

# HIGH DESERT MUSEUM

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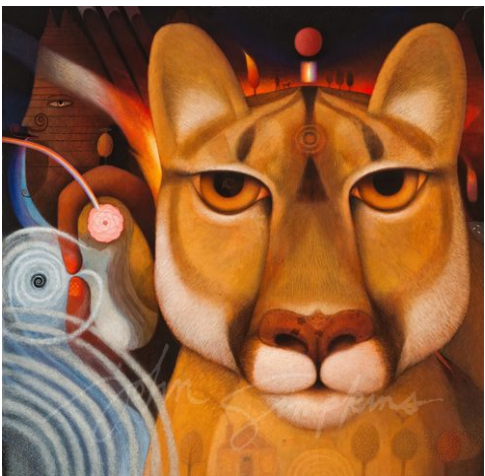
## High Desert Museum Presents “Desert Mystic: The Paintings of John Simpkins”

### New exhibit explores work of remote artist

BEND, OR — In a small ghost town nestled at the edge of the vast landscape of Oregon’s Alvord Desert near Steens Mountain, artist John Simpkins has turned a one-room schoolhouse into a working studio. For the past seven years, Simpkins, with only his dog for company, has lived and painted in the schoolhouse, one of the few buildings still standing in Andrews — a town that was home to a mere 150 people during its prime at the turn of the century.

Though living in solitude, Simpkins’s connections to the region’s animals, weather and light patterns inspire paintings that weave together rich, symbolic narratives. Through his art, Simpkins tells his story and the stories that surround him, working intuitively, painting in the moment, free from plans or sketches.

A new exhibit featuring Simpkins’s detailed and colorful paintings will open at the High Desert Museum on Saturday, October 27. “Desert Mystic: The Paintings of John Simpkins” explores the artist’s inspirations and influences, from religion and spirituality to folk art, symbolism and the tradition of anthropomorphizing animals. The exhibit also reflects on Simpkins’s creative process and considers his unique vision and perspective.



“The impressive trove of accumulated paintings from the past seven years that fill Simpkins’s studio is a testament to his robust work ethic,” said Museum Curator of Arts and Community Engagement Andries Fourie. “Personifying the tradition of the artist as a mystic and hermit, Simpkins has transformed the Oregon desert into a creative oasis.”

Working with the artist, Fourie has created interpretive labels for each of the paintings within the exhibit to guide visitors as they consider the art’s colors, layers, subjects, stories and symbolism. The labels offer small snippets of context, allowing viewers an opportunity to explore a deeper understanding and appreciation of Simpkins’s work.

Additionally, Museum Donald M. Kerr Curator of Natural History Louise Shirley worked with Fourie and Simpkins, exploring the connection between the paintings and the creatures depicted within them to create a second set of interpretive labels.

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“We hope that including natural history labels with the artwork will lend an extra dimension to the visitor experience,” Shirley said. “Different aspects of the artwork provided the direction for the labels. For example, I wrote about range expansion in response to ‘Victor/Coyote’ because the coyote featured in the painting has a map of North America across its body. The coyote is also depicted alone, which prompted me to write about the species’ behavioral ecology.”



Presenting an art exhibition with a connection to natural history lines up seamlessly with the Museum’s dedication to inspiring learning on different levels.

“Wildlife and natural history are quite subtle in the High Desert, where things are nuanced and camouflaged,” said Museum Executive Director Dana Whitelaw, Ph.D. “Alternatively, Simpkins’s art is big, bold and bright. Connecting the two provides visitors a unique opportunity to discover an appreciation for both art and the natural resources of the High Desert landscape.”

In conjunction with the exhibit, the Museum will welcome Simpkins for an artist reception on November 8, from 6-7:30 p.m. Find more information online at [highdesertmuseum.org/simpkins](http://highdesertmuseum.org/simpkins).

“Desert Mystic: The Paintings of John Simpkins” will be on display through February 17, 2019. It is presented with support from 1859 Oregon’s Magazine — Statehood Media and the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation.

## ABOUT THE MUSEUM:

THE HIGH DESERT MUSEUM opened in 1982 and brings regional wildlife, culture, art and natural resources together to promote an understanding of the natural and cultural heritage of North America's high desert country. The Museum uses indoor and outdoor exhibits, wildlife in natural habitats, and living history demonstrations to help people discover and appreciate the high desert environment. The Museum is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization accredited by the American Alliance of Museums and is a Smithsonian Affiliate.

[highdesertmuseum.org](http://highdesertmuseum.org)

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