

PAINTING FOR THE PLANET

Armed with a paintbrush in one hand and paper in the other, Missoula artist Monte Dolack is tackling the world's problems, one painting at a time

STORY BY GINNY MERRIAM
PHOTOS BY JEREMY LURGIO

The east wall of Monte Dolack's Missoula studio is a window into the artist's mind. Half-realized fish jump from rivers, wolves raise their noses to howl at yet-to-be-seen landscapes, a dog sits in a chair and stares at a man. Dolack calls the bank of dozens of sketches his Tree of Ideas. Some have hung there from tacks for years, and others sprouted last week.

"It's like having a tree of fruit that all ripens at different times," Dolack says. "I'll look at it, and one will be ready."

In Dolack's 33 years as a professional artist in Missoula, hundreds of those ideas have grown into paintings that made prints and posters to benefit the natural world. Dolack's images—whimsical, historical, funny and serious all at the same time—have become recognizable around the world. The art is colorful and seductively appealing. The message from the fish and animals, mountains and rivers is urgent: My future is in your hands. And your checkbooks.

"My conflict is between the romantic, nature-loving side I have and the social critic, the cynical part that wants to show what's wrong with the world," Dolack says. "How do you make images that are meaningful to other people? Is it our responsibility as artists to sound the alarm, to make a difference, to make people understand?"

Dolack decided long ago that answer is "yes." By donating part of the proceeds from sales of prints and posters, Dolack's work has helped organizations such as Defenders of Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy, Montana Trout Unlimited, the Clark Fork Coalition and dozens of other groups preserve habitat for animals and fish. It has also bolstered the Montana Committee for the Humanities, the Humane Society of Western Montana, ▶



Monte Dolack poses for a picture at his gallery in downtown Missoula. The Monte Dolack Gallery features original paintings, note cards and posters from both Dolack and his wife, Mary Beth Percival.



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Monte Dolack



Dolack works on a small painting titled 'Learning To Sit,' which features the artist sitting on a seat with his dog, Stella sitting on a seat across from him.



Montana Public Radio, the Montana Summer Symphony, the University of Montana and scores of others in their work in literacy, education and culture. A retrospective of Dolack posters lined up would be a history of Montana conservation efforts during the past three decades. It has also brought Dolack awards and acclaim, a place in the collections of the Library of Congress, a designation as one of the most influential Montanans of the 20th century and exhibits from Boston to Ireland to Japan.

As Dolack and his wife, Mary Beth Percival, who is also a painter, have grown more comfortable financially, he has been able to spend ever more time and talent to benefit the landscape he loves.

"I don't want to make art for people who are decorating their homes with Western art," he says. "My paintings are about ideas. There's been this thread that connected everything. That thread is landscape, conservation, preservation."

Dolack remembers the first time he heard the phrase "The Big Sky," as a little kid growing up in Great Falls. He marveled, "That's where I live!" To this day, he and that sky and landscape are inseparable, says Kay Ellerhoff, a Helena journalist who has been friends with Dolack and shared projects and travel with him for 26 years.

"I have always been certain that more than almost anyone I know he is truly in touch with his roots," Ellerhoff says. "He started as a seedling and grew into a tall tree with such deep roots. And they get deeper every year."

The art he has given organizations is priceless, according to Ellerhoff. "People buy his prints and posters who wouldn't necessarily have given money to the organization," she says. Dolack's work also educates, she says, because his research is so meticulous. He doesn't get an idea and slap it on a canvas; he reads and studies until he can perfectly realize every feather and hoof and ear. "That attention to detail is something I think a lot of people overlook," says Ellerhoff. "His work is whimsical, it's magical, it's imaginative, but it's also correct. When he paints a green-winged teal, it's not a mallard."

Marshall Bloom, a Bitterroot resident who is past state chairman of Montana Trout Unlimited, first worked with Dolack in 1990 when he formed a state advisory group for the organization. Dolack, whose donated image of a trout on the TU license plate now raises money for trout habitat, was one of the first people he thought of.

"He's a phenomenal artist in so many ways," Bloom says. "Monte can present his images in a way that people of all ages and all levels of sophistication can relate to. He can present people and their relationship with the natural world in a way people can understand."

Dolack's work has done more than simply portray. It has become part of the effort, Bloom says. Take, for instance, his poster of Yellowstone wolves, done in 1989 for the Defenders of Wildlife in the infancy of wolf recovery. "That print showing wolves in the geyser basins of Yellowstone turned out to be a prophecy of the success of the wolf recovery program," says Bloom. "It raised awareness of the role of wolves in the natural



ecosystem. That's the scope of what he's able to do."

While Dolack's Montana images have a touch of the fairy tale to them, the Montana that shaped him also spoke of industry. The view from the picture window of the Dolack family's home in Great Falls was of the smokestack of the Anaconda Company smelter across the river in Black Eagle, where Monte's father, Mike, worked. Young Monte, an artist since grade school, saw his loving and supportive father leave every workday for the poisonous plant. Later, he worked at summer jobs there himself to save money for college. People told him he should hang on to that job— "You can't make a living as an artist," they said—but Monte knew he loved music and art, and that would be his life.

Dolack went to Bozeman to study at Montana State University in the excitement of the late 1960s. There, his painting professor Robert DeWeese taught him how to stretch a canvas. His adviser was the ceramic artist Frances Senska, who taught Rudy Autio and Peter Voulkos. A short try at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland was made shorter when protest of the Vietnam War disrupted the campus.

"Ronald Reagan was governor," Dolack says. "The school went on strike. He actually sent troops in. There was tear gas. I had just worked at the smelter in Great Falls for six months to get money to go to school."

Dolack came back to Montana in a move that was later to become a conscious commitment to his home landscape. "Back then, about all you'd do is finish school and leave," he says. "So many people I know left. They



went somewhere to 'make it'—San Francisco, Portland. But I wanted to be part of a community."

Dolack landed at the University of Montana, where his talent was shaped by Rudy Autio, Don Bunse, Ted Waddell and other legendary art professors. Known for his long hair and psychedelic lifestyle, Dolack traveled to Mexico in a red Volkswagen van. A visit to Voulkos and his warehouse studio in San Francisco set him in a new direction. "I was pretty inspired by the warehouse artists' scene," he says.

This page, top: A series of sketches and ideas plaster a pin-up board in Dolack's studio. He calls the board his Tree of Ideas. Above: Dolack thumbs through a small sketch book containing sketches from his trip to Venice, Italy. He is currently putting together a series from the trip. Facing page: Dolack and his wife, Mary Beth Percival, center, meet up with their friend, Nancy Birnbaum, to walk the dogs near Missoula.



In 1974, Dolack started the Warehouse Artists' Co-op on Missoula's near north side. Twenty to 30 artists at a time joined him. He left school a quarter or so short, "So I don't have my papers," he says. As long as he had a paintbrush in his hands, he was happy. "I would do anything," he recalls. "I was painting signs, logos, commissions for people. I didn't even think about the difference between commercial art and fine art that much."

Dolack's work from those days includes posters for the infamous Aber Day keggers that drew thousands of students and others with live music. After four or five years, he moved his studio downtown to offices above the Top Hat bar. He helped pay the rent by making flyers for bands playing at the Top Hat, which led to commissioned album covers. The 12-inch squares were a great medium, he says today. Album covers led to movie posters for the Crystal Theater, Missoula's art house of film. Some of Dolack's best-known work is still his posters of Bogart and Bacall and the Marx brothers. "I did one a week for a long time," he says.

The Crystal posters led to the Telluride Film Festival and a poster for John Sayles' first movie *Return of the Secaucus 7*, and soon he was doing posters for films with national distribution. His partnership with Crystal Theater owner Joe Staats took him to the 1983 New York Art Expo and a foothold in the graphic arts world.

One of his first save-the-earth commissions was for The Nature

Conservancy and then director Bob Kiesling, who were working on the Pine Butte Swamp Preserve near Choteau. "I said, 'I'm not a wildlife artist,'" Dolack remembers. "He said, 'Well, that doesn't matter.'"

Twenty years ago, all of a sudden, Monte and Mary Beth were able to buy a house. They found it in Missoula's Rattlesnake Valley and named it "Suburban Refuge" after his painting of ducks in a bathroom.

Today, Dolack and Percival lead a life that balances painting at home and travel abroad. Their studios are at opposite ends of the house, and they usually meet for lunch in the kitchen or down at the neighborhood coffee shop and restaurant, Rattlesnake Gardens. When they travel, they paint, and Dolack works on the current volume of his series of journal/sketchbooks, which are lined up in a bookcase in the studio, now spanning several decades.

And he works ever harder on saving the natural world. "Sometimes, I'm just sick," he says. "They may kill the last tiger in our lifetime. They may destroy the last habitat left for the last panda in the decade. There may be no more rhinos."

"I'm 57 now, and I want to connect with good work. The more my friends fall around me, it really reminds me that tomorrow is promised to no one. We have to act on it." ■



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