

**A Tribute to James Bama
by Rodney Schroeter**

**Taken from the pages of
The Plymouth Review Current**

The two artists...

...who had the greatest impact on Your Editor's life are represented here: Steve Ditko (left) and James Bama (right). I was introduced to the work of each artist at age

eight, in 1963.

These two pieces of original art went up for auction at Heritage Auctions. — HA.com



My first Amazing Spider-Man comic, #4 (which introduced The Sandman), was drawn by Ditko.

Ditko created Spider-Man with Stan Lee in 1962, and eventually plotted the stories. (Note the credit—"Plotted and drawn by:")

In this opening page from Amazing Spider-Man #37, 1966, Ditko did something interesting. He emphasized Peter Parker; the Spider-Man mask hangs in the background—limp, less important. Showing Parker, contemplating the events and characters of the story (as if in retrospect), Ditko emphasized the importance of the characters. When Ditko plotted the stories he drew (in contrast to working with a full script from a writer), his stories were driven by the characters: their differences in viewpoint, misunderstandings, and conflicting values.

Ditko conveyed expressions not only through his faces, but through his hands. Note the tapping finger. It adds thoughtfulness to the contemplative expression, with Parker's raised eyebrow and wry smile.

In 1966, even as the popularity of Spider-Man and Dr. Strange (another character Ditko helped to develop) grew, Ditko left Marvel to work for other companies. From that time until his death in 2018, he worked for a variety of comics companies, applying his imagination by creating many, many characters and stories.

Ditko returned to work at Marvel in 1979, but refused to again draw Spider-Man or Dr. Strange.

Your Editor has had the pleasure of working with Robin Snyder to design and co-publish several books collecting Ditko's work, including *Avenging World*, *A Touch of Genius*, *The Complete Four-Page Series*, *Overture*, *Opening Acts*, *Character Twists*, *Postshadowing*, and *Curtain*.

(This original sold for \$336,000.) (Yes. It did.)

I was introduced to the art of James Bama (though I would not know his name until a few years later) through my first Aurora Universal Monster model kit, Dracula. (Bama did about 20 box-cover paintings for this series, including Frankenstein, the Wolf Man, the Mummy, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, King Kong, Godzilla, and The Munsters).

Bama painted several hundred paperback covers, including over 50 for the Doc Savage series. The Doc Savage cover shown here, for Merchants of Disaster, symbolizes the story's menace: an invention that destroys oxygen. The electrical chiaroscuro glare and the bolt of lightning makes me want to squint, as from a welder's torch, I can almost smell the ozone and feel the suffocation as Doc clutches his throat.

Bama grew up in New York City but made a radical change to his life when he and his wife moved to Wyoming in the late 1960s. He started painting interesting people he met in his new home; found he could sell those paintings at ten times what he was making on paperbacks; and began a career as a fine artist, earning him recognition as the Greatest Painter of the 20th Century. (Recognized as such, that is, by Your Editor, and perhaps a few others.)

Will I bid on either of these originals? Just thinking about it raises my body temperature a couple of degrees (Celsius), but only until I consider realistically what I think they will bring... at which point I answer: *Nah, I don't think so!* (Talk about a dash of cold water (the kind Tige was doused with (see two pages ago)).)

This original painting sold for \$50,400.

Ladies and gentlemen:
I believe our culture is
in a state of decline. That it
has been for decades.

I won't try to justify
that statement, or give de-
tails of how, or why I be-
lieve it's happening. I will
only say that I don't consider that
decline to be inevitable or irrevers-
ible. And I will identify the culture
I have in mind. It is often
called Western Civilization,
but I prefer the term Enlight-
enment Culture.

What has all that to do
with James Bama? Well, you see, I believe the work of James Bama

What can I say about **James Bama** that I haven't said 100 times already?



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has slowed that decline.

I have no idea how I
could prove that, or even
what I could use as evi-
dence. I wouldn't even
dignify the statement as an
opinion; let's call it an im-
pression, even a suspicion.

I'll tell you what values I have
found in James Bama's work for
nearly sixty years of my life. That
might help you see why I
harbor that suspicion.

I am speaking of Bama's
fine art—that is, work he
did for himself, which he

started creating after he moved to Wyoming.

I certainly don't denigrate his commercial art. It has the same





technical mastery of painting as his fine art. That's why it's worth collecting. I own two of his paperback cover paintings. They are gems, proudly displayed in our home.

But whereas his commercial work was done to illustrate another person's vision, his fine art was done strictly for his own satisfaction; to his own artistic standards; embodying purely his own vision and view of life.

And what is that view of life? What values can we find in the work of James Bama?

One of the first things I hear people say when introduced to his work is, "Why, it looks just like a photograph!"

That's not technically true. If you are intimately familiar with the esthetics of both photography and painting, you'd realize it. If you had the opportunity to compare a reference photo Bama used, and the resultant painting he did from it, you'd realize it.

But the essence behind the initial, "It's just like a photo!" remark is valid. Bama's paintings *are* realistic (he called himself an "American realist").

The *style* of a painting relates to *epistemology*—that branch of philosophy dealing with the functioning of the mind, a proper methodology of thinking, and the validation of knowledge.

What epistemological principles can we glean from the style of a James Bama painting? One obvious thing is a sense of clarity. Just as a sharp, clear photo is in focus, so, too, are Bama's paintings in focus. Bama chose to paint with clarity. His style tells a viewer, "Choose clarity of thought. Observe and think with precision. Keep your mind focused."

What, then, can we learn from the subject matter of Bama's work? A painting's *content* relates to *metaphysics*—that branch of philosophy concerned with what exists, and the nature of what exists.

Bama's chosen content, like his style, is oriented to reality.

Many of Bama's paintings are of one person. Sometimes there is a background; often, there is not. (Bama once told me, or I saw it quoted somewhere, that adding a back-



ground never improved a single one of his paintings.)

What does an artist say about reality, by creating painting after painting of individuals (background or not)? He is saying, "The individual exists."

If that seems ridiculously obvious, I congratulate you for holding that element of Enlightenment Culture. In contrast, there are entire schools of philosophy that denigrate or even deny the existence of individuals—something those who have inherited Enlightenment Culture by default just can't fathom. However, have you ever seen paintings with numerous people in them, each person anonymous and indistinguishable from all the others? An artist who depicts people that way, in work after work, is denying the importance—or perhaps even the existence—of the individual.

Building on the epistemology of clarity, and the metaphysics of reality, we now touch on the evaluative branch of philosophy, *ethics*, which is concerned with the *choices* an individual makes.

How has James Bama *chosen* to portray individuals in his paintings? Several terms come to my mind. Proud. Dignified. Seriously reflective and contemplative. Self-respecting. Joyous (despite Bama telling me once he preferred not to paint a person smiling; there are exceptions). Most importantly: efficacious.

All of these qualities of personality are acquired through choice. In other words, the individual has free will.

These are the epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical principles, and the view of the individual person, that I believe are present in James Bama's work. These are the principles valued by people who respond strongly and fall in love with





Bama's work—even if they are unable to articulate those principles. Many people (including the artists themselves) hold values (Enlightenment or otherwise) implicitly, and are unable to explicitly identify them. Some people claim to have no philosophy; yet lacking philosophy would leave a person helpless, unable to act for one's short-range survival or long-range flourishing and happiness. Some say they know nothing about art; yet they respond positively to the work of James Bama (clearly showing they know *something* about art).

Choose reality.

Choose to be in focus and keep a clear mind.

Choose to recognize the existence and importance of each individual.

Choose to understand and accept that each individual is capable of achieving (by a series of choices) pride and dignity in his/her own life.

You're only able to choose these things because you have free will. That's your nature. That's the kind of consciousness you have.

These values are inherent in the work of James Bama.

They are also the foundation of Enlightenment Culture.

As I said, I believe Enlightenment Culture is in decline. If that subject interests you, I refer you to work by Ayn Rand (the most effective defender of Enlightenment Culture in my lifetime) and Leonard Peikoff (who wrote three important books on how philosophy shapes history). These two people will help you to reverse that decline (if it is indeed happening). Artists like James Bama can slow the process, but will not stop it. While art has all the elements



of philosophy, art is not a substitute for philosophy.

The work of James Bama is more than just pretty pictures that "look just like photographs." Each one shows a viewer what kind of thinking and living is possible. Every person who responds positively to a Bama painting, stops to admire it, identifies with it, buys a print of it, introduces other people to it, has helped slow the decline of Enlightenment Culture.

If you find Bama's work speaking to you; if you find yourself passionately responding to it—you can make your own personal contribution to Enlightenment Culture. First, monitor and understand your own thought processes as you evaluate his paintings. Define your own reasons for those evaluations. Then, learn a little about philosophy and history. No PhD degrees necessary; just enough to understand how we have inherited Enlightenment Culture, whether it's truly in a state of decline, and what *you* can do about it.

James Bama died on April 24, 2022, four days short of his 96th birthday.

For reasons I have given here, I consider James Bama the greatest painter of the 20th Century.

Of course, he was not the only painter to express Enlightenment values. There were many before him; many contemporaries; and those who came after.

And now? The 21st Century eagerly awaits his equal.

Clint Eastwood Calls James Bama

This is the story, as I remember Jim telling it to me.

Jim was working away at home (as he did so many hours each day) when he received a call. The woman identified herself as Clint Eastwood's secretary.

She told Jim that Clint Eastwood really wanted Bama to paint him for a movie poster (supposedly Pale Rider, which was released in 1985).

Jim did not want to do it, but he told the secretary, if Eastwood really was interested, Jim wanted Eastwood to call and talk to him.

Some amount of time goes by.

Jim gets another call, and it is indeed Clint Eastwood. After some discussion, Bama set the terms under which he would paint Eastwood:

- Eastwood would have to come to Wyoming and pose for Jim.
- This would not be commercial work (for a movie poster).

Bama said he would paint Eastwood as a fine art piece, like other work he was doing at this time.

Eastwood seemed to find those conditions acceptable.

Did it ever happen? Sadly, no.

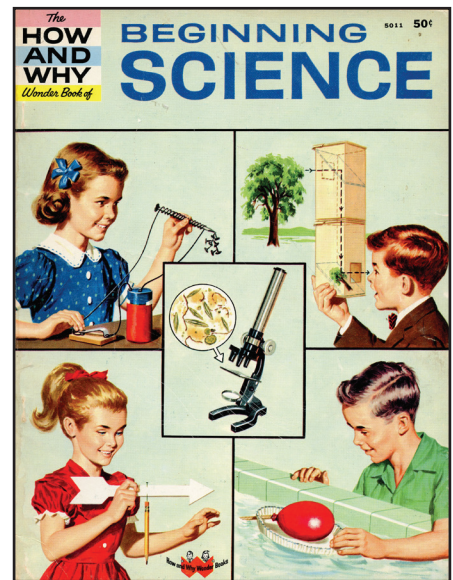
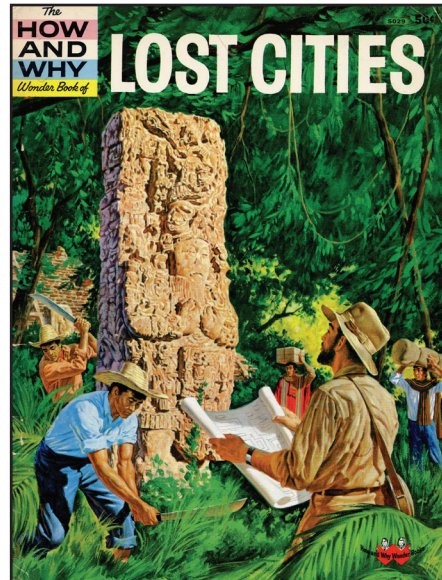
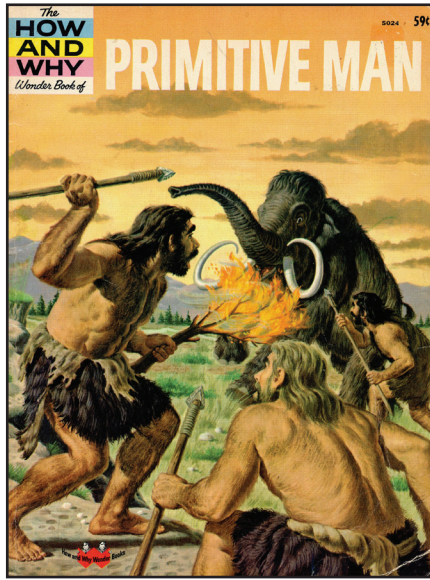
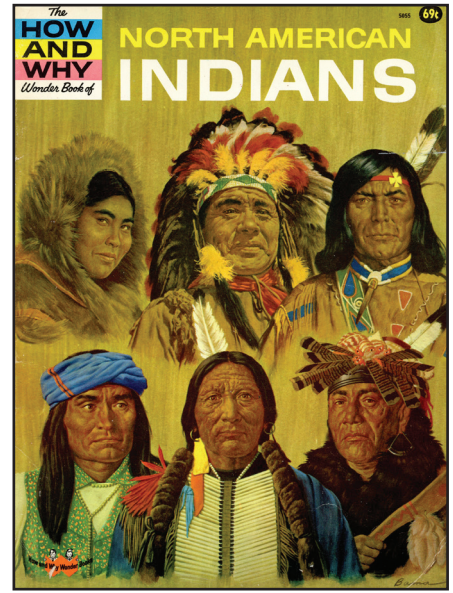
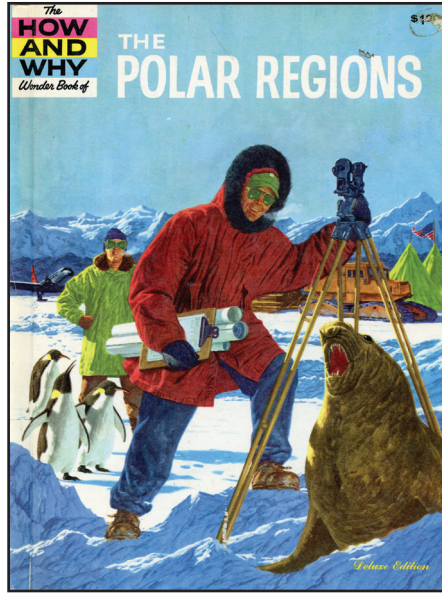
Two similar incidents took place. The Greenwich Workshop, which published Jim's limited-edition prints, convinced him to paint Paul Newman As Butch Cassidy. He did, in 1990 (see the bottom of pages 16-17).

Bama was also asked to paint Wes Studi as Magua, from Last of the Mohicans. He did.

Both works were released as prints by the Greenwich Workshop.

The How and Why

James Bama



Who out there remembers these educational booklets, published from about 1960 to 1965?

Fun, weren't they?

There were dozens of titles, but the few you see here had cover art by James Bama.

You'd think the publisher would state on the title page, "Cover art by James Bama." But no. That would make the job of an obsessive Bama collector like Your Editor too easy. (Only one of these has his signature on the cover art, at the bottom



right corner; can you spot it?)

I first learned Bama had done some of these in 1987 or 1988, when I stayed with him and his family, going through his files and making lots of notes. I discovered a few he did not have copies of, recognizing his style and verifying them with him.

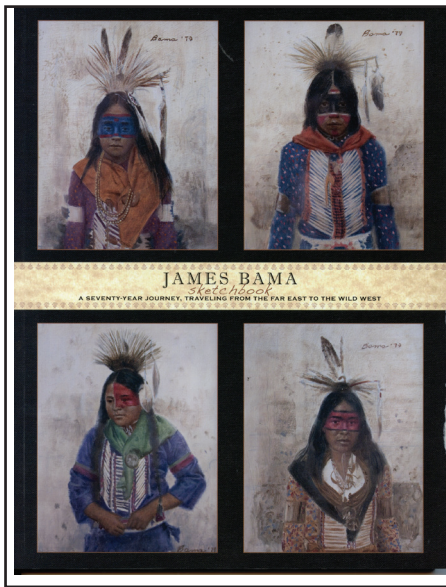
The inside pages were not illustrated by Bama. Of course, *those artists* were identified.

One more achievement of Bama's career as an illustrator.

Preliminaries

Generally, this was James Bama's working procedure:

- He would take many photos. This could be arranged with the subject, at a specific time and place; wearing certain clothing; including a certain item (wagon, saddle, rifle, etc.). Or it could be what Jim called "grab shots," taken where and when it happened—at a pow wow, rodeo, or other special event.



- Jim would develop the photos. Most would be black and white, because he preferred to compose a painting with his own color scheme. The exception would be clothing where the colors had historical or cultural significance.

- Selecting the photo with the best composition, Jim would make a preliminary pencil sketch on tissue paper.

- Jim would then create a very small, preliminary color painting, establishing the color scheme for the final work.

- With the photo and the two preliminaries at the upper corner of his painting board for reference, Bama would create the finished painting.

Preliminaries can be interesting, because they often give insight into the artist's creative process.

Bama's prelims are as good as (or better than) the finished work of many artists. In fact, some auction houses have listed prelims by Bama, not even knowing they were not the finished work.

So the availability of a book devoted to preliminary pencil and paint pieces by Bama offers an excellent opportunity to enjoy these pieces.

James Bama Sketchbook is one of three excellent books published by Flesk Publications featuring Bama's work. Sadly, none are currently available from the publisher. But they can be found on the secondary market (eBay, for example).



In 1986, I went to Cody, Wyoming, where the Big Horn Gallery had an exhibition of Jim Bama's work. I also had (at Bama's invitation) a very agreeable visit of several hours at his home (which was about 18 miles from Cody). The finished paintings at the Gallery were priced at \$10,000, \$20,000, \$30,000... *and up*, which was out of my reach. I settled, instead, for the purchase of this color preliminary, which is reproduced here full size.



Bama's neighbor, Dee Smith. — From the Flesk Publications book, James Bama Sketchbook



Wes Studi, a Native American actor who appeared in Dances With Wolves, posed several times for Bama. Bama completed several paintings of Studi, including one in Studi's role as Magua, from Last of the Mohicans. — From the Flesk Publications book, James Bama Sketchbook



The Sketchbook features Bama's comments on each piece. For the one at left, he wrote, "This is an adorable little Indian boy. I've always wanted to paint this but never did. This was at Crow Fair. There were a lot of great-looking kids, all dressed up in powwow finery." The man at right was a personal friend of Jim's. — From the Fleck Publications book, James Bama Sketchbook

The Best Photo I Ever Took of James Bama

When I visited Jim Bama at his Wyoming home, he would carry on a conversation as he worked. And this photo, taken in the late 1980s, shows very well *how* he worked to create a painting:

On his board are two photos he took, seemingly in different contrasts.

At the upper left is the pencil sketch he did from the photos. The actual oil painting is partly covered by one photo.

The stick (antenna?) in Bama's left hand is to rest his right wrist, as he works on the painting, so as not to smudge it.

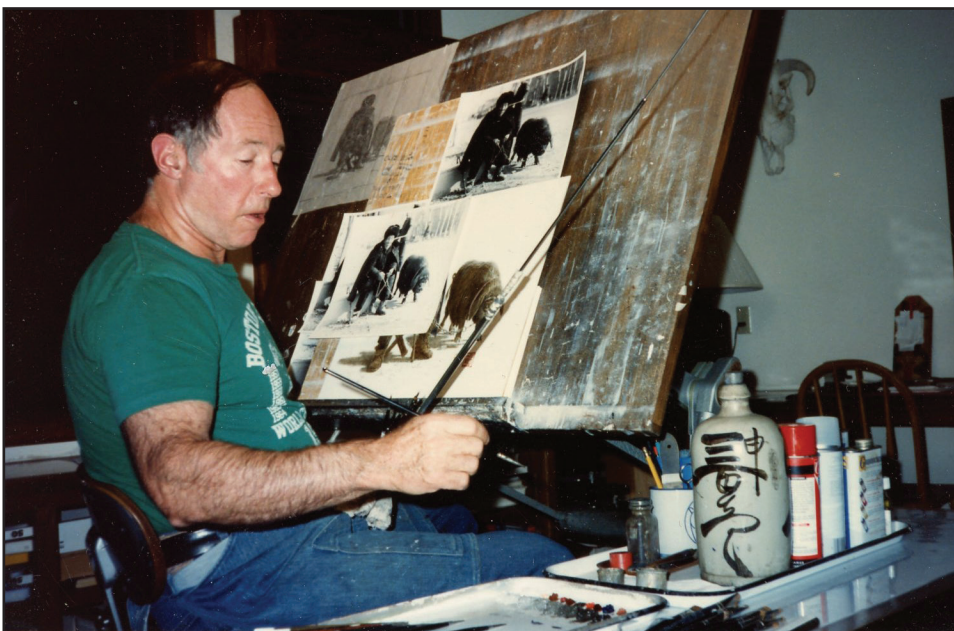
You may well ask (if you can make out the subject), "How many elderly Chinese men with pot-bellied pigs are there in Wyoming?"

Most likely, very few.

Bama was asked in 1987 to join a group that toured China. Bama took over 1000 photos on that trip.

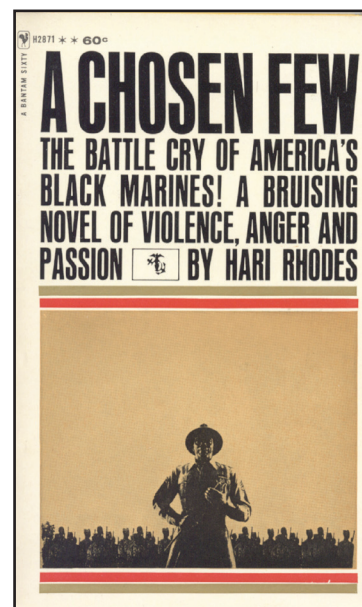
The Greenwich Workshop, which published Bama's signed and numbered prints, released several China-themed prints, and planned to release the old man and pig.

But then came the Tiananmen Square massacre, which even some of the staunchest apologists for dictatorships could not ignore, and demand for All Things China diminished. This was never published as a print.





“Why Did I Even Bother?” Dept.: Jim Bama painted the formidable military officer at left. He likely hired a model; had to find the right uniform; and worked long hours to create this very effective piece. So what does the art director at Bantam Books do? Shrinks it down to near-illegibility for this paperback cover. Why? Why?? — Thanks again to Tom Roberts for identifying the paperback this image was used on. I found a transparency of this painting among Jim’s files; was not familiar with it; ran ads asking if anyone knew where/if it had been used; finally heard from Tom.



Fame is a Funny Thing

Some people want fame. Badly. And that can be an innocent thing, if it's not a matter of wanting to be liked by others, to cover up a serious lack of self-esteem. (Because there is no substitute for regarding oneself positively.)

Some people regard fame with indifference, yet that fame affects their lives in some not-so-positive ways.

James Bama is an example. I can't imagine a person more indifferent to the fame that descended upon him. But it still had some annoying consequences.

I wrote to Jim in 1980, asking if I could visit him if ever I were out in his part of Wyoming. (Had he said yes, I would "just happen" to make a special trip to be in that part of the world.)

He was good enough to reply, but explained that he discouraged visitors. After his *Western Art of James Bama* book was released by Bantam in 1975, he wrote me, he had over 200 visitors during the summer, mostly strangers who just dropped in.

As Jim told me in later years, he'd explain to people that he couldn't get any work done that way. What if he were to stop in unannounced where these people worked, he would ask, and want to visit for a couple of hours?

I can understand the widespread enthusiasm for Jim's fine art ("western") work. For decades, so-called artists threw away everything fine about fine art: rules of perspective, artistic technique, coherence, until "art" was just a bunch of paint thrown on paper. Along comes James Bama, using actual artistic techniques and portraying dignified human beings. The honest majority of people responded like starved refugees being presented with a royal banquet.

But Jim is not famous only for his fine art. He has many admirers for his Doc Savage covers. I count myself as one; I purchased many Doc paperbacks in Plymouth or Sheboygan in the late 1960s and early 70s.

I can understand admiration for the Doc Savage covers. But there are those who love the Doc covers, but don't care for Jim's later fine art.

So when fans contacted Jim about his Doc Savage covers, he was flattered that people still remembered and liked that work he did decades before, but he considered it in the past; of little relevance to his present life; "yesterday's news," as he'd put it.

Many asked him if he'd do a re-creation of a Doc Savage cover for them. Some older artists

welcome that; it can be lucrative, and might be their only source of income. But Jim was not interested.

I was 13 years old when I saw my first Doc Savage paperbacks with cover art by Jim Bama. But his influence on my life, and on many others, began even earlier.

In the 1960s, Aurora issued plastic assembly kits of famous Universal monsters: *Frankenstein*, *The Mummy*, *Wolf Man*, *Dracula* (my first, at age 8), *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *King Kong*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Dr. Jekyll as Mr. Hyde*, *The Addams Family House*, *The Munsters*...

Jim did about 20 paintings for Aurora.

Just as with Doc Savage, there are fans who focus on Jim's art for Aurora... and have no interest in his other work. (Which I find incredible.)

Jim told me, and said in interviews, that he grew to dislike doing these monster paintings so much, that the art director would drop off an assignment for one while Jim was out for lunch. (At that stage of his illustration career, he was working for an illustration studio in New York City, where he grew up.)

Fame is a funny thing? That's right. And sometimes people are fortunate enough to be famous for what they are most proud of.

But here's something ironic (and maybe incomprehensible).

Above are three paintings that have been sold (or is selling) by Heritage Auctions.

The Aurora Munsters box cover painting (1965) sold a year ago for \$81,250.

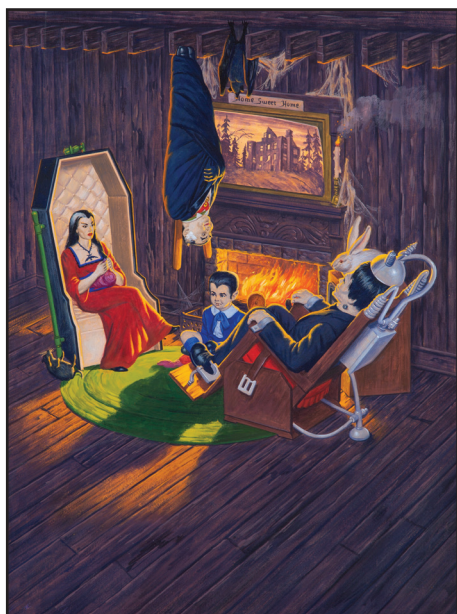
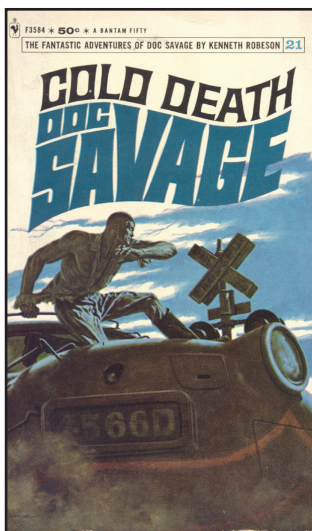
The Doc Savage painting for *Cold Death* (1968) sold for \$68,750.

The fine art painting, *Dee Smith with Saddlebag* (1973), sold last year for \$21,250.

Sometimes, a person learning that I knew Jim would ask me, to ask him, to do this or that, related to Doc Savage or the Aurora kits. Rather than pass that request on, I'd explain as best I could that Jim had the freedom and passion to paint what he wanted. While he acknowledged the skill, effort, and time that went into his commercial work, he was proud of it, but not interested in revisiting it. No matter what level of fame was attached to it.

Instead, from 1971 on, he concentrated on the work he considered important.

And I'm glad.



A tale of three original paintings, all auctioned off through Heritage Auctions. From left to right: Box cover for *The Munsters*, an Aurora plastic assembly kit from about 1965; cover for *Cold Death*, a Doc Savage adventure (1968); *Dee Smith with Saddlebag* (1973). Which of these would you most like to hang on your wall? Which one do you think brought the highest price? (See article for that.) – HA.com