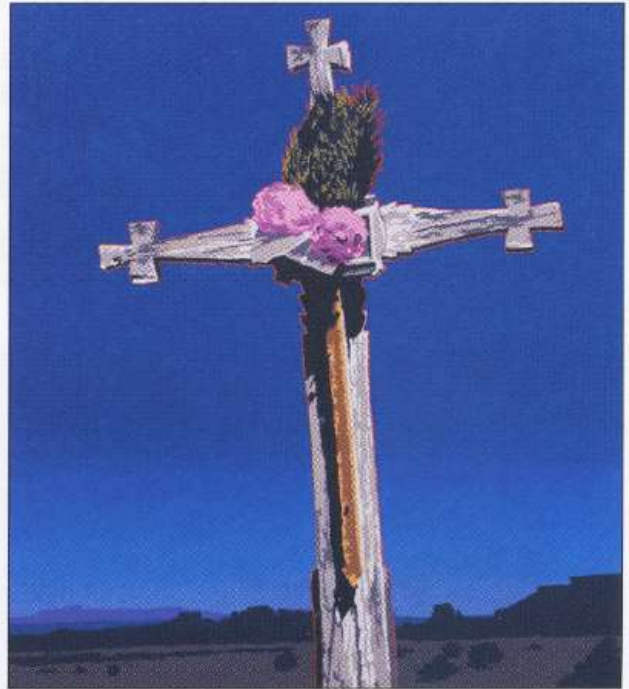
shadow· each tree leaf painted with four shades of green, and the precise number of feathers on a bird's wing. The new, brash kids at the easels cleaned up images with simplicity borrowed from the expressionists, bold colors from the abstract impressionists, and concentration on icons. Emphasis was on the subject, not on the frills. The results jump off the canvas.

Public policy on the settlement of the prairies and the Southwest was not as heroic as it was portrayed for decades. Abrams clarifies the myths with a true picture of what cowboys were really like ~ "...a low-paid, sometimes lawless character, but by endowing him with bravery and integrity, he tamed the wilderness, became the good guy and always saved the day."

"Although the plentiful plains of the American West are long gone, the cowboy remains the American hero," the book jacket begins. "With a massive public relations campaign over a century, including railroad promoters, wild west shows, rodeo stars and six-gun Hollywood westerns, the all-American hero saved the day ~ and the girl."

That's not quite how Schenck sees it. He celebrates what's truly magnificent about America ~ the land. The cowboys just happen to be on it and under its incredible sky.

Abrams' admiration for the sub-



From Here to Eternity

ject is all-encompassing. Her categories include wonderful paintings in the chapter on Churches and Crosses; as well as Lovesick Cowboys, Cowgirls: Women of the West; and The West that Never Was. Schenck knows it like he owns it, and Abrams is the lively hostess who introduces the lucky reader to Schenck's version of its charm.

This is better than the movies. Don't miss it.



Anne Stinson began her career in the 1950s as a free lance for the now defunct Baltimore News-American, then later for Chesapeake Publishing, the Baltimore Sun and Maryland Public Television's panel show, Maryland Newsrap. Now in her ninth decade, she still writes a monthly book review for Tidewater Times.