

# Channeling Spirits of the Valley

The Magnificent Six in Monument Valley



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October, 2016

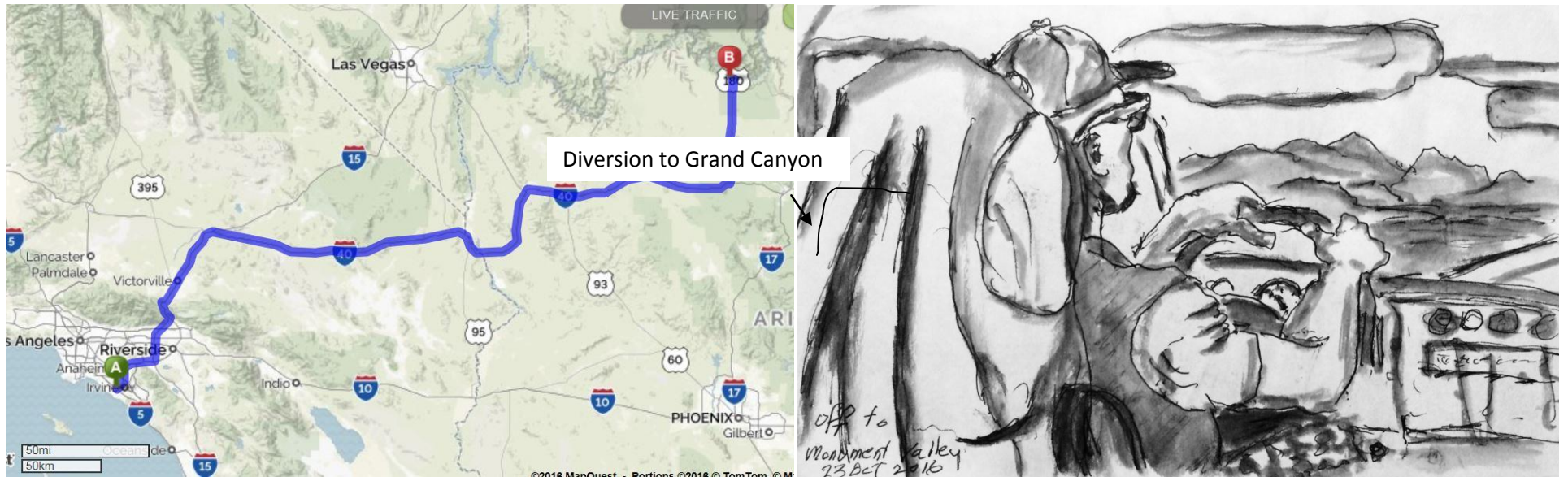
My fascination with Monument Valley began as a child, seeing it as the standard in many western movie backgrounds. I saw wagons trains passing before majestic buttes, and Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Tom Mix, and John Wayne racing through the canyons on horseback outshooting the bad guys wearing black hats. In 2016 we were glued to our TV sets as Ed Harris and Anthony Hopkins shot their way through ten episodes of Westworld on HBO. As an artist, I imagined this place as the ultimate for plein-air painting, and had it at the top of my bucket list forever. But God had put it in about the most remote place in the United States; you can't fly to it or take a train or arrive quickly anywhere near it; it's a two day drive from just about anywhere.

In October, 2016, after three years of planning and dreaming, six veteran, plein-air artists, "The Magnificent Six", stuffed in a van, drove 700 miles from Orange County, California to Monument Valley, Utah, to paint and photograph this amazing scenery of the Navajo Nation. Artists Jesse Fortune, Jim Trolinger, Geoffrey Winnie, Zeke Guspan, Steven Nakamura, and photographer, Pauline Abbott had all had expressed a special calling from this sacred place. Jesse, who had driven the van to his studio the night before, was first to load and texted the rest of us, "Fits like a glove; I don't know where the rest of you guys will put your stuff, though." We thought he was joking. Somehow we managed to squeeze in the remaining artists with an equal amount of gear into the already stuffed van. When the last easel was packed, I breathed a sigh of relief. Our license plate was 7JOY388 - what better sign could we get? The Monument Valley spirits were already with us. With spirits elevated and artists ready to paint, we began the first leg of our adventure with Indian spiritual music from Geoff's Ipod filling the van. A few of us, unable to wait, had sketchbooks already in action by the time we left Orange County.

During that week we would paint, sketch, and photograph Monument Valley almost non-stop. The group produced over thirty paintings in oil, acrylics, and watercolor, many drawings in ink, charcoal, and graphite, and hundreds of photographs. This is the story of that adventure, showing some of the art produced.

I have used some of my own paintings and drawings to illustrate the story. Pauline Abbott, our photographic artist, took most of the photographs. For the final chapter, I selected my favorite works of the artists.





We chose the shortest route from Costa Mesa to Monument Valley with an overnight stop in Williams, Arizona. (Our route would allow an easy one hour diversion through Grand Canyon on our return trip.) After driving beyond all reminders of the big city, the desert scenery kept us entertained with mountains and a wide variety of desert cacti, and the freeway rest stops seemed perfectly placed to provide an occasional leg stretching.

In the late afternoon we exited Interstate 40 along the old Route 66 to Williams, self-checked into the Buffalo Pointe Inn (they had left keys with a note) and proceeded to the world famous Sultana Saloon, which seemed to be the only place still open. Williams is a small picturesque old-west town with saloons, craft shops, hotels and a train station that provides daily train rides to Grand Canyon an hour north. With an hour of daylight remaining and all having a desire to sketch something, the unanimous decision was to return to the Williams Cemetery, which we had passed on our



way into town On Monday, we had two major objectives before us, one getting to Monument Valley in time to paint something and two, a new objective, finding earplugs. It's hard to imagine what it sounded like, during the night with four guys sleeping in one room. The scenery got better and better as we approached Monument Valley, and a few view stops were too tempting to pass up. We also found the earplugs in a Tuba City sporting goods store.. Passing through Kayenta in the early afternoon, our temptation was to make a lunch stop at Carl's Junior, until someone spotted a more interesting Navajo restaurant, the Amigo Café, which initiated us to Navajo fry bread and other local cuisine.

Jessed didn't mention how fast he had been driving, but miraculously, even with several photo stops and a longer lunch stop, we drove into Monument Valley Navajo National park an hour ahead of schedule. By this time Steven had already filled a large sketchbook, and I was well into my smaller one. The View Hotel, where our cabins were located, is the only hotel inside the Park. Cabins 1 and 18, a mile from the hotel, provided perfect, immediate painting views of the valley, and art creation began even before we were all unpacked. Combining a group dinner with our first critique of the week, we also planned our next day trip deep into the canyon.



**View from the front porch of our Cabin**



**Five artists preparing to paint from our “front yard”**



**First Paintings done from our cabin porch**



**Products for our First Critique of the day's paintings of the view from our cabins**

On our first morning in the Valley everyone was up to greet the morning chill and paint the sunrise. After a quick breakfast we boarded the van and left for the 17 mile drive into the valley to rate the best painting locations, paint at one, and choose one for the next day.





### **Sunrise in Monument Valley**

The very beginning of the descent into the valley made it clear that the road would be a challenge, not only to the driver, but also to the passengers. Most of the 17 miles involved creeping along and avoiding deep holes and maneuvering over deep ruts and large extrusions in the unfinished roadway. Much of the route is one way, so once the commitment is made, there is no turning back.

Every stop rated high as a painting location. Named rock formations, like “The Three Sisters” always attract tourists. This formation, said to represent a young nun standing between two older sisters, looked to us like three Navajos throwing a “bird” at the while man naming their sacred places. Whatever you call it, it is a beautiful formation and would certainly lend itself to painting, but few artists like being surrounded by tourists.

Halfway through the drive delivered two outstanding places with no negatives, Thunderbird Mountain and Totem Pole, places to return to paint. As eagles soared along the Thunderbird Mountain cliffs, Zeke performed a rain dance to pay homage to the spot.



**Zeke doing a rain dance at the Mesa**



**The Three Sisters, three nuns or three Navajo “birds to the white man”**

A clearing near the designated “Totem Pole” site appeared to be an ideal painting spot away from the tourist area and was chosen ultimately as the next day’s painting site. I could almost see the wagon trains, with John Wayne in the lead, passing along the gap before the soaring pinnacles. This spot had everything an artist could love, painting scenes in every direction, shade trees, space to spread out, and perfect lighting. The wind seemed to be the spirits calling, challenging us to interpret the surrounding geology. It was tempting to hang out at each stop, but we stuck to our plan to rate the entire drive, so with some heckling, we kept moving.



**The Totem Pole**

Artist's View, the next major stop, is excellent for photography but, in spite of its name, was one of the lower rated spots for painting. It was perfect for a picnic lunch. We constructed a cairn (totem) to cement our bonding and vowed to put our feelings into our work.



**A Mutual Cairn Created by the Magnificent Six at Artists View**



### **Overlooking Artist's View**

Moving on, past the inviting buttes and formations, we reentered the two way road near the only official toilet of the 17 mile drive, situated near a corral and Navajo market with horses to rent and jewelry to purchase. The toilet rates about 2 on a 1 to 5 scale where it would be more pleasant to go behind it instead of in it; nevertheless, we were glad it was there. Having spent about four hours completing all but about a mile of the drive, we stopped to paint at Merrick's Butte. The panorama rated right up there with the best we had seen, and within minutes, everyone was happily in the zone painting. There was no place for tourists to pull over so, except for the occasional touring van pausing to allow passengers to gawk, the silence was deafening and wonderful. The silence and the surroundings led me into the kind of meditative state where one feels a spiritual presence. We

began to see religious figures in the rock formations, and the shadow movements brought them to life. Pauline spotted a number of angels and others saw prophets and Christ figures. It became easy to understand why this place is sacred to the Navajo.



**Merrick's Butte**



**View from Merrick's Butte. Notice the continuously changing lighting of the buttes.**





**View from Merrick Butte, 15x22 watercolor on paper**

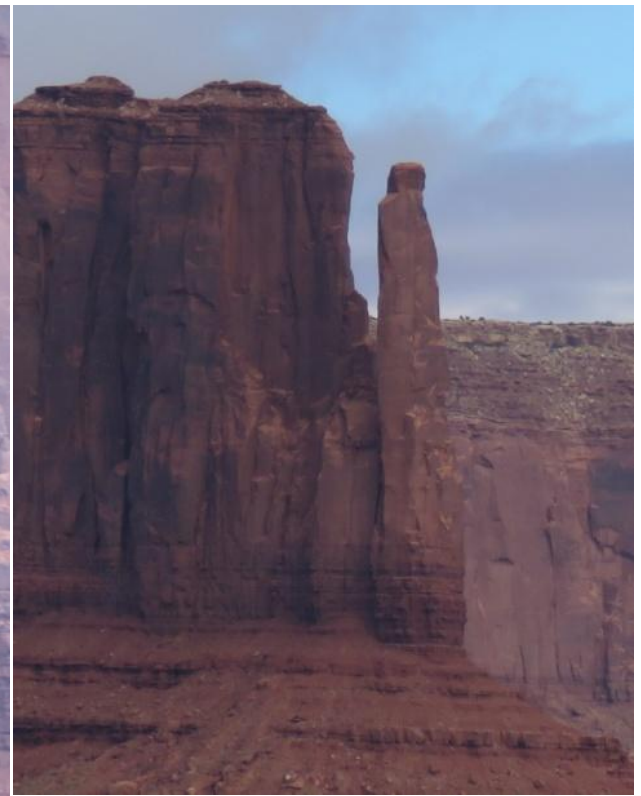


### **Paintings at Merrick's Butte**

As we painted, cloud movement across the sky turned the entire landscape into a dynamic light show as the buttes went in and out of shadow like beacons being turned on and off by the gods.



**Angel Figures in the rocks**



**A Christ Figure**



**Angels in the buttes, ink and water on paper**

The day had provided us with both excitement and exhaustion, and it was good to arrive back at our cabins. Pauline and I hiked the mile long walk to the hotel to dine on traditional Navajo food. The food was great; the alcohol-free wine renewed our appreciation of real wine. The park is designated “alcohol free”. Our limited supply went fast and, too late to be of use, we learned the location of the magic green door where one can knock three times and put in an order.

Combined with paintings from the morning sunrise, those produced at Merrick’s Butte provided ample art to discuss and critique in the evening.



### **Critique of paintings from day 3**

I couldn't wait for morning. Everyone was up at sunrise with renewed enthusiasm to paint the sunrise before heading out again into the valley to paint at The Totem Pole. This time we drove non-stop to the Totem Pole, nearly a two hour drive creeping and bouncing along the rugged road. It was a relief to exit the van. My Fitbit was telling me I had just walked six miles. In fact, walking six miles would have been much easier than riding the valley road.

“Everyone was ‘stoked’, and each staked out his favorite view, meeting his own requirements and taste. I found the perfect view from the shade of a Juniper tree, which I needed because of too much over exposure on the previous day. Pauline wandered happily, taking photos over a wide and varied span around us.



**Painting Totem Pole from the shade of a juniper tree**



**Totem Pole, 9x22, watercolor on paper**

Even though we had “our own” little spot, tourists stopped for selfies and comments any time there was room for a car to pull in. We painted at Totem Pole for hours, gathered for a picnic, painted some more, and eventually left with just enough time to leave the canyon before its official 5 PM closing time. In my opinion, our totem pole paintings were the best of the trip. By the time we arrived back at the cabin, everyone was completely exhausted, partially from the day’s excitement and partially due to the perilous ride back along the rough road back.

In the evening we feasted on a turkey chili meal prepared by Jesse and Steve. Steve, in addition to being a talented artist, is also a gourmet cook. To add icing to the cake, Steve produced a small bottle of Trollinger wine that I had given him as a gift six months earlier. We opened the meal with a toast to the valley and to my ancestors who had introduced the wine into Germany.



**Feasting on Turkey Chili, prepared by chef, Steve and sous chef, Jesse.**





#### **Critique of Paintings from Day 4**

Sunrises seemed to get better and more enjoyable each day. On Thursday, once again I stood, half dressed and barefoot on the porch using everything I had learned on the previous days. Pauline and I were just finishing a fruit and oatmeal breakfast, when Jesse appeared at our cabin looking for a walking mate to scout out painting sites within walking distance of the cabins. I had already identified a cliff behind our cabin with an even more perfect panorama than that from the porch. We returned and surveyed the spot and then discovered a possible route from there to the Wildcat Hiking Trail, which winds its way to the West Mitten Butte. We couldn't resist; half an hour later standing before the butte, we suddenly realized neither had brought water and would have to gauge our time carefully.

We stopped at the base of the butte, Jesse found a comfortable seat and lost himself in meditation, and I began sketching the butte. During those few moments of beautiful silence we both could sense the presence of the valley spirit exploding within. The immenseness of the butte before me became almost overwhelming as I struggle to get it all on paper.



**Scouting around The Mittens for the perfect painting spot**

Everyone had agreed the previous night to take advantage of views from our cabins to paint, so we returned and joined the others to search out our perfect spots. Strong winds made this a difficult choice with each of us choosing according to his wind tolerance. Jesse and Geoff elected to suffer the high winds near the valley edge to get the view they craved, while the rest of us chose to paint in the wind break provided by the cabins. The day ended with some amazing art being created.



**Day 5 Painting Critique**

A beautiful sunrise greeted us at 6:30 AM, and by now, there was no question that I had to paint it again, having increased sunrise skills and tricks during the week. Watercolor presents a special challenge in the cold morning air; unlike normal desert painting, it dries extremely slowly, while the sun rises fast. I learned to paint the entire background wet, then scrape some of it off, also using masking fluid. The buttes had to come last and needed completion later in the day after the paint had dried completely.



By 9 AM, we left for our trip back to Williams. At our first refueling stop, we spotted a Navajo jewelry market next to the station. So far the week had been so filled with painting and sketching, we had all resisted looking seriously at the Navajo goods for sale. We could resist no longer, and I left wearing a silver bracelet that I have worn every day since. Pauline left with new ear rings and Steven made a purchase for a loved one. We had planned a brief stop at Grand Canyon on the way to Williams, simply to drive along the south rim, make a few photo stops, have a picnic lunch, and

move on to Williams. One gaze at the vast mesmerizing landscape from the valley rim changed that plan. To place an artist before such a view, without allowing him to paint it, is cruel and inhuman punishment. Easels, brushes, and paint came out until 4 PM.

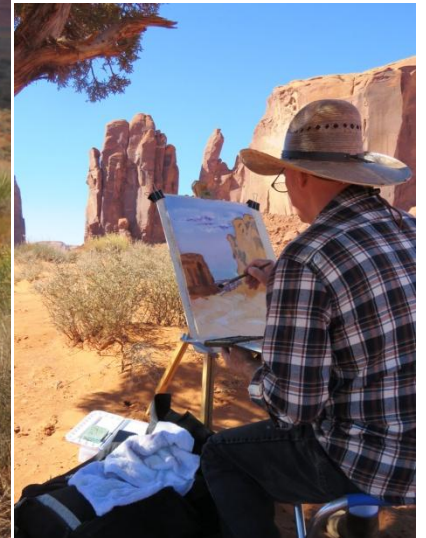
On the southern route to Williams an amazing storm skirted the highway, just missing Williams. The Buffalo Pointe Inn had left us a welcoming note and keys, and as soon as we unloaded, with no questions asked, we returned to the Sultana Saloon. After a few beers followed by dinner at the Steak House, a few guys continued to paint the town. On our previous trip through Williams I had spotted the perfect turquoise hat in one of the stores. There was just one, but if it would fit, and if it was still there, I knew it had been made for Pauline. We returned to that store; it was still there and it fit perfectly. I couldn't let her leave the store without it. The rest of the evening was more active for some than for others; however, what happens in Williams stays in Williams. It's enough to say that Williams won't forget the Magnificent Six for some time to come.

**Saturday, October 29-**By 9 AM we were on the road home, arriving in Orange County at 4 PM in time to return the van.



**Painting from the Grand Canyon South Rim**

# Art Produced at Monument Valley





**Geoffrey Winnie**



**Jesse Fortune**





**Stephen Seizo Nakamura**



**Zeke Guspan**



**Pauline Abbott**