

# Gray's Sporting Journal

## The Fly Fishing Edition

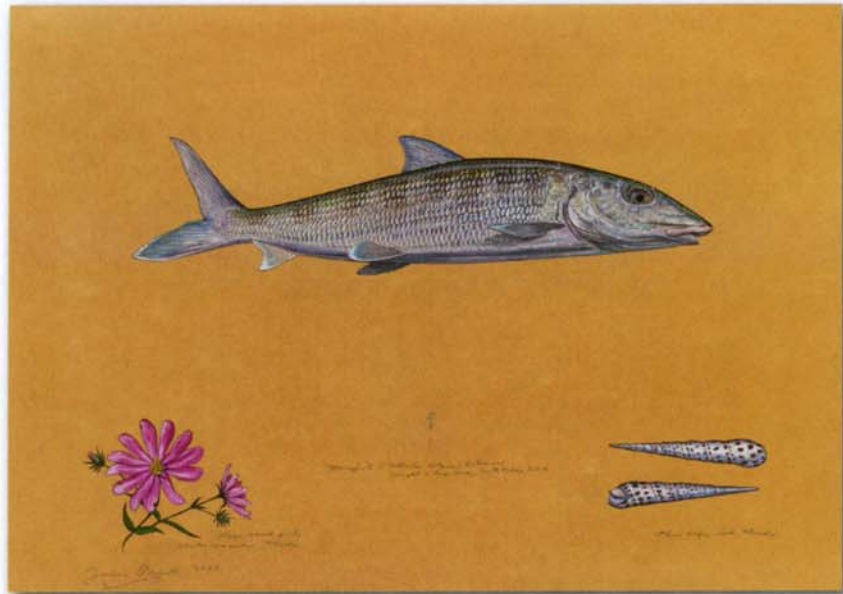
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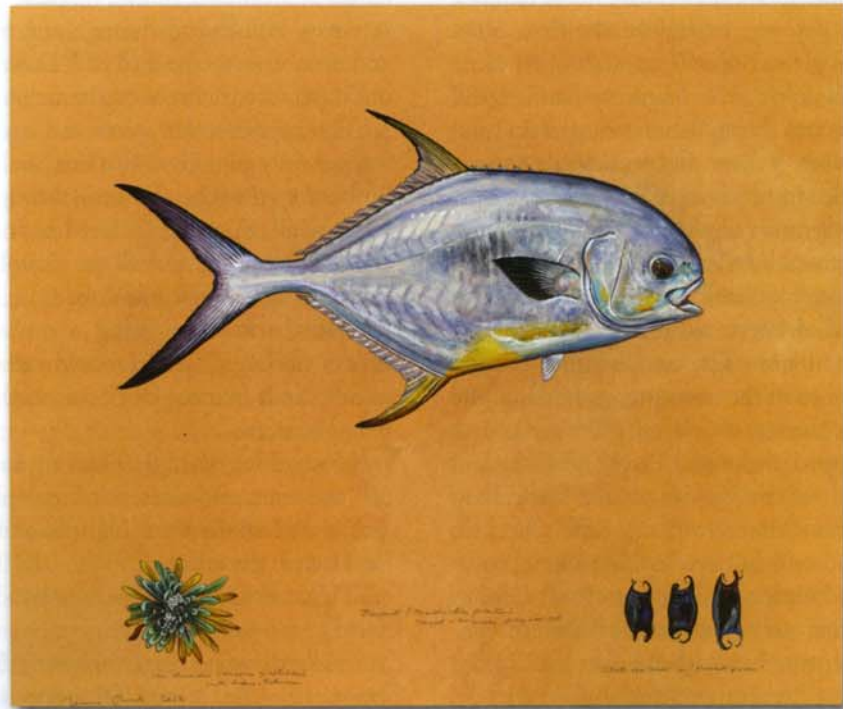


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# James Prosek

Beyond just painting the fishes. *by Brooke Chikvers*



**E**ven at Yale, it's rare for a 19-year-old to make a significant contribution to natural science while also earning acclaim as an artist and author. But with his 1996 book, *Trout: An Illustrated History*, James Prosek (born 1975) did just that. Today, he's a recognized artist, author, angler, adventurer, amateur scientist, maker of fine art books, filmmaker, photographer, taxidermist, sculptor, novelist, musician, and composer. Yet he and his work defy easy classification.

The inquiring nature and scholarly authority of his watercolors and books on the world's fishes solidly place him in the tradition of ichthyological illustration, which dates back to Renaissance Frenchman Pierre Belon (1517–1564), the first naturalist-artist to travel abroad to record his observations of fish. But Prosek's stirring, experience-fueled, life-size portraits of fish, from his 14-inch porgy to the 12-foot-8-inch marlin, recall the empathetic realism of Courbet's 19th-century still lifes of trout. Then again, the metaphoric tone of his oeuvre, which includes literal "parrot fishes" and mixed-species self-portraits, challenges the viewer's perception of reality, extending Prosek's reach to contemporary American conceptual art.

Prosek's fascination with trout began with the first one he caught, at age 10. Describing it as the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, he elaborated that trout "were the embodiment of what I held to be ideal." As a teenager, Prosek thought only of fishing. Soon, he pursued solely native trout and ignored introduced species, no matter how big they were. Influenced by his Brazilian-born bird-loving father, whose "life and interests are the essential foundation of my own desires," he began copying a library edition of Audubon's *Birds of America* with colored pencils. After learning about the near extinction of the blueback trout, which survive in only a handful of ponds in Maine, he decided to paint them.

With few illustrations to refer to, and "under the instruction of our great bird painters," including Louis Agassiz Fuertes, the mostly self-taught Prosek developed his idea of painting from nature some 70 different North American salmonoids. When necessary, he relied on descriptions in old books; for example, basing his Sunapee trout on the

words in Quackenbos's 1916 *Geological Ancestors of Brook Trout*, "richly illuminated with the flushes of its maturing passion . . . a veil of amethyst through which the daffodil spots of mid-summer gleam out in points of flame." For his 2005 *Trout of the World*, Prosek fished ever rarer trout in ever more remote waters.

Seeing fishes with his own eyes in their own waters soon became his pilgrimage, from his Connecticut backyard to the eels of Pohnpei Island in Micronesia. It was also his path for learning more about himself and his voice through art. For although his watercolors are inherently instructive, they are, more important, firsthand testaments to the crystal moment between a fish's life in the sea and its death on the decks of a fishing boat, conveying that instant before the inner light of these "swimming mirrors" flickers before extinguishing like a flame. Far from Soho art galleries or age-dimmed museum specimens preserved in rum, Prosek, the fisherman, angled on his own or boarded commercial fishing vessels.

In the heartbeat when a still-sunlit fish leaves its element for ours, he photographs it, measures it in a dozen different ways, pencil-sketches it, and notes its multitude of subtle colors and distinct markings, all amidst the chaos of a fish being landed.

Although Prosek wants his piscine forms and dimensions to be accurate and his colors real, making the original life-size image look like a photo was never his goal. Instead, his fishes function as a hymn and aide-mémoire, embodying all the memories and emotions of his spiritual quest to capture their presence. "In the end it may look like a fish, but it is certainly more than that for me," writes Prosek.

Because each fish and experience is unique, he paints individual fish, and not anonymous "representative" reference-guide specimens, like Marcus Bloch's (1723–1799) 432 hand-colored engravings (for which he used gold, silver, or bronze filings to give his fish scales sheen) or Jonathan Couch's four-volume (1862–65) *History of the Fishes of the British Isles*. When Prosek catches his reflection in a fish's fading eye, he paints that, too, marking the moment he and his quarry become emotionally tied, when their history becomes his.

He formalizes his fishes' presentation to the viewer with his Zen-like tea-stained backgrounds,

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whose uniformity allows the viewer to compare specimens within the pictorial conventions and spirit of natural history. His fish lie in profile on their left side, the head pointing to the right, exposing one eye and one gill. "There's no true way to take something three dimensional and make it two dimensions without distortion and without making decisions," he says.

Prosek's conceptual undercurrents are sensed through his subjects' deadpan, slightly melancholy out-of-water expressions. While otherwise solemn and static, the fish are rendered with a shape and musculature that conveys their movement through water.

The giant, rectangular paper canvases, which Prosek rolls out across the floor of his studio, give scroll-like sacredness to their images. In his most recent series, published in 2012 as *Ocean Fishes* by Rizzoli, he places his subject across the upper third of the surface. To form the base of his rule-of-thirds triangle, he adds two "experiential elements," or personal visual clues, such as gathered shells or beach blooms, and the field naturalist's penciled inscriptions. These connotations help Prosek both recall and recount his encounter with each fish, while simultaneously anchoring the image compositionally and contributing to the work's overall structure and internal tension. They suggest small objects placed in a tomb to make the deceased comfortable in the afterlife, and are more allusions to Prosek's relationship to the fish than direct references to its habitat.

In his texts, Prosek recounts sadly the all-too-typical fish tales: of how different populations evolved, hunted to near extinction by settlers or commercial fishermen, or hybridized out of existence, or overrun by stocked fish. Some recovered and were subsequently reintroduced into other waters; occasionally, their conservation status improved from "endangered" to merely "threatened." Others were already long gone.

Prosek's direct observation of nature has allowed him to paint rarely depicted anatomical details, such as stretch marks and overlooked fin notches, and colors that vibrate with internal light that cannot be captured on camera. It has led him to better "understand the language of the colors," as he compares the orange red slashes under the jaws of cutthroat trout to Colorado sunsets, or the different

shades of scarlet and vermilion of spawning trout to "autumn sugar maples"; or describes the hues of parr marks as "wild and rosy as the cactus fruit that lined the banks." For his sea-fishy blues alone, Prosek dabs his saucer-palettes with water-soluble cerulean, ultramarine, Egyptian violet, carbazole violet, and dioxazine mauve, sometimes mixed with ground mica to create sparkle. None of this is arbitrary, unlike Samuel Fallour's fancifully colored Indonesian fishes for Louis Renard's 1719 *Fishes, Crayfishes, and Crabs*, despite their being painted from freshly caught specimens from the Banda Sea.

Working mostly in watercolor, gouache, and graphite, Prosek surrounds his tea-aged paper canvas with a sea of reference books, notes cards, small-scale sketches, and photographs, linking them to details that when viewed close up and out of context appear abstract. He suggests the elusive phosphorescence of fish skin with the subtle movement of color washes, secured with graphite strokes and raised dots of pure pigment that one critic compared to pointillism.

Prosek also painted a black ocean of minimalist white fish silhouettes that pay tribute to the iconic endpapers in Roger Tory Peterson's 1934 *Guide to American Birds*. These drawn-to-scale ghostly forms may also be a visual statement of the artist's philosophical debate with himself about the folly and hubris of our list-driven need to name nature, to control it by neatly fitting it into the commonly accepted hierarchal tree, rather than the dynamic and fluid web of life he perceives.

Prosek's work memorializes his sympathetic relationship with fish in whose eyes he sees "miniature Earths with atmospheres and seas and forests and deserts"—and his own existence. In an increasingly virtual fish-stick world, the concept beyond his canvases is, "Without these sources of awe and inspiration, we would have no faith, we would have no spirituality, we'd have no art." ■

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*Brooke Chilvers was reading Prosek's page-turner on eels while circumnavigating Iceland when she started seeing the southern coast's landscape through eeler's eyes. Suddenly she understood how the rivers, wetlands, and ocean shore came together, so it was no surprise to learn that the biggest conger eel ever recorded, a 350-pounder, was caught in a trap off Iceland's Westmann Islands.*