

R. Kenton Nelson | Perfect Worlds

By: [Norman Kolpas](#) | March 1, 2001

The city of Pasadena, CA, nestles sleepily in the embrace of the San Gabriel Mountains just 10 miles north of downtown Los Angeles. Transformed in the late 19th century from a failed agricultural settlement to a winter resort for wealthy families from the East and Midwest, the community today retains a gracious retro ambiance. Its clean-swept suburban streets boast gracious houses with well-manicured lawns. The venerable business district, a gathering of early- to mid-20th-century office buildings and hotels, has been recently restored as a now-thriving Old Town. Although thronged with high-end national chain boutiques, it harks back to gentler days.

A block away from Old Town's main thoroughfare stands one of the city's most impressive buildings, a square-block Spanish Baroque palace. Originally built in 1898 as a hotel, the splendid building was long ago converted into apartments and condominiums retaining the elegant proportions and elaborate detailing that once made it a favorite of visiting socialites. On the ground floor, a studio converted from what was once a small guest suite looks out on lush subtropical gardens and a burbling fountain. Rich wood paneling gives way to a head-height picture rail, on which rest jewel-toned paintings that seem to capture the essence of Pasadena's heyday: hushed residential byways, geometric cityscapes, and well-to-do men and women in impeccable attire.

R. Kenton Nelson looks as if he has just emerged from one of his artworks. Neatly groomed and wearing a pinstriped shirt and a natty bow tie, he sits at his easel beside the window. Another vision of a perfect world takes form beneath his brush as he applies layer after layer of oils to build his deep, luminous colors, working background to foreground to fill in a composition he has tightly sketched out on the canvas board. "I paint the world as I'd like to see it," he explains.

Intent and diligent though he is in that pursuit, he paints at a relatively rapid pace, having turned out what he guesses to be more than 500 artworks in the past seven years. But Nelson's enthralling realistic works are snatched up just as swiftly by discerning collectors, including filmmaker/writer Steve Martin, best-selling thriller author Dean Koontz, actress Diane Keaton, and writer/director Nancy Meyers, who hung his work *Admiration* on the Mel Gibson character's bathroom wall in her recent film *What Women Want*. Even *The New Yorker*, a magazine renowned for its distinctive visual style, chose Nelson paintings to grace two of its covers during the past year.

Such familiar names suggest one compelling reason why Nelson's paintings appeal so strongly: Each of those collectors, as well as the renowned Manhattan magazine, specializes in telling stories, and a narrative element resonates vibrantly in nearly every one of his works. "One of my biggest inspirations for painting is reading short stories by John Cheever and F. Scott Fitzgerald," Nelson says. "I admire the way they can hold your attention and change your life in just 30 pages. I'd like each of my paintings to engage viewers for just a few minutes, to start a narrative, an open-ended story, that they can finish themselves."

Stories have long played an important role in Nelson's life. Some of the earliest he remembers hearing involved art and were told to him during his childhood in late-1950s Pasadena by his grandmother Eva, who was the youngest sister of renowned Mexican muralist Roberto Montenegro. "She was kind of his pet and was always present when Diego Rivera and David Siquieros would come to his house. I'd hear about the dinner parties they had and how Rivera and Frida Kahlo were married in Roberto's back yard," says Nelson.

Despite this lineage—not to mention the Montenegro paintings that hung on the walls of his home—Nelson did not initially pursue a career in art. Though he always liked to doodle and got good grades whenever he was assigned to draw something, his passion was music. He played piano, guitar, and saxophone all fluently by ear and easily got work as a lounge musician. But he soon came to realize that he "didn't want to play 'Melancholy Baby' or 'Tie a Yellow Ribbon' for the rest of my life."

So Nelson turned, finally, to art—or rather commercial illustration, studying and polishing his skills at the Los Angeles area's respected Long Beach State and Otis Parsons schools. In 1976, he began his professional career and was soon doing independent airbrush illustration work, logo design, and art direction for such prestigious clients as Coca-Cola, Federal Express, Forbes and Money magazines, and Century City and Fashion Island shopping centers. "I made a nice living doing that," he says with characteristic modesty and enthusiasm. "And I always felt like I was being paid to do my hobby."

With the personal computer boom of the 1980s, however, Nelson's work gradually became less lucrative and less enjoyable. More and more illustration and design work was being done using computers, which drove fees down and didn't offer him the kinds of challenges he craved. By 1992, he says, "I thought I should either learn how to use the computer or start painting." The latter option held greater appeal. "So I got a bunch of paints and put them on a palette and started asking questions of people I knew who painted."

Nelson found inspiration not just in the bold, richly colored, striking images of his great uncle but also in the works of a host of great American painters. He admired the heroic murals of working people and national icons created under the Works Projects Administration, formed during the Great Depression of the 1930s. He looked to scene painters like Edward Hopper, Millard Sheets, and Thomas Hart Benton for their idealized images. He gained particular insight from the works of great American graphic designers and illustrators of the 1950s such as J.C. Leyendecker, who created sleek magazine images of dapper gentlemen wearing Arrow shirts. “They were all painting the ideal,” he says. “And I felt that if I were going to paint anything, why not paint it perfectly?”

In search of perfection, Nelson has developed an iconography of his own. Sharply delineated clouds puff and billow in sea-blue skies, the embodiment of promise. Precisely clipped bushes and hedges show the loving attention of an unseen, ever-vigilant gardener. Fit, handsomely groomed men and women wear clothing that has never seen a wrinkle or stain.

And yet, benevolent though such images may be, many viewers of Nelson’s works detect unease lurking beneath the pristine surface. “If anything’s too perfect, it’s a little creepy. That’s a given,” he allows. Pressed for further explanation, he admits that the effect is deliberate, a game he plays to subtly build in even more narrative interest. That also explains Nelson’s growing interest in Mother Goose. Several different volumes of the classic rhymes rest on a table in his studio. He mines them frequently to provide background stories for his paintings—although the uninformed viewer might not immediately make the connection. In one painting, for example, a young couple strides up a path in a bucolic landscape, holding a metal bucket between them. Their shared look of hopeful determination feels all the more ironic for the knowledge that this “Jack and Jill” will fall.

Once you’re clued in to such half-hidden meanings, these captivating paintings gain yet another dimension. Like the stories by Cheever and Fitzgerald that Nelson so admires, they invite oft-repeated, highly rewarding contemplation.

Photos courtesy the artist and DNFA Gallery, Pasadena, CA; Eleanor Ettinger Gallery, New York, NY; Scott White Contemporary Art, La Jolla, CA; Diane Nelson Fine Art, Laguna Beach, CA; and Van de Griff/Marr Gallery, Santa Fe, NM.