

THE WILD LIFE

Artist April Howland crafts eye-catching paintings that showcase the beauty of animals and nature

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES



April Howland remembers the moment she first became interested in art. "I was 4 years old, and I begged my mom to buy me a couple how-to-draw books at a garage sale. One was about how to draw cats. The other was how to draw dogs," she recalls. "I would trace the images, and I was just obsessed."

Another love developed even earlier. "Growing up, we had a dog named Brandy. My dad says I picked her out of a box of puppies when I was 2 years old," the Sedona-born native says. "She lived to be 21 years old. So she grew up with me; she was part of my entire childhood. She was my best friend."

Today, Howland is one of the Valley's top wildlife and companion animal artists. From vibrant butterflies and regal raptors to majestic mammals such as horses, cougars and African elephants – and, of course, personalized portraits of precious pets – she captures nature's feathered and furry creations with impressive detail. "I'm connected with animals on so many different levels. I just feel as though I get them. And they get me," she says.

Blending vibrant hues, realism and an occasional touch of whimsy, Howland focuses on each animal's unique character. "I love painting eyes," she says. "There's so much light and depth and just soul and feeling in an eye. Eyes create the mood of the painting."

Much of the artist's inspiration comes from her journeys to countries around the globe, particularly Africa, where she's helped build school kitchens and, more recently, partnered with conservation experts to dehorn rhinos, protecting the iconic ungulate from poachers.

"Africa has really molded a lot of my wildlife work," she says. "It's the last really wild place in the world, and it's important to protect and educate people on it."

Back in the Valley, Howland and local botanical artist Dyana Hesson co-founded Art on the Wild Side at the Phoenix Zoo. The program encompasses two galleries at the zoo that showcase rotating exhibitions of wildlife and nature photography, paintings and mixed media. The galleries are open to the public, and most of the art is for sale, with 30% of the proceeds going to the zoo to help with its efforts of protecting animals in the wild.

"We're really proud of what we've done at the zoo," Howland says. "For me, it's all about supporting artists and their work, as well as supporting the conservation efforts that the zoo does."

Whether she's creating playful pet portraits or poignant portrayals of endangered species, Howland aims to inspire art lovers to connect with nature. "Each piece brings me so much joy to make," she says. "And for many of these animals, once they're gone, they're gone. So it's almost like I'm documenting them for future generations."

Learn more at www.howlandstudios.com.