

A Tribute To LeRoy Neiman (1921-2012) And An Original Essay On Wildlife Painting By The Artist

WAJ Interviews David Wagner About Curating Several Neiman Exhibitions Over The Years

Written By Todd Wilkinson, Editor and Publisher, Wildlife Art Journal



LeRoy Neiman's 'The Big Five'

"First and foremost a colorist. His tones are vivid, jarring, and at times, gaudily biting; they explode in an effusion of reds, blues, pinks, greens, and yellows; they shimmer and dance across the surface plane, electrified bits of pure energy." — Malcolm Lein on LeRoy Neiman

By Todd Wilkinson, Wildlife Art Journal

LeRoy Neiman died on Wednesday, June 20, 2012 at the age of 91. For Baby Boomers, in particular, his art marked our coming of age. The scenes he painted corresponded with what we were told was important about culture and hero worship, high society and people picking themselves up by their bootstraps, our growing awareness about nature and even the seductive beauty of the bawdy.

Someone once described Neiman as a brighter contemporary blend of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Salvador Dali, and Andy Warhol. Indeed, his brand of impressionism was amalgamation. While detractors called him a mere illustrator, he had been both a student and teacher at the Art Institute of Chicago where he demonstrated by example the connection between composition and superb drawing.

It was no coincidence that Neiman's rise corresponded with the proliferating influence of color television that gave the iconography of visual imagery an impact it had never possessed before. Where the scope of Neiman's name recognition bumped up against limits, based upon the circulation of magazines that published his work, his popular appeal was extended by TV and the success of serigraphs made available to middle class admirers of decorative art.

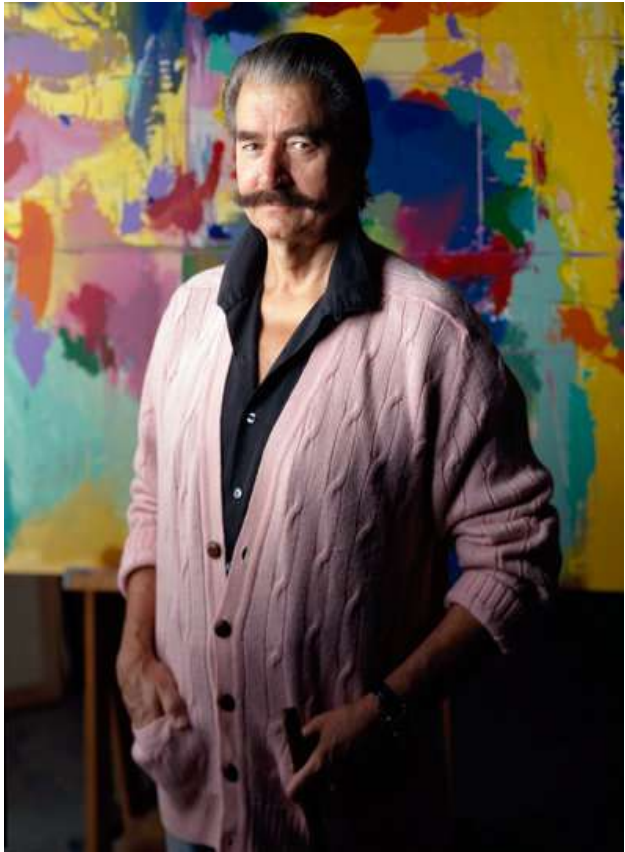
While he is not known as an animal artist, the fact is that he loved to paint them for they reflected his own sense of adventure and vitality. And viewers remember his animal paintings. He could portray a lion as regally as he did Joe DiMaggio or Mickey Mantle; the patterns on a cheetah's coat as adeptly as a kleikisopic outdoor cafe scene in Paris; a charging rhino or elephant with the same drama

as a sailing regatta, racehorse at the Kentucky Derby or sprinter at the Olympic Games. Do you remember that he was the official artist of five Olympics? And then there was his friendship and immortal depictions of boxer Muhammad Ali. Neiman became famous but through it all he was modest, accessible and generous.

Born in 1921 in St. Paul, Minnesota, he had a tough upbringing. Neiman pursued art studies in Chicago and moved to New York City in 1963. His urban impressionism came to represent the very essence of contemporary painting for Americans during the 1970s, 70s and 80s. A measure of his stature, Neiman's work was featured in one-man shows at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. and the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia.

A person who got to know Nieman well was [David J. Wagner](#), a friend of *Wildlife Art Journal's* and an art curator who put together several exhibitions featuring Neiman's wildlife pieces. What follows is an interview with Wagner about the life and career of Nieman.

TODD WILKINSON: You curated several shows for LeRoy Nieman over the years and you say he was "one of a kind". How so?



DAVID J. WAGNER: So many ways The Wall Street Journal once stated that LeRoy Neiman was the richest artist in America. Based on the size of his charitable donations, he had to have also been the most generous, Though he is known to the public for his flashy signature style of painting, I've always admired LeRoy for his incredible ability to portray action, and his skill as a draftsman.

LeRoy Neiman could draw with skill and results equal to any of the greatest old masters in history. I once attended a fancy dinner at the Millennium Hotel in New York City and while I seated next to him, he took a pencil out of the pocket of his sportcoat, and on a napkin whipped off a portrait of some celebrity - I can't remember who - and created a most masterful drawing I've ever seen at the bat of an eye . It was really good, I mean *really* good. Critics can say what they will, but Neiman's ability to draw is indisputable.

- "Once when I was visiting LeRoy to select works for an exhibit and we were shooting the breeze, he said to me, 'Do you know what my favorite four-letter word is?' I said, no. He said, "more." —Wagner on Neiman

LeRoy was totally connected in the world of celebrities, not just sport celebs, but Hollywood, music, and politics. In spite of all that, I found him to be as genuine and personable with joe-six-pack as he was with billionaire collectors or touring Bo Derek with me through his retrospective exhibition or shooting the breeze with Yogi Berra at an event in Central Park. LeRoy Neiman was amazing.

TW: What were the circumstances that brought you two together?

WAGNER: When I was Executive Director of the Kentucky Derby Museum at Churchill Downs, the museum gave LeRoy a thirty year retrospective exhibition in 1995, the same year he was selected as official artist of the Derby, and another exhibition in 1997 two years later. LeRoy knew Louisville well, not only from a long-standing relationship to thoroughbred horse racing, but also with Ali, who is from Louisville, and who was a perennial subject of LeRoy's over the years. Two years later when I was living and working in New York, LeRoy and his management team arranged for the then-mayor of St. Paul, (Neiman's home town), to retain me to conduct a best practices survey of museums (e.g. the Warhol Museum, the O'Keeffe Museum, etc) and develop a master plan for a LeRoy Neiman Museum. It never panned out due to lack of funding, but it was a great dream.



Left to Right: David J. Wagner, Dave Liniger, Chairman of the Board, RE/MAX International and founder of The Wildlife Experience Museum in Denver and Neiman at the exhibition opening for "On Safari" in 2003.

Photo by Lynn Quayle

After I left New York and moved back to Door County, Wisconsin, I led a museum collector group associated with the museum there on a tour in NYC, which included a visit to LeRoy's studio and lunch with him at Tavern On The Green in Central Park. After that, I then curated another retrospective of LeRoy's works on paper in Wisconsin that I toured to the National Art Museum of Sport in Indianapolis. In 2003, I curated yet another exhibit of LeRoy's African wildlife art. Dave Liniger, chairman of RE/MAX International and founder of The Wildlife Experience Museum in Denver, Colorado, flew LeRoy and his entourage out for the opening in his private jet. LeRoy wrote a very complimentary note to me about that.

TW: As the author of the book [American Wildlife Art](#), a historical overview of animal art in the northern western hemisphere, where did Neiman fit in?

WAGNER: Neiman's wildlife art doesn't fit in. His work is all about style. And his style was all his own. I guess that's the point.

LeRoy Neiman: On Safari was the title of a book that came out in 1997 that was devoted to "the Big Five" (Lion, Elephant, Cape Buffalo, Rhinoceros and Leopard) and "Animal Land", as Neiman called it (Zebra, Giraffe, Baboon, Monkey, Warthog, Cheetah, Wildebeest and Hippopotamus), as well as Masai people whom he had encountered and drawn in Africa. He dedicated a body of work from his experiences in Africa which I curated into an exhibition at The Wildlife Experience in Denver in 2003. Neiman's signature style took wildlife subject matter in a direction that was entirely new and unknown in the genre per se. He imbued his subjects with the kind of flair and bravura that accentuated their persona or particular beauty.



Neiman's **'Portrait of a Cheetah'**

All about style, his wildlife paintings have little to do with the world of wildlife art as we usually think of it. I suppose the same could be said for Andy Warhol, and his series on Endangered Species.

He once wrote in the catalog for one of our exhibitions following trips he had taken to Africa: "The artist benefits in awe from the experience of seeing wildlife in natural surroundings, notices what they notice, observes their moves as they scheme, conspire and maneuver. I was lucky to record these wild, independent creatures in their natural habitat. Their freedom is contagious."

(NOTE: WAJ readers can feast on Neiman waxing upon his impetus for painting wildlife in an essay at the bottom of this story.)



Neiman's sketch, '**Rhino**'

TW: Many people don't realize that Nieman was a kid of Swedish ancestry from St. Paul. His father abandoned the family and Nieman, like Hibbing, Minnesota native Robert Zimmerman (Bob Dylan) adopted a new public identity and persona. In your mind, what *was* Nieman's persona?

WAGNER: He was also of Middle Eastern descent, and proud of it. LeRoy and I talked at length about image. When he appeared somewhere, like ring side at a major prize fight, or on the sidelines with the NY Jets, or a celebrity event in Las Vegas, he wanted to be noticed.

To be successful, his persona had to be larger than life, and he wanted and needed that to establish himself as an artist of celebrities (who, I might reiterate, were not just sports celebs). LeRoy had a wide range of subjects, and a wide circle of patrons lined up to spend six figures, among all of whom he was quite popular. In person, LeRoy was totally affable, so-much-so that he could disarm sitters of portraits so their real self would shine through for him to capture.

TW: Neiman is best remembered perhaps for his sporting work that appeared in Sports Illustrated magazine. He portrayed some of the giant athletic figures of our time, from Ali to chessmasters Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer to Olympic figures, golfers, tennis players and stars on the gridiron and baseball diamond. How was he different from other illustrators of his time?

WAGNER: Style distinguished Neiman from the rest of the crowd, but also his study, portrayal and pursuit of "the good life." When he worked with Hugh Hefner in the early years of Playboy, LeRoy went out on assignment to capture "the good life" in art - The World Cup in sailing, Le Mans, Wimbledon, the Masters, the cafes of Paris, etc. etc. etc. There is no one who compares to LeRoy in terms of his style, and his breadth of subject matter in this arena. Add to that wildlife, celebrities, etc., and you have one replete career. But of course, it wasn't just about painting for publication, though his serigraphs clearly expanded his market.

TW: In the Neiman shows you curated, what kinds of conversations did you have with LeRoy and his wife, Janet Byrne Neiman, in deciding what would be in the exhibits?

WAGNER: Once an exhibit was agreed upon, LeRoy would invite me to his home and studio at the Hotel des Artistes at Central Park West and 67th Street in Manhattan, and there we would go through files and photos of artworks, and originals, in an effort to compose an exhibit. He was generous to a fault; and never dictated the content of an exhibit. Instead he would give me options, always more options than I could ever use; and in cases where he did not own an artwork, he would open doors for me to approach collectors about loans. Janet would be there, but also, in the years I knew and worked with him, his assistant Lynn Quayle, was invaluable, as was Richard Lynch, the president of Hammer Galleries on 57th which represented LeRoy.

TW: If you had to choose some of your favorite Neiman wildlife pieces which ones would they be—and why?

WAGNER: I love his cheetahs and leopards, his big dark charging elephants, his charcoal drawing of rhinos, and his elegant, Playboy-esque drawings of tall, leggy, well-endowed and beautiful Maasai women.

TW: Answer this question: Neiman was more like Andy Warhol or, say, Robert Bateman or Bob Kuhn?

WAGNER: I see no relationship to Bateman or Kuhn. Of Warhol and Neiman, I suppose their celebrity status as artists in their own right provides some commonality. If you were to ask normal, every-day people in the 1970's or '80's, "Who is the most famous artist living today?," I would imagine most would have answered, Warhol or Neiman.

Certainly during the Olympics, when Neiman drew live before millions and millions on ABC, his fame was indisputable. I am not sure who fills that void today. I bet if you asked the same question, most members of the public would not have an answer. Another commonality between Neiman and Warhol is their emphasis on style; and of course, on reliance on serigraphy to market their work.

TW: What kind of knowledge can contemporary wildlife artists and collectors glean from studying Neiman the artist?

WAGNER: Several lessons. First, the importance of draftsmanship; next, the importance of personal style; after that, the importance of marketing skill, know-how, and relentless drive if you want to be commercially successful; then I would add, the importance of celebrity afflictions—It may sound odd or oblique here, but John James Audubon developed and exploited celebrity affiliations to propel his career and fame; After that, I'd say surrounding yourself with people who relate to your work and can advance your influence. In LeRoy's case it was Playboy magazine, Knoedler Publishing, and Hammer Galleries, among others.

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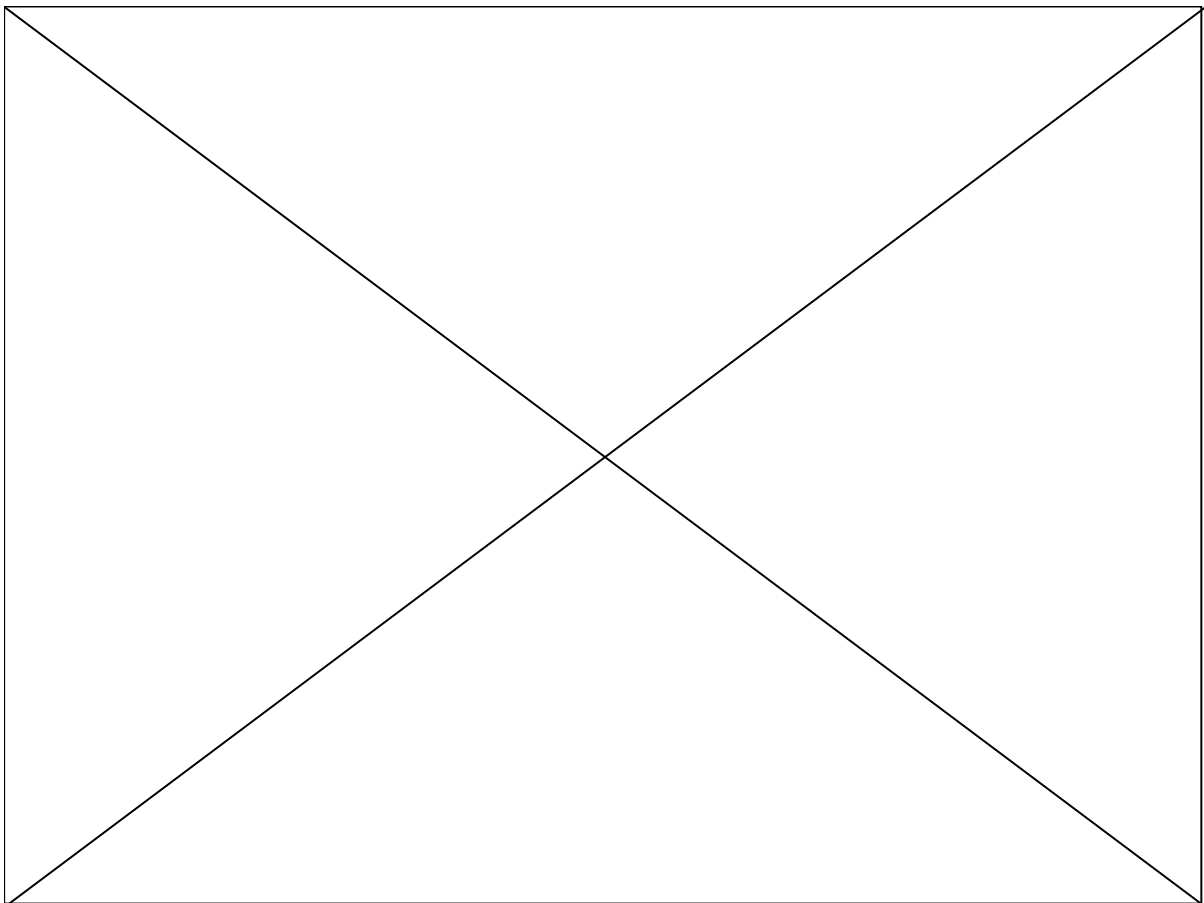
TW: One last story about Neiman you'd like to share....

WAGNER: I have two.

I was once in Havana attending the Havana Jazz Festival, only to return to the States and, during a phone conversation with LeRoy shortly thereafter, I learned that he had been in Havana at the

very same time I was there. The only difference was, while I was attending concerts of great Cuban jazz legends, LeRoy was drawing portraits of Fidel Castro in person in undisclosed locations throughout the country. I thought to myself, "only LeRoy." The huge charcoal drawings that he created were definitely inspired in their sense of power, and later displayed in an exhibit at Pratt School of Art & Design in Brooklyn. From my phone call with LeRoy, it sounded like the two guys really hit it off; perhaps because they could commiserate with one another, having each had to abandon their much beloved iconic Cuban cigars due to doctor's orders.

My next story is this: Once when I was visiting LeRoy to select works for an exhibit and we were shooting the breeze, he said to me, 'Do you know what my favorite four-letter word is?' I said, no. He said, "more."





Neiman's 'Cougar'



An Artist Statement By LeRoy Nieman, prepared for the catalog accompanying the exhibition "On Safari" (2003) held at The Wildlife Experience, Parker Colorado

By LeRoy Neiman

The notion of painting on safari began while kicking around ideas with film producer, Robert Haimi, Sr., for a short documentary. Bob's spread in Kenya, with animal orphanage and landing strip, and the Mount Kenya Safari Lodge adjacent to it, would provide the ideal base of operations.

I had been to Kenya once before, in 1970 as a guest of Hugh Hefner aboard the Big Black Bunny plane, with a half dozen other Playboy pals and an equal number of bunny hostesses. Having been exposed to Samburu and Maasai and all those wild animals, and having experienced safari adventure in maximum comfort, I was primed.

Doing the film of course, I would be sketching and painting in the bush on camera. No problem there, I'd drawn big game animals when I was a kid - stuffed versions indigenous to natural history museums. My interest increased when, as a GI Bill student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, class projects took us to the city's Brookfield and Lincoln Park zoos to draw live animals, and to the Field Museum, where we sketched the mighty beasts lifelike in dioramas.



Neiman self-portrait featuring his trademark cigar

My studies in Chicago had also introduced me to the animal paintings of past centuries. The studio hunt paintings of Peter Paul Rubens captured for me the essence of the big cats, though the African bush was not yet a firsthand source to 17th century artists. It would take the wanderlust attitudes of the 19th century to raise the bar, resulting in an abundance of realistic art by animal painters and sculptors with live exposure to their subjects.

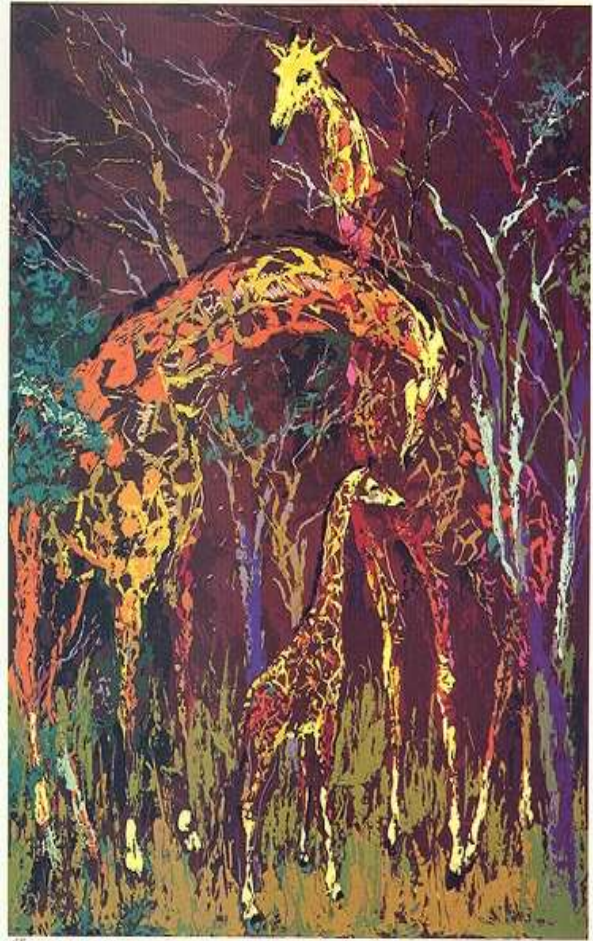
With these references, and my admiration for the untamed, self-sufficient creatures of the wild, I went into the bush with my gear. To get acquainted and acclimatized, we'd fly low in a puddle-jumper, over thundering elephants, galloping zebras, and leaping wildebeest by the thousands.

For the land work, a Hummer was at our disposal. I'd fill sheets of charcoal paper with live drawings, and my sketchbook with quick impressions of fleeting animals, then settle down to render lazy lions and elephants browsing oblivious to our presence.

At right: 'Giraffe Family'

My main intent was to bag on canvas, the big five: the golden, ferocious lion; the peace-loving elephant, his heart so big it weighs sixty pounds; the vicious, unpredictable cape buffalo; the near-sighted rhino, a creature of habit; and lastly the imperious leopard, a loner so elusive he kept us in search of him for days.

The plan was to sketch the animals live all day long from the safety of the Hummer, returning to camp to work on stretched canvases we'd lugged from New York. But working from on-the-spot sketches back at camp proved daunting, so before



long, we were hauling the large canvases along with us. We'd set up and work in the bush, out in the open, blazing heat, a roly-poly hippo sunbathing nearby, or frisky, bickering monkeys and poodle-like baboons, snorting and snacking politely in social klatches, or the feisty warthog strutting stealthily, sturdily into view, curious about what was happening.

Off in the tall grass, a lion might be blinking at us, or a rhino looking on with one eye. Figuring into this drama and providing one of its most rewarding memories, was my encounter with the Maasai tribesmen. Tall, slim, with a pure naturalness to their lean, graceful bodies, they are elegant, arrogant, and aware of their good looks. The result of generations of hunting and being hunted, they have the same proud, dignified bearing as the animals - keen, alert, attuned - a beautiful attitude.

Mornings we'd encounter the aristocratic giraffe, and the mighty elephant, the ornery cape buffalo, or the sleek, speedy, dog-like cheetah, already on the hunt, and everywhere, the graceful, grazing minions, always alert, sometimes frozen in fear of being stalked. Occasionally we'd come upon the carrion from a previous night's supper - first the king of beasts would get his lion's share, leaving the leftovers to the hyenas, then the vultures would descend to pick the

bones, and lastly, thousands of ants would take over to clean up - not unlike the social structure of man.



Neiman's **'Portrait Of A Leopard'**

Day's end back at camp, a gourmet dinner washed down with champagne, we'd sit in the main tent sipping liqueurs as the fire crackled, and review film takes of the painting's progress. All around us, nocturnal creatures engaged in their affairs, sometimes too close for comfort, like the night spent on the Mara River, when a few curious hippos paid a visit. We listened frozen as they grazed outside our tents.

The artist benefits in awe from the experience of seeing wildlife in natural surroundings, notices what they notice, observes their moves as they scheme, conspire and maneuver. I was lucky to record these wild, independent creatures in their natural habitat. Their freedom is contagious.