



# ART WIZARD

DAVID GOSSELIN

by  
Margaret Clevenger





David Gosselin in his Livingston, Alabama studio

*Gosselin's works include subject matter ranging from creatures and plants he created (right) to historical figures (following page).*

made his living by painting houses.

Creating art is a way for Gosselin to rid himself of irritating thoughts, his own form of therapy. "It's my complaint department," he said. "That's the way I get them (complaints) out of my head. If I don't do them, they just stay in there, in my little Rolodex between my ears."

In *Holiday in Hell*, Gosselin has painted his vision of who would be roasting down under and includes Hitler, Stalin, a terrorist bomber, a Nazi soldier, and a pedophile priest. The devil's face in the center of the painting is from a Halloween mask Gosselin had as a child. "I don't have the mask anymore but I remembered it," he said. "It was a translucent plastic; you could see your face but it looked like your face was once removed with no expression."

Gosselin often works in oils, using bright colors to fill canvases or Masonite from edge to edge, requiring a second or third, or even a fourth, look to see everything he has put into his painting. *Short Walk Down a Long Hall* is a hinged triptych that is a biological history of the world. Fish, reptiles, a dinosaur, and flying insects find their way through a series of cased openings. Gosselin spent eight years working on it. Spending that much time on one painting means he usually has three or four works going at the same time. "While one is drying, I'm working on another," he said. "When I get an idea, I try to get as much done as I possibly can. My mind wanders; it ping pongs all over the place."

Gosselin does not do a lot of drawing on the canvas before he paints because he said he thinks that would be too much like using a coloring book. "So I just let it go on canvas," he said. "Sometimes I do a pen-and-ink and the painting at the same time. I try to work on the painting just one step ahead of

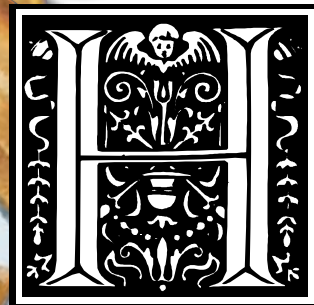


the ink because if you make a mistake in ink, it's pretty unforgiving and you find a Plan B real fast. Sometimes you have to scrap the whole thing."

When times were lean in the 1970s and Gosselin was out of work, he found a job with the CETA Program (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) painting dumpsters and fire hydrants. He transformed the plain garbage receptacles with likenesses of Jimi Hendrix, Duane Allman, and Frank Zappa. "I had a good time doing it," he said. But early one Monday morning, Gosselin was greeted with an unexpected and unpleasant surprise. "There was a dumpster at one of the

local grocery stores and one of their freezers went out on a Saturday night. I got there Monday and it was full of thawed out chickens. That was a rough day. Beyond awful. It was seven o'clock in the morning when I wandered up on that thing and I bailed quickly."

Kate Cherry, executive director of the Meridian (Mississippi) Museum of Art, has admired Gosselin's work since first seeing it several years ago at the Brass Monkey in Livingston. "He had several pieces on the wall and I remember the monkeys were playing pool," Cherry said. "The way he portrays animals as people is quite interesting. He won our People's Choice



He is known simply as "The Wizard." Artist David Gosselin acquired the nickname when he was a student at Livingston University (now The University of West Alabama), but the master of the paintbrush declined to expound upon the reason for the moniker beyond saying, "I was a child of the times."

Regardless of why Gosselin was first dubbed "The Wizard," it is easy to see why a museum director still refers to him that way. Gosselin conjures beautifully rendered, detailed works of art by applying small, distinct dots of color to form an image. The technique is known as

pointillism, but Gosselin said "I just call it dots. I use a liner brush and for some things I take three or four coats of paint."

Originally from Rhode Island, Gosselin made his way to Livingston to attend college because his high school guidance counselor suggested he do so. "Our counselor went to school with Dean Homer who was at Livingston," Gosselin said. "He said 'Do you guys want to go to college, get the hell out of Rhode Island? Go down and see my buddy Jim Homer.' So six or eight of us did, and I'm the only one who had the sense to stay. I love it here. No snow. Up there you have to shovel down to find your car."

Gosselin studied "a little bit of art" in college, but did not graduate. He has continued to create art while he has







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Award in 2014 for Big Game Hunt.”

Cherry said Gosselin is a quiet person who keeps a low profile. “You can’t find much about him on the internet,” she said. “Last year when he brought his work, I did not see him, and I did not see him when he picked it up.” Cherry said that her staff members at the museum do not refer to Gosselin by name. “We always call him by his nickname, The Wizard.”

Nathan Purath, co-director of the Coleman Center for the Arts in York, Alabama, is quite familiar with Gosselin’s work. “He’s had solo shows and been in lots of group shows here,” Purath said. “Gosselin is a very important figure in the West Alabama art community. He creates these really imaginative, outlandish, fantastic subjects. He definitely has the skills to render realistic imagery and his work is a fantastic realism. He has won tons of awards here.”

Gosselin’s artwork can be seen before ever entering the downtown York art center. The artist restored an old mural on the side of the brick building that is home to the Coleman Center. The mural advertises Waco Pep as The King of Motor Fuel, a product that was marketed in the Southeast in the 1920s with the motto “Gets You There With Power to Spare.” Part of the restoration includes a blue-eyed, black-haired beauty with a classic movie star look, sitting behind the steering wheel of an automobile.

Gosselin has utilized his history major and biology minor in many of his works like Short Walk Down a Long Hall, Big Game Hunt, and The Alchemist. He is, in general, an animal lover with one major exception. “I hate squirrels,” he said. “They’ll chew on your wires and burn your house down and not even get electrocuted. And they are little vandals. I had two tomato plants with fifty tomatoes growing on them, and I didn’t get one. Not one. The squirrels got them all. They come down in droves, like cattle cruising across your lawn. It’s the only thing I shoot at with my pellet gun.” So you are not

likely to find one of the bushy tailed rodents in any of Gosselin’s paintings, except, perhaps, in something like Holiday in Hell.

For his painting The Alchemist, Gosselin researched an archaic alphabet that is no longer in use. The two men in the painting are on a mission to find the correct formula by which to turn everything they have into gold. Gosselin carefully chose the words he wanted from the ancient language and said the writing roughly translates to “The boss is wrong, gold is gold, and it can’t be made.”

Gosselin usually paints from an image in front of him rather than from memory. “My memory has gotten a little sketchy,” he said. “You only get so much room and then you have to cull some of what’s up there to make more room. That’s what getting these ideas down does. It clears up a little bit of space for something else.”

Gosselin’s art will be featured at the Dinah Washington Cultural Arts Center, 620 Greensboro Avenue, located on the same block as the BamaTheatre, in downtown Tuscaloosa in June and July, 2016. ■

*Margaret Clevenger’s work has appeared in many newspapers and magazines including Alabama Heritage, Mississippi Magazine, Pennsylvania Magazine, and Southern Lady. She has a story, “Whistling Past the Graveyard” in the anthology Tuscaloosa Tales: Stories of Tuscaloosa and its People. She is a regular contributor to Jubilation.*

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