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## Promoting Longevity through Engagement in Purposeful Occupations

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## Promoting Longevity through Engagement in Purposeful Occupations

### Abstract

Ron Henry, an artist based in Grand Junction, CO, provided the cover art for the Fall 2022 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "On the Trail to Durango" is a 36" x 36" painting made from oil and acrylic on gesso board. Ron has been creating beautiful art since he was a child. Art has provided Ron with a strong sense of purpose throughout his life. At age 90, Ron attributes his longevity to living a healthy lifestyle and regular engagement in purposeful occupations, such as painting. In this tenth anniversary issue of OJOT, *Occupation and the Artist* is profiling Ron to celebrate his nearly nine-decade-long career as an artist.

### Keywords

occupation, occupational therapy, art, painting, purpose, longevity, Ron Henry

### Credentials Display

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The Old West was a defining period in American history. Although life was difficult, this period represents a simplified way of life. The classic American cowboy is symbolic of several valuable character traits. For example, cowboys are physically and mentally prepared to face challenges. They demonstrate hard work and resilience. Cowboys take personal responsibility and get the job done. In addition, they have a strong sense of purpose that provides motivation to persevere. Artist Ron Henry holds admiration for the Old West. He enjoys creating Western-themed paintings because they remind him of a better time.

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Ron Henry was born in 1932 in San Francisco, CA. His father was a longshoreman and warehouseman, while his mother was a homemaker. Ron expressed an interest in art at a young age. He started drawing at age 6. Ron’s father was also an artist. “During the depression, there were no jobs, so he chose a different career,” said Ron. “My dad never pursued art but never discouraged me from doing it.” Ron never saw

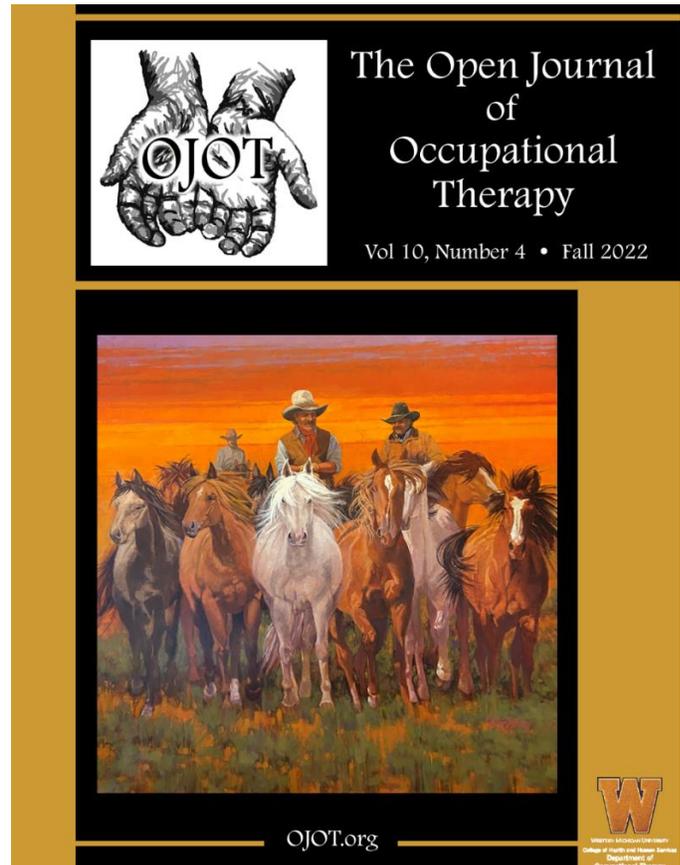
much of his father’s art; however, he remembers it mostly was pencil drawings. In 1940, Ron’s family left San Francisco and moved down the peninsula. They remained in the Bay area until the early 1980s.

During the Korean war, Ron enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. After serving for 3 years, he was honorably discharged from service. Ron received a GI Bill that provided educational benefits to pay for his college education. Ron enrolled at the Academy of Art in San Francisco. “Best move I ever made,” he said. Ron’s professor told him that only 1% of the students in his class would make it as an artist. “I stuck with it,” he said. “That’s all I knew.” Ron studied contemporary artists he admired, including Howard Terpning, Roy Anderson, and James Reynolds. Researching their techniques helped Ron further develop his skills and signature style.

After college graduation, Ron started a career as an illustrator at Sunset Magazine. After a few years, he accepted a position at an advertising agency. Ron designed advertisements, logos, and book covers for several companies. He enjoyed his work. “I loved illustration but did more graphic design to make a living,” he said. Ron worked for big companies designing and illustrating brochures, catalogs, and

**Figure 1**

Cover Art for OJOT, Vol 10, No 4, Fall 2022



collateral material. Illustrating a catalog took him several months. “This was my bread and butter for 20 years,” he said. Ron worked as an art director for 10 years. He was able to design his projects and see them through. “I had control of the whole thing,” he said. Ron often worked 50 to 60 hr per week. “I was fortunate to always stay busy,” he said. In 1981, Ron retired from a successful career. At the time, he was just 49 years old. “When the computer came along, I could not adapt. I did not like it.” After his retirement, Ron moved to Sedona, AZ, where he continued to work as a freelance artist.

Ron’s paintings are lifelike and strikingly beautiful. His use of vivid color and fine detail evoke movement and emotion. Ron’s painting process involves a two-step process with acrylic and oil paints. First, he roughs in the underlying images with acrylic paint. “I use acrylic because it dries fast,” he said. Next, Ron paints over the acrylic with oil paint mixed with a gel medium to speed up the drying process. Ron’s favorite subjects include cowboys, antique cars, horses, and people. He also finds inspiration in nature. A few years ago, Ron discovered his love for horses. “My daughter has horses, and she asked me to paint one for her,” he said. “I did one, then another. I just think horses are magnificent animals, and I enjoy painting them.” The piece, “Rhythm in Motion,” is a 24” x 48” painting made with oil and acrylic on gesso board (see Figure 2). “This is my favorite painting,” said Ron.

**Figure 2**

“*Rhythm in Motion*” by Ron Henry



Ron enjoys creating western-themed art because it reminds him of a better time. “Today, there is not a lot that motivates me,” he said. The ideas for Ron’s paintings come from his imagination or several photographs that are merged. Over the years, Ron has filled several files with reference material, such as photographs. “The Scout” is a 12” x 24” painting made with oil and acrylic on gesso board (see Figure 3). The painting was conceived from different photographs combined into a solitary image. Over the decades, Ron has maintained a photo morgue, or archive, of favorite images he has saved for this purpose. On average, Ron produced around 12 paintings per year as a freelance artist. “I do not paint that many anymore,” he said.

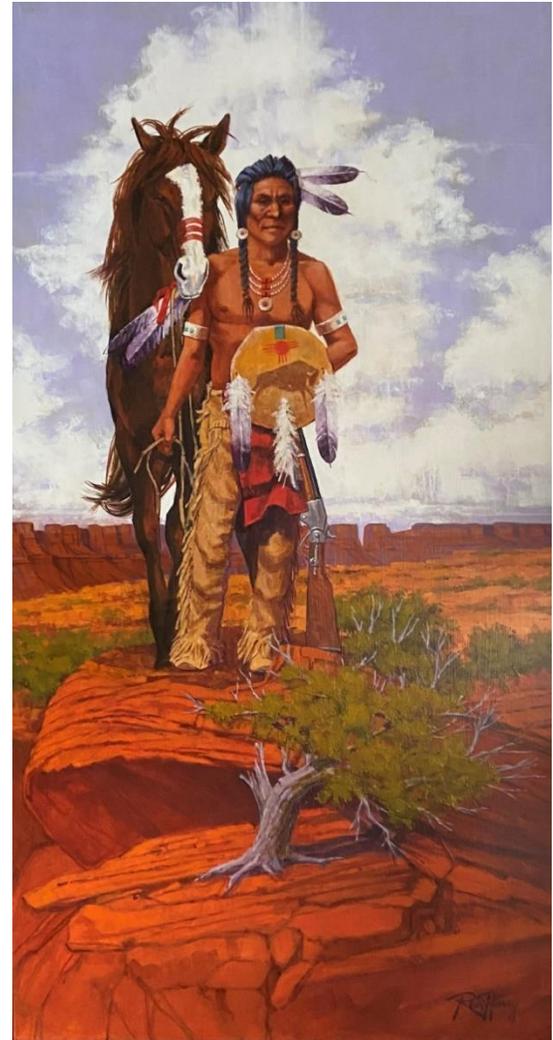
Ron lives independently in a house filled with his beautiful paintings. At age 90, he maintains a lifestyle more active than many adults half his age. During a typical week, you will find Ron mountain biking on the riverfront trail and playing a round of golf with friends. He spends a lot of time in the front room of his home, which has been converted into a large art studio. Ron paints for up to 4 hr per day, 3 to 4 days per week. “Watchful Eyes” is a 24” x 24” painting made with oil and acrylic on gesso board (see Figure 4). Recently, Ron stopped creating large paintings. “They are harder to sell these days,” he said. Ron’s art has been featured in exhibits across the United States. He has sold paintings to individuals and organizations. He currently has more than 50 paintings on exhibit at the Apple Shed gallery in Cedaredge, CO (see Resources). Ron plans to continue painting and selling his art for as long as he is able. “I enjoy it,” he said.

Ron attributes his longevity to a healthy lifestyle. “I paint, work out, and just keep moving,” he said. “I also eat right and try not to watch the news.” In addition to maintaining healthy habits, painting has brought meaning and purpose to Ron’s life. Research has shown an association between engagement in purposeful activities and longevity in older adults. A longitudinal study from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found having a sense of purpose in life plays an important role in preserving physical function (Kim et al., 2017). One justification for this finding is that older adults with higher levels of purposeful engagement tend to be more physically active (Ryff, 2017).

Ron has lived a long life without major physical limitations. Both physical and mental health serve as outcomes directly influenced by one’s purpose in life (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Ron credits painting and reading for keeping his mind sharp. “Keep your mind moving. That is the key,” he said.

Ron Henry began creating art in early childhood. Ninety years later, he maintains an active lifestyle and a successful career as an artist. Known for his western-themed paintings, Ron creates beautiful images that depict a simpler way of life. Although he is creating fewer pieces of late, Ron plans to continue painting and selling his work in local galleries. Like the cowboys of the Old West, regular engagement in purposeful occupation has promoted Ron’s ability to lead a long and productive life.

**Figure 3**  
“The Scout” by Ron Henry



**Figure 4**  
“Watchful Eyes” by Ron Henry



**View more of Ron Henry’s paintings in the OJOT gallery:**

[https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot\\_occupationandartist/40/](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/40/)

**To purchase Ron’s Art – Contact the Apple Shed Gallery:**

Website: <https://www.theappleshed.net/copy-of-artist-profile-page-1>

Email: [info@theappleshed.net](mailto:info@theappleshed.net)

Phone: (970) 856-7007

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