

GARDEN & GUN
presents



Bobwhite Flush, watercolor (14" x 21") by Eldridge Hardie

START
THE
HUNT
➔

★

BEST of THE

Sporting South

Take to the field with the country's finest bird dog (who just happens to be a setter), discover great artists bringing sporting traditions to the canvas, and plan your next adventure with our roundup of elite guides, whether you'd like to chase giant tailwater trout or hunt ducks in the footsteps of Nash Buckingham

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Master of the Hunt

It isn't challenging, when you scrutinize an Eldridge Hardie painting, to insert yourself into the frame; what's tricky is keeping yourself out of it. So adept is the Texas-born sporting artist at precisely *nailing* a moment, a mood, what a landscape feels like, that it would take a thick shell of stoicism, or an unusually determined indoorsman, to resist hearing the crunch of snow underfoot in *A Pheasant in a Plum Thicket*, his winter scene of the aftermath of a hunt. Or the splash of the mallard-clutching retriever's paws in the oil painting *Marsh Dog*. Or the whisper of current and breeze on the luminous trout stream of *Dry Fly Morning*.

Those who find themselves transfixed, or more likely transported, by Hardie's creations have plenty of company. From the National Museum of Wildlife Art to the Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame to the National Bird Dog Museum, the roster of institutions that have mounted exhibitions of his paintings or otherwise shone a spotlight on him hints at the breadth of both his subject matter and his appeal. More than twenty-five books have featured his illustrations. Admirers mention him in the same breath (or at least the same paragraph) as Ogden Pleissner, A. L. Ripley, even Winslow Homer. The organizers of the Plantation Wildlife Arts Festival, in Thomasville, Georgia, named him its 2014 featured artist. "I'm gonna do a little quail hunting while I'm there," he says. "That's part of the package. They know how to hook me."

As that remark suggests, if there's a secret to the seventy-four-year-old's ascension to a living-legend pedestal of sorts among sportsmen and collectors, it's a secret badly kept. "I'm painting my vices," he likes to say. To borrow from Norman Maclean, in Hardie's life there has been no clear line between art and outdoor sport. Born on a Hill Country ranch near Boerne and raised in El Paso, he grew up dove shooting and dabbling in the "marginal trout fishing" of southern New Mexico. He also distinctly remembers a visit from his uncle and namesake Eldridge King on his return from the South Pacific after World War II, when Eldridge the younger was six. During the visit, the boy watched his uncle, who would soon become a successful commercial illustrator, paint a watercolor. "I just thought that was the greatest," he says. In hindsight, the moment seems preordained.

Spurred along by both his uncle and Tom Lea, a well-known Texas artist and author and a family friend, Hardie enrolled in art school at St. Louis's Washington University, where he finished first in his class.



For the painter
Eldridge Hardie, his art
isn't just a vocation.
It's a way of life

★
By
Mike Grudowski

PHOTOGRAPH BY
Matt Nager

He spent summers working as a guide on Wyoming's Yellowstone Lake, then moved to Denver in 1966. After an unlikely stint revising illustrations for biology textbooks, he took the leap, merging his passions into a freelance career, and never looked back. "I left myself no other options," he says, "burning all other bridges." Over the years as his paintings gradually caught on, Hardie's work has taken him on many a daydream-worthy excursion: fishing for sea-run browns in Tierra del Fuego, grouse hunting in Scotland, casting for Atlantic salmon on the fabled Restigouche in New Brunswick, bonefishing the flats in Belize and the Bahamas.

Exotic passport stamps aside, though, Hardie's craft comes with its own set of challenges. In a sense, a sporting artist must be three painters in one, rendering convincing landscapes, dogs and wildlife that are both accurate in detail and lively, and believable human figures. "I'm not a fast worker," he says, "and the subjects I paint are not easy to do quickly." His knowing audience leaves little room for a false move. "Dogs have to point right, act right," he explains. "Guys have to look like they're casting properly. You put something wrong in the way a guy's holding a shotgun..." He need not finish the sentence.

Despite his decades in the field, while on outings Hardie grabs shots with a pocket digital camera—"my main sketch box"—and scribbles notes on color and composition. All while also trying to, say, bag a limit of ducks. "It's a juggling act," he admits. "But I'm darn sure gonna enjoy the experience." Later, back in the studio, he consults stacks of accumulated references—magazine clippings filed in folders, old 35mm slides.

It's little surprise that Hardie's immersion in the sporting life that he paints—his intuitive feel for his subjects—strikes a chord. Some years ago, a Mississippi couple commissioned him to paint a portrait of their champion German shorthaired pointer, after the dog had died. Although Hardie had never seen the animal in person, when the woman saw the finished piece, she wept.

"Reverence, in its deepest and most honest form, is the word that comes first to mind when I look at Eldridge's work," the publisher and outdoorsman Nick Lyons once wrote. Michael Paderewski, whose Paderewski Fine Art and Sportsman's Gallery spaces in Charleston, South Carolina, and Beaver Creek, Colorado, display Hardie's work, speaks of the "certain moment that has that essence that drives people outdoors. Eldridge just captures that. He stuck to what he wanted to do." 📍



Prelude, oil (20" x 30")



Morning, watercolor (14" x 21")