

When I paint I forget about being handicapped . . . “I am pulled into the dimensions of the canvas before me and I feel free.” Such are the feelings of artist, Wendell B. Johnson, about his craft. The subjects that fill his canvas are the landscapes and mountains of his native Utah home—from the Wasatch Mountains of the north to the red rock country of the south. His approach to his art is both bold and subtle, realistic and colorful.

Born in 1948, Wendell showed a natural ability for drawing at an early age. Through his school years he excelled in art and worked on decorative murals for classrooms. Later in high school, he won awards for cover designs in an open competition for the yearbook. “My favorite pastime then was to go to the Springville Museum of Art during my free time and study the paintings.” There he gained an appreciation for a certain approach to painting—concepts based on realism. He admired the work of John Hafen, John F. Carlson, Arnold Friberg, and Paul Salisbury. He decided that a career in some branch of the arts was the only life for him.

That career was cut short in the summer of 1964 when a diving accident left Wendell paralyzed from the neck down. Without the use of his hands and arms the hoped-for dream of becoming an architect was gone. The paralysis was permanent, but after six months Wendell gained a limited amount of use in his shoulders and biceps. While at a rehabilitation center in California, therapists helped him strengthen his upper arms and a special hand brace was made to enable him to hold a pencil. “At first it was frustrating—like beginning all over again as a child—I was only able to make unintelligible scribbles.” But, with persistence and determination Wendell continued to work until he was doing thumbnail sketches. Two years later, he graduated from pencil to brush and watercolor.

