

artist profile

JAMES COLEMAN

Imagination Reigns Supreme

For James Coleman, painting is a quest for fun and fantasy.

BY JENNIFER DULIN WILEY
ABN Managing Editor

The work of artist James Coleman transports viewers into a world of pure beauty and imagination. Drawing from his unique experience as a Disney animator, Coleman seeks to inspire and create an exciting world of carefree escape through his inimitable and vibrant fine art.

"I'm trying to bring a positive image into people's lives—something that will inspire them," Coleman says. "That's what I love about art. Day to day, we all need an escape or place of refuge, and that's what I like to paint."

The ingenuity and powerful expression Coleman brings to his fine art and Disney works has certainly struck a chord with collectors. Noted admirers include George Foreman, Jay Leno, Thomas Kinkadee and the Disney family. Coleman's works in oil, pastel, watercolor and gouache can be found



▲ "Venice Twilight," an embellished giclée on canvas, 36 x 48 and 30 x 40 inches

in galleries nationwide depicting romanticized landscapes of Hawaii, the Southwest, Europe and more.

In one way or another, art was always an escape for Coleman, who struggled with undiagnosed ADD and dyslexia throughout his childhood and early teens. "I can remember drawing all through my life," Coleman says. "Art was fun, and it came very easily to me. I can remember camping with my family when I was 7 or 8 and looking at the fire trying to figure out how to draw it."

By age 12, Coleman was painting, and his early teens led to more experimentation in art. A report he completed on Leonardo da Vinci further sparked his interest. "I was fascinated and thought, 'That's what I want to do—paint, create, invent,'" Coleman recalls. "But my father was a schoolteacher and didn't believe you could make a career in art."

However, continued struggles with schoolwork only pushed him closer to art. He began taking classes in painting and drawing, and the teacher recognized his talent after the first assignment. "I didn't really think of it as a talent," Coleman

explains. "It just came somewhat naturally, but I began to realize that I had something different."

It wasn't until his mother suggested that he apply for a mailroom position at Disney Studios, where she had worked as a secretary for years, that Coleman saw any real future in art. On a whim, he entered a sunset painting into an informal art show held internally at Disney. Like his previous teachers, the Disney animators instantly recognized Coleman's gift and encouraged him to think about a career in animation.

Coleman wasted no time beginning to teach himself the ropes of the animation process. He made countless trips to the Disney animation morgue to see if he could copy the distinct techniques used by the animators. When he was confident enough to show what he had learned, he went back to the animators and landed an apprenticeship painting backgrounds for the Disney film "Winnie the Pooh and Tigger Too."

"I was just petrified," Coleman says. "It was very intimidating, but I knew that if I concentrated and

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▲ **“Warm Aloha,”** an embellished giclée on canvas, 30 x 30, 36 x 36 and 48 x 48 inches

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asked enough questions, it was going to work, and it did.”

Coleman’s burgeoning animation skills really started to blossom on his next film, “The Rescuers.” Bringing a fresh, young perspective to background painting, Coleman was thinking of things that the older animators were not. Before he knew it, he was the head of the animation background department, working on Disney classics such as “The Little Mermaid” and “Beauty and the Beast.”

At the same time, Coleman’s fine-art career was beginning to take off, and he wanted more than ever to dedicate his creative time to what was in his heart. “After ‘Beauty and the Beast’ in 1989, I left because I knew it wasn’t my future,” he says. “I’m drawn to fine art because it’s what’s inside me. When you’re part of animation, you’re working as a team; it’s a collaboration. You kind of have to change your art so it will all fit together. Fine art inspired me to paint things from my heart instead of my head.”

Still, elements of Disney live on in Coleman’s fine-art paintings and through the work he creates for Collectors Editions’ Disney Fine Art program. “Disney has helped shape both of my art forms by showing me that there’s a way to stage a painting to draw people in,” Coleman says. “When I envision a landscape to paint, I go about it in a different way than other artists. I romanticize the place and put feeling into it. I’m not painting a replica. I’ll always have that Disney experience to draw from, and to

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this day, it makes my work unique.”

Putting full concentration on his fine-art career was scary, Coleman admits. His dad, who knew what a good thing he had going at Disney, told him it was crazy. But fine art was his dream, and he vowed to make it work. Coleman began traveling more and painting scenes from the Southwest, eventually moving to Hawaii, where his signature tin-roof houses and tropical scenes remain wildly popular. Coleman then moved on to paint landscapes inspired by locations nationwide and throughout Europe.

The dynamic artist handles each medium he uses in a different manner. With oils, he begins by roughly blocking in colors, working with major shapes and values to achieve the initial impact. He’ll wait for the piece to dry and then begin working on the distance and into the foreground. Sometimes his paintings are *ala prima*; other times he’ll experiment with glazing to keep his work fresh and evolving.

Coleman never knows exactly what a painting will look like even though he always decides the initial subject matter beforehand. While painting from his home studio in Thousand Oaks, Calif., Coleman likes to keep the composition as loose as possible and avoids crowding a piece with too much detail to keep the work looking light and airy.

Because many of his paintings are inspired by the places he has traveled, Coleman is always keenly aware of his surroundings to make sure he doesn’t miss any opportunities. He takes in each location mentally and rarely snaps photos so emotion can guide the creation process. “One of the artists at Disney told me to hope for fortunate accidents, and that’s the way I like to paint,” he explains.

Hawaii, Hilton Head, S.C., and the Redwood Forest top his list of favorite places. Coleman also



▲ **“A Sweet Goodbye”** was created in celebration of the 70th anniversary of Walt Disney’s classic film, “Snow White.” The hand-enhanced, signed and numbered giclée is available through Collectors Editions in an edition of 70.



▲ **“Hawaiian Dream,”** an embellished giclée on canvas, 36 x 24 inches



▲ **“Summer’s Bloom,”** an embellished giclée on canvas, 20 x 40 and 30 x 60 inches

does plenty of business travel with the 60 or so days worth of shows he attends. “As artists, collectors are everything to us,” he says. “We wouldn’t be doing what we do if it weren’t for them and the galleries and consultants. Shows are a personal touch because you’re taking time away from painting to do it, but that’s how you gain collectors for 25 years or more.”

Looking modestly back on all that he has accomplished, Coleman knows there is still more to come. “I’ve gotten to where my paintings just flow through my hand; they come straight from the heart,” he says. **ABN**