

Children's Books and Stamps: Studies in Design

James Gurney

By Phyllis Van Orden

I'm not sure what it is about dinosaurs that appeals to children, but dinosaur books continue to be popular among all age groups, and author and stamp-illustrator James Gurney wrote one of the best. *Dinotopia* is based upon a fictional diary that tells the story of Arthur Denison and his son, William, who were shipwrecked and found themselves on an incredible island inhabited by friendly dinosaurs living side-by-side with humans.

Gurney's interest in dinosaurs began at an early age. Born in Glendale, California in 1958, he visited a museum as a young man and saw a mounted skeleton of an Allosaurus; the hook was set.

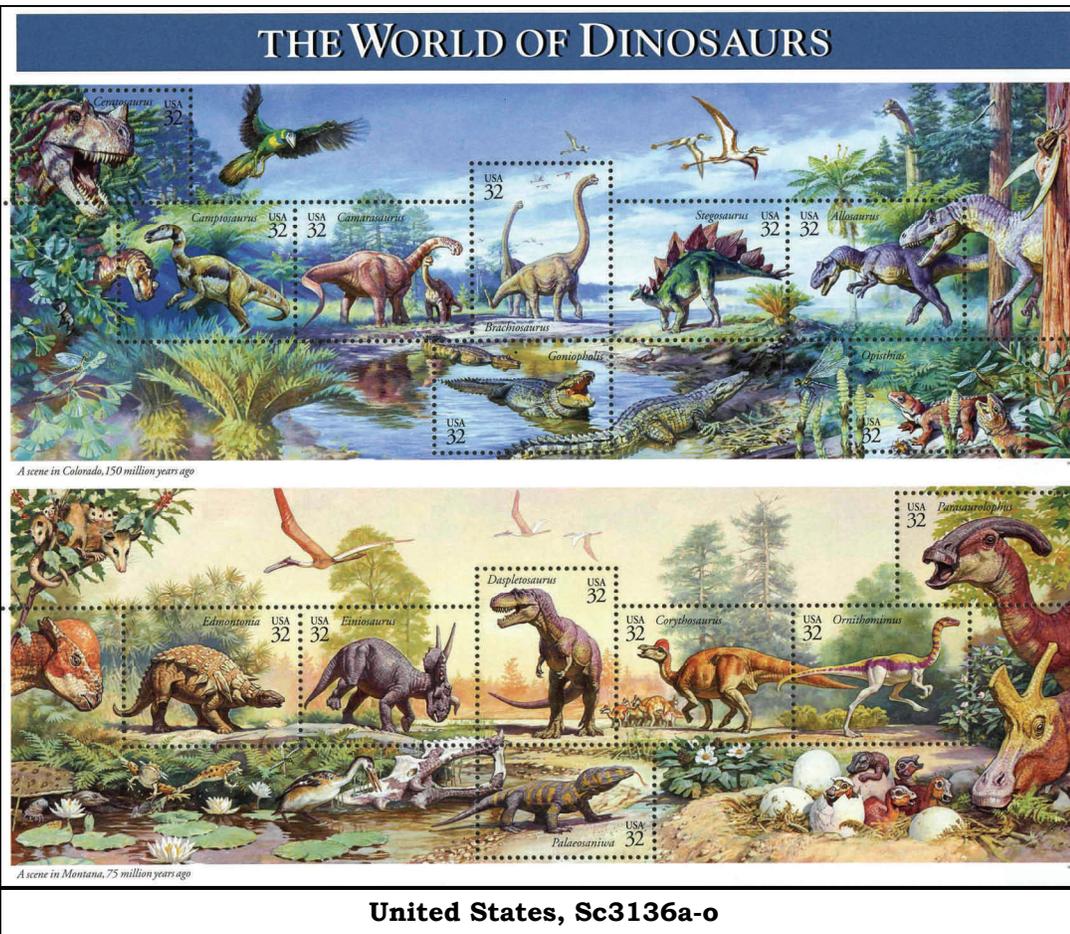
When he was 21, Gurney earned a B.A. in Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley and graduated Phi Beta Kappa. He studied painting at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, then began his career in 1983 as a painter for the feature-length animated film *Fire and Ice*, for which he painted more than 500 background scenes.

Science fiction and fantasy readers know Gurney through his illustrations of more than 70 paperback book covers. His work in this field was recognized when he won the Best of Show award at the 1989 World Science Fiction Convention. In the same genre, Gurney wrote *Dinotopia: A Land Apart from Time*, starting in

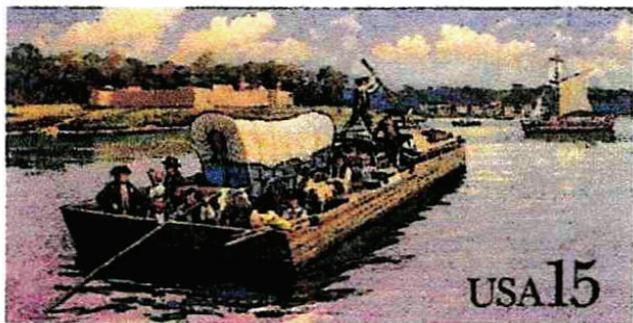
1990; this book and its two sequels have together sold more than 2.5 million copies.

In 1993, Gurney received the Hugo Award, presented annually for the best achievement in science fiction or fantasy works, for *Dinotopia's* original art work, and again in 1996 for *Dinotopia: The World Beneath*. In September 2007, Andrews McMeel published Gurney's third dinosaur book, *Dinotopia: Journey to Chandara*, to rave reviews.

Whether dealing with an imaged land or a contemporary setting, James



United States, Sc3136a-o



Settling of Ohio, Northwest Territory, 1788

United States, ScUX124

Gurney is noted for his ability to capture immediacy, motion, and the play of light and shadow across panoramic vistas. His detailed illustrations of mechanical contraptions are noted for their accuracy. Besides his dinosaur books, Gurney has illustrated more than a dozen articles for *National Geographic Magazine*, most notably pieces about early civilizations—the Etruscans in Italy, the Kush in Nubia, and the Moche in Peru, and he's received several awards for his landscape paintings rendered in the tradition of the Hudson River School.

Gurney's first illustration for the U.S. Postal Service was the vignette for the Ohio/Northwest Territory Postal Card (Scott #UX124), designed in 1988 with Susan Sanford. Gurney's sketch features a flatboat floating on the high spring waters of the Ohio River with the settlement at Marietta, Ohio, in the background.

Gurney has designed 17 different United States postage stamps, including 15 on his "World of Dinosaurs" sheet (Scott #3136), which went through several evolutions. Earlier United States stamps depicting dinosaurs include "The Age of Reptiles" (Scott #1390) in a *Natural History* issue in 1970, and the block of four "Prehistoric Animals" (Scott #2422-2425) of 1989. The popularity of dinosaurs grew, in part to the 1993 release of *Jurassic Park*, a science-fiction film directed by Steven Spielberg, based on the novel of the same name by Michael Crichton.

By the mid-1990s the U.S.P.S. was considering another block of four stamps with a dinosaur theme and contacted John Gurche,



United States, Sc3877

designer of the 1989 stamps; he was not available. Carl Herman, U.S.P.S. art director, contacted Gurney to request that he design a block of four stamps with illustrated margins that depicted four dinosaurs from around the world. They later changed the focus to North American dinosaurs, then decided to portray eight dinosaurs.

After drawing them, Gurney observed that, if you line up eight dinosaurs in two rows of four, they start to look like chorus-line dancers. And if you have a dinosaur stick his head into a stamp from the side margin, you feel awful about tearing off his head when you use the stamp.¹ When asked to increase the number of dinosaurs to ten, Gurney created what he called the "ice cube tray" look.

As a result of these design challenges, Gurney finally proposed that he design two panoramic scenes of five stamps each, one depicting dinosaurs from the Jurassic era (150 million years ago) in Colorado, the other featuring dinosaurs from the Cretaceous era (75 million years ago) in Montana. Positioning the center stamp in a vertical position broke up the monotony of the row. The perforation patterns ultimately lead to a sheet with a total of 15 dinosaur stamps, and the scenes expanded to include flora and fauna of the era—now titled the "World of Dinosaurs"—including depictions of lizards, turtles, ginkgo trees, a mayfly, ferns, a sequoia forest, frogs, and water lilies, with holly, larch, fir, and willow trees in the background.

When discussing his dinosaur stamps, Gurney observed that "I wanted to recreate the full texture of the environment in order to make the postage stamps useful as an educational tool."² This attention to accurate detail characterizes his work. To create the "full texture" of prehistoric environments, Gurney not only



James Gurney in his studio admiring one of his dinosaur models.

**Taken from the James Gurney website:
<http://www.jamesgurney.com/bio.html>**

painted scenes in the woods behind his house, but also visited the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens and traveled to Florida's tropical swamps because Florida hosts many plants and animals reminiscent of prehistoric environments.³ He used photographs from these locations as the basis for his paintings.

In 1998, Michael Brett-Surman and Thomas R. Holtz, Jr. wrote a book about the designing of this magnificent sheet of dinosaur stamps, *James Gurney; the World of Dinosaurs: A North American Selection*, based upon Gurney's "How I Painted the Dinosaur Stamps," which he wrote for the USPS marketing department. James Gurney received another prestigious honor when he was selected among a group of only 35 illustrators to represent his generation in *The Illustrator in America, 1860-2000*, by historian Walt

Reed, the definitive history of American illustration.

U.S. Postage Designed by James Gurney

"Settling of Ohio, Northwest Territory, 1788," Postal Card, Scott UX124, issued on 15 July 1988. With Susan Sanford.

"The World of Dinosaurs" commemorative pane of 15 stamps, issued on 1 May 1997.

"Sickle Cell Awareness," Scott 3877, issued on 29 September 2004.

Endnotes

1. George Amick, *Linn's U. S. Stamp Yearbook, 1988* (Sidney, OH: Amos Press, 1989), p. 62.
2. United States Postal Service, *Postal Service Guide to U. S. Stamps*. 28th Edition (New York: HarperResource, 2001), p. 389.
3. George Amick, *Linn's U. S. Stamp Yearbook, 1997* (Sidney, OH: Amos Press, 1998), p. 64.

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- Amick, George. *Linn's U. S. Stamp Yearbook, 1988*. Sidney, OH: Amos Press, 1989.
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- "Dinotopia: Meet the Author." www.dinotopia.com/gurney.htm
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