



DEFINING —THE— LANDSCAPE

An Artistic Approach to Cartography

By Danielle Taylor

As modern drivers replace paper maps with navigation systems, one artistic cartographer's creations help remind us of our connection to the physical world.

David Imus' maps reveal extraordinary detail.



Essential Foundation For decades, Oregon native David Imus has toiled alone with one mission in mind: to help others better understand their world. As an artistic cartographer, he painstakingly designs maps intended to showcase the beauty of our planet Earth. While most maps today focus on navigation (road maps) or political boundaries (maps used in schools), Imus' creations focus instead on the aesthetic beauty of a landscape, revealing details of geography that help observers associate how topography and natural routes of travel have shaped the development of today's world.

"The maps I create show basic geography," Imus says, "which I think is the essential foundation of a geographically literate society. Without that base, you can't have a general awareness or be able to see and understand general geography except what's immediately around you."

David Imus looking over Death Valley at the mouth of Titus Canyon.



“*Geographic awareness gives travelers a new level of enrichment.*”

– David Imus

Understanding Our Place It’s no secret that many American students struggle to grasp geographical concepts or identify locations around the world, which can negatively affect their perceptions of global issues and their understanding of how actions in one area can cause significant effects elsewhere.

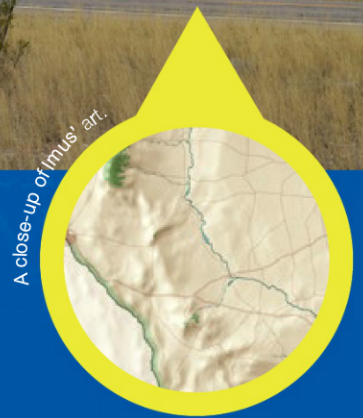
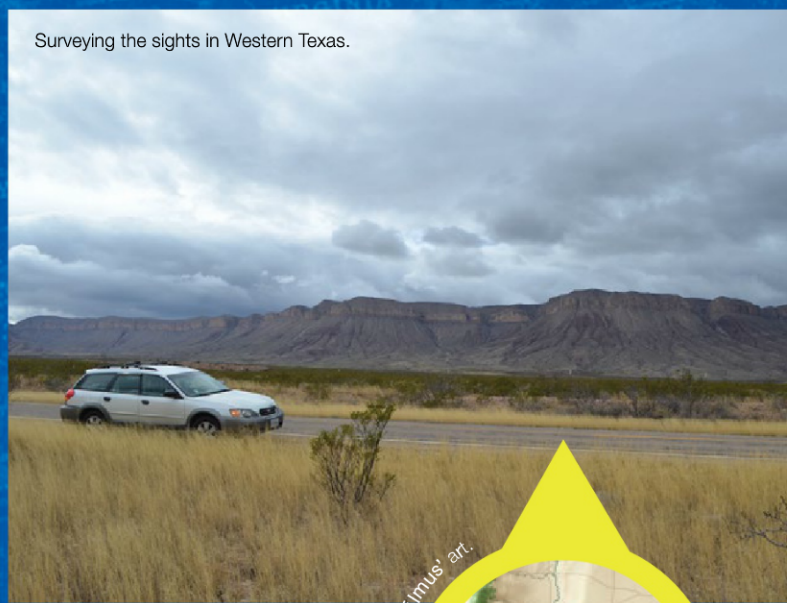
In October 2015, the federal Government Accountability Office released a report bluntly titled “Most Eighth Grade Students Are Not Proficient in Geography,” which revealed that studies found 75 percent of eighth graders scored below proficiency level in geography.

Fortunately, David Imus and like-minded geography professionals seek to address that issue by creating maps that tell the stories of the places they represent.

“When you’re telling a more easily understood story, you’re not making the viewer interpret info – you’re

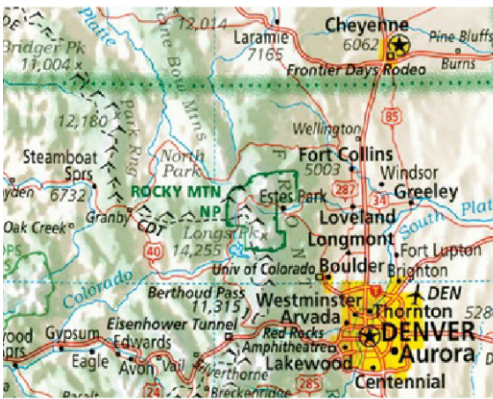
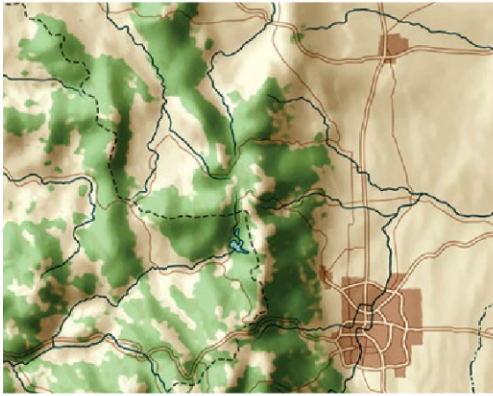
interpreting it for them,” he says. “Geographic awareness gives travelers a new level of enrichment.” Imus takes pride in the excruciating level of detail he puts into his creations. His intention, he explains, is to make the physical illustration of a landscape come alive for observers so they can better perceive how that backdrop played a part in anything that happened there.

Surveying the sights in Western Texas.



A close-up of Imus' art.

With "American Panorama," (below) cartographer David Imus sought to release the landscape from the state borders and type labels that often obscure its shape. "When you take those off, the land rises from the sheet," Imus says. "When they see [the artwork], people touch it and expect to feel bumps."



Although Imus' "Essential Geography of the United States of America" (above) may not list as many town names as other maps, it does include numerous natural and man-made points of interest that other maps often miss. "Every type of map label I included, I placed where it would do the most good," he says.



On the Map Imus earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in geography and Spanish from the University of Oregon in 1982 and founded Imus Geographics (imusgeographics.com) the following year. Initially, he took contracts for street-map publishers, but his motivations shifted after a profitable business deal in the late 1980s allowed him to take off a year or two to travel and explore the actual landscapes he portrayed in his work. The experience spurred an interest in making maps of scenic areas in his home state of Oregon, and he began working on a travel and reference map

of the state. Others followed, such as Chugach State Park, the Metolius River and the state of Alaska. For his inventive work, Imus has won top honors multiple times at the Annual Map Design Competition for the Cartography and Geographic Information Society of the American Congress on Surveying and Mapping (ACSM/CaGIS).

In the late 2000s, Imus turned his attention to a masterpiece project: an artistic map of the entire United States of America. For two years, he worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week, drawing forth nuances of the American landscape in his design.



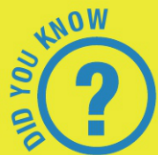
Essential Geography of the United States of America

He spent countless hours making thoughtful, intentional decisions about every detail on the map, ranging from each label's position to the best way to represent wooded areas to customized letter spacing applied to every word. His hard work paid off: In 2010, the "Essential Geography of the United States of America" won the ACSM/CaGIS annual Best in Show award. As word spread, orders for his printed maps began pouring in, bringing Imus more success in the first half of 2012 than he had experienced in the total of his career to that point.

Following Imus winning top prize for his U.S. map, he and a friend have driven all over the West in a Subaru Outback, exploring and getting a better in-person feel for the physical and cultural landscape he loves, so he can continue to improve his representation of its natural elegance.

"If you want to go down to Death Valley, or anywhere over rough terrain, Subaru gives you such a quiet drive," he says. "It's so well-engineered. I totally respect their engineering – they went for broke when they engineered the Outback. Like my art, they weren't trying to get it done by a deadline, they were just trying to do something right.

"When I would travel in that Subaru, I wasn't doing anything dramatic," he says. "I'd be an artist observing the structure and beauty of land, like a botanical illustrator observing the structure and beauty of a flower. Clarity and beauty are the same thing when it comes to maps. If you draw flowers clearly, they'll be beautiful because flowers naturally are. The world is the same way."



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Updating an Ancient Art Form In recent years, the digital era has massively transformed the field of cartography, with computer programs like geographic information systems (GIS) allowing layers of information to coexist in unified on-screen maps. Additionally, everyday drivers benefit from hands-on and hands-free navigational applications linked into the satellite-based Global Positioning System (GPS).

These 21st-century systems undoubtedly offer critical functionality in the modern world. However, a place still exists for creative representations of landscapes on the printed page, which complement new tech-based systems the way a painting complements photography. Fortunately, plenty of consumers and map creators alike continue to demonstrate enthusiasm for the traditional art form. ■

¹ Compatible smartphone and application required. For applications to operate, latest version of each application and optional integrated audio and navigation system unit required. Data provided by smartphone is displayed on navigation screen. Some state laws prohibit the operation of handheld electronic devices while operating a vehicle. Smartphone apps should only be launched when vehicle is safely parked. Your wireless carrier's rates may apply.