

50 YEARS WITH COCA-COLA

ARTIST JIM HARRISON



PHOTO COURTESY JIM HARRISON PRINTS

When 16-year-old Jim Harrison climbed atop the scaffold in Summer 1952 to paint his first Coca-Cola sign, little did he know that he was beginning a lifelong love for the Coca-Cola trademark and launching a career as one of America's foremost landscape artists.

"For almost a century, ice-cold Coca-Cola has been the universal thirst quencher and one of the world's best-known American products," Harrison said. "Coca-Cola's trademark has been a favorite subject of mine throughout my life as an artist, beginning with my earliest days as an assistant sign painter in rural South Carolina. Working with Coca-Cola to capture their trademark along with images of the past is a natural partnership. I jokingly have said I have worked for Coca-Cola for 50 years."

From its beginnings, he added, the soft drink has crossed racial, social and economic lines. "A Coke was a Coke, and the cold, refreshing enjoyment could be purchased by anyone with a nickel. According to a 1920 survey, Coca-Cola sales accounted for more transactions at country stores than any other single item. It had become a permanent part of the American scene."

From his early experiences as a sign painter, Harrison developed a passion for preserving the past, especially that of rural America. During that first summer, 70-year-old sign painter J.J. Cornforth took Harrison on as his apprentice. For the next few years, the young artist tagged along with his mentor as they painted signs on the sides of barns and country stores for the local Coca-Cola bottler. The old gentleman taught his young friend “the art of lettering.”

When Cornforth retired, Harrison inherited the business and continued to paint signs on weekends and during vacation breaks while in college. After graduation, his schedule as a high school football coach provided him with vacation time that permitted him to continue the Coca-Cola work. In the years that followed, he had to discontinue his work painting Coca-Cola signs, but he developed his fine art painting. All the while, Coca-Cola remained dear to Harrison’s heart. He became an avid collector of Coca-Cola signs and memorabilia. When he resigned his coaching duties to devote full energies to art, he incorporated old trademarks into his work.

In 1972, possessing no knowledge of the art market but ample enthusiasm, Harrison went to New York City for the fall Greenwich Village sidewalk art show. His only sale during the three-week show was an \$85 original; the trip cost him \$800.

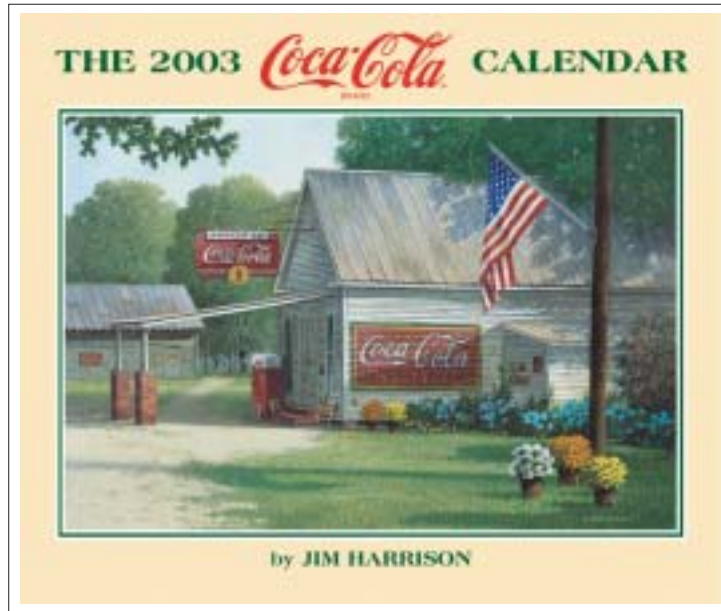
“I learned a lot on the sidewalks of New York. Every night I’d go to 57th Street and look in the windows of the various galleries. I admired the Hammer Gallery and set my goals to someday have my paintings there.”

The beginning artist realized he needed experience. The sidewalk circuit served him well, as he learned his trade and the business of art. After several years, 10 galleries were selling his originals.

He had become intrigued by the concept of limited-edition prints. With a \$4,000 bank loan, he published his first print, “Coastal Dunes.” His work soon got the attention of the nation’s leading publisher of limited-edition prints, Frame House Gallery of Louisville, Kentucky. In 1974, Frame House released its first Harrison print, “Rural Americana.” It projected

Harrison onto the national scene through the publisher’s network of 600 dealers. He was enthusiastically received. During the next 30 years, more than 80 Harrison limited editions sold out on release. He became the nation’s undisputed leader in rural Americana art. Many of his prints have appreciated to 3,000 percent of their original value. His work now is distributed through his company, Jim Harrison Prints, in Denmark, South Carolina.

His studio is arrayed with his Coca-Cola collection. Many items have served as inspirations for his



paintings. In 1975, he painted a country store showing one of the faded signs Cornforth and Harrison had painted 20 years earlier. “Disappearing America” was released as a limited-edition print at \$40 and became an immediate success, selling out all 1,500 copies in the edition. Its value since then has soared to a secondary market price of more than \$3,800.

“I now feel that I have come full circle,” Harrison reflected. “Working with Coca-Cola to capture the trademark along with images of the past is a natural partnership. I am as excited about this work as I was many years ago when I crawled up on that first Coca-Cola wall with Mr. Cornforth.”

Since entering into a licensee relationship with Coca-Cola in 1995, he has continued developing limited-edition prints. He also has begun developing other products with the trademark, including canvas transfers, trays, sun catchers and calendars.

Harrison’s paintings of farm landscapes, Coca-Cola signs on barns and small town architecture take viewers on trips down memory lane to a quieter, sweeter time. Today, Harrison has a nationwide following of collectors.

“I sincerely try to put meaning into my work in hopes it has some historical value,” he said. “With my paintbrush and pen, I sometimes feel like I’m just one step in front of the wrecking ball. For more than half a century, I have had a love affair with old buildings, old things and old ways. Preserving them in at least some small way is important to me.” ❖

Deidre Martin is director of public relations for Jim Harrison Prints.