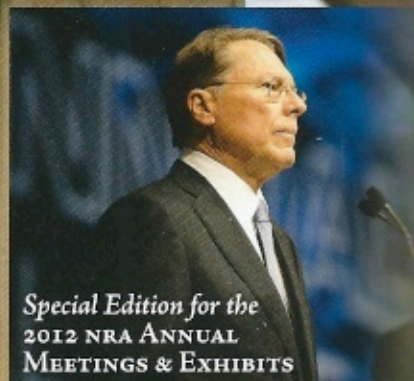


Life, Liberty and the Pursuits of Happiness

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Special Edition for the 2012 NRA ANNUAL MEETINGS & EXHIBITS

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John Se

Who's hunting who? John Seerey-Lester often paints hunting scenes from the animal's point of view, as in this painting, "Deadly Shadows."



John Seerey-Lester

BY BOB BAHR

Seerey-Lester:

Painting the Hunter and the Hunted

An encounter with a wild animal excites the human brain like few other things can. The adrenaline begins pumping, regardless of whether we consider ourselves predator or prey. Painter John Seerey-Lester depicts scenes that crackle with that drama, often from a neutral viewpoint that lets the observer consider the story from either the animal's or the person's perspective. Because the action in his paintings is usually unfolding in the bush or on a safari, the human is intruding into the animal's world, giving it an edge. The result is what Seerey-Lester calls "predicament paintings."

Seerey-Lester ©X

John Seerey-Lester

"The term has been used before, but I call these pieces 'predicament paintings' because the situations I depict are threatening in some manner," says the artist. "I try and create a scenario where it could devolve into every outdoorsman's nightmare—you meet a grizzly unexpectedly and at a disadvantage, or you encounter an elephant at night, and if you fire a gun at it, you will likely start a stampede."

Seerey-Lester's paintings excite the eye as well-executed artwork and immediately engage the brain as the implied narrative in the piece poses questions. How will the predicament be resolved? The artist isn't telling. "The bear is in the tent, the gun's off to the side ... what's going to happen? People say, 'Don't tell me the ending.' They put their own story to the painting."

Seerey-Lester has traveled the globe painting and photographing nature, and he's shown a special affection for the animals of Africa and from the wild terrain of Denali National Park in Alaska. The British-born Florida resident says if he doesn't get some painting or drawing done in a given day, he's "a bear," a recrimination to which his wife, fellow painter Suzie Seerey-Lester, will attest. "Any day in the field, I've got to paint or sketch," he continues. "I have a passion. And when I get to a new location, I go crazy."

The artist has spent quite a bit of time in the bush, and he draws upon these experiences when creating his compositions. "I've had lions and lionesses around my tent all night, for example," says Seerey-Lester. "These are incidents you never forget."

He may not have found himself in the specific predicament depicted in every painting, but Seerey-Lester won't paint a piece without rigorously researching all aspects of the scene. "I can see it in my mind's eye because I've been there," he says. "I don't paint any area I haven't visited. I don't paint South Africa because I've never been there. The elements you see in my paintings I've observed. I've seen the wildlife firsthand, and I've camped out on the savannah."

Seerey-Lester buys vintage guns or accurate replicas to increase the sense of veracity. "I do take artistic license in these paintings to some extent, but I'm really careful about the guns, depicting the right kinds they used," he says.

Over more than a decade, Seerey-Lester has worked on an informal series of paintings depicting Theodore Roosevelt outdoors. Two of these pieces are in progress right now, including one depicting an elk hunt in Wyoming. Most years, Seerey-Lester participates in the annual artist workshop sponsored by the Susan K. Black Foundation, in Dubois, Wyoming, so a trip tracing TR's tracks this past fall dovetailed well with the painter's plans.

Seerey-Lester ventured into the rugged landscape around Heart Lake in Yellowstone National Park, then headed east to Two Ocean Pass, where a stream on the Continental Divide splits to drain to the Atlantic on one side and the Pacific on the other, and then finally into Dubois, a town long favored by hunters, fishermen and artists. Before his trip Seerey-Lester read accounts of the hunt.

"I often find something in the journals that captures my imagination," says the artist. "Passages about hunters sitting around the campfire, describing the flicker of the flame and the sounds they could hear—some of the hunters were really good at capturing this."

Armed with research, Seerey-Lester came ready to take notes and paint field studies. The painter rarely sells these wonderful little landscapes, instead keeping them for reference.

When he's ready to compose the final painting, the artist enlists the help of friends and models to pose in positions suiting his ideas. "I have to find models who look similar in build to these hunters," he explains. "In the case of the older TR, I had to find someone who rides and shoots from horseback, someone who knows how to sit in the saddle when doing this, who knows how to hold a gun." Coincidentally he found a good stand-in for Roosevelt in Lee Cable, an instructor at the artist workshop he was attending, a respected artist in his own right, and a longtime friend. Seerey-Lester wrote and produced an award-winning book in 2009 titled *Legends of the Hunt*, in which more than 100 of his paintings appeared alongside stories behind the true events involving people such as Roosevelt, Frederick Selous and Ernest Hemingway. Volume II is planned for 2012, and there will be a special NRA limited edition.

Seerey-Lester's completed paintings chronicling



"The elements you see in my paintings I've observed."



Top: **"Where Night Trails Meet."** Left: **"Watcher."** Above: **"Kwenda, Kwenda!"** Seerey-Lester reminds us that the unexpected often happens in the bush, and that man is not infrequently the hapless intruder.

John Seerey-Lester

TR's hunts include "Reading at the Fly" and "Twilight Trophy," which the artist donated to the NRA and which subsequently earned a top bid of \$60,000 in the 2011 NRA-ILA Auction.

Seerey-Lester is a staunch supporter of the NRA—and a new citizen of the United States of America. Born in England, the artist has spent

years living in the U.S., finally making the decision to become a citizen last year, in part because of his appreciation for the Second Amendment.

"In England there is no such thing as the NRA or anything close to it," he explains. "And I believe in the Right to Bear Arms. It is very important to me to be a free citizen of this country and have these rights."

The gregarious painter said when he was asked in his



"I'm always looking to paint something in a different way."

naturalization interview if he would be willing to bear arms in defense of the country, he intimated that he was armed and ready at that moment.

Perhaps Seerey-Lester was drawn to the Second Amendment and the heritage of gun ownership in America because of the contrast to his experience in England. "I wasn't raised to go out hunting like boys were in this country," he recalls. "Hunting was a very different scene in England, one for the very rich. I was a beater, driving birds out of the bush toward the hunters

for two shillings and sixpence, and trying not to get shot. Manchester, where I grew up, was an industrial city, so I had to go very far to do this, and it was a rare thing. When I came over here it was an eye-opener to me that kids were given a gun and allowed to go hunting. Same with fishing. I was very impressed with the wilderness areas of America."

Many of the scenes depicted in Seerey-Lester's work unfold in twilight, the time when game roams the bush in search of food or mates. It's the artist's favorite time of day, be it before dawn or at sunset.

"I like the play of light and the shadows at twilight," he says. "In Africa the twilight is very fast—the sun disappears quickly. Because it's so near the equator, the sun just drops out of the sky. But it's a good time to see game when you are out in the bush. My love for twilight goes back to when I was a kid—I used to play out in the fields in England, and twilight was my magic time of day. I tried to be out of sight so I didn't have to come in for dinner."

His predilection for twilight also differentiates him from other painters. "I'm always looking to paint something in a different way," explains Seerey-Lester. "Whatever you paint, someone has done it before, it seems, so I play around with light to make it different." Most painters place their center of interest at the place of highest contrast in a painting—where the darkest dark meets the lightest light, drawing the eye. Seerey-Lester uses this effect in an opposite way, to his advantage.

"I try to hide the main subject by putting the main subject in the shadows or subdued in some way, and have the main emphasis of light and dark elsewhere. The animal is usually hidden in some respect. So in the camp scenes sometimes you can't really see the threat; it's there but you have to find it. In the wild, that's how it is. A lion can lie down in short grass and you'd never see it. I like that mystery, and I like to put it in a painting."

Top left: A prospector finds "Misfortune" instead of gold. Top right: In a classic example of a predicament painting, Seerey-Lester depicts a curious black bear in between a man and his rifle in "Out of Reach." Left: Seerey-Lester sees the "Eye of the Hunter" in a leopard.



John Seerey-Lester

John Seerey-Lester has many anecdotes from his time sketching or hunting in the bush, and he knows many more stories through the research he does before each painting. There's a saying among artists that you should paint what you know. Seerey-Lester knows predicaments.

The artist recently recounted a hair-raising run-in with a grizzly bear in Denali National Park, in Alaska:

"I was sketching in my sketchbook, watching a grizzly sow and her cub that was about a mile away on the tundra, looking through my scope. The camper we were staying in was about 30 yards to my left. Suddenly I see that she is running straight toward me; a moose cow had spooked her. People don't realize grizzlies can run 35 miles per hour—the speed of a car. I had to think fast. Should I stay or should I go? It may run past me and not see me if I stay still. I was thinking about running to the camper, and I was wearing sneakers. (I encourage my friends to wear boots so they are slower.) But my friend was already in the camper, locking the doors and the windows. The bear decides to run behind the camper instead of in front of it—and a good thing, because it would have bowled me over. She ran up the hill behind me and stopped at the top, and I could see her breath. I did a sketch of that and added the cub in for a stronger composition." 🐾



Bottom left: "Unexpected Visitor" makes the visitor wonder what happens next—will the occupant of the tent get to the gun in time? Will the bear simply wander away? Below: Seerey-Lester plays with the question of who is the predator in "Royal Hunter," in which a regal tiger watches a royal entourage tromp their way through the bush. Right: An example from the painter's informal series on President Theodore Roosevelt's hunting trips. This one is titled "Reading at the Fly."



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