Guardians of the Family
by Shannon Christensen
oil on canvas, 63” x 36”, 2004

Because of its association with worship, a triptych enhances the status of the artistic subject. Thus by being a triptych, Guardians of the Family elevates the family to a more venerable position. The separate panels further the idea that mother, father, and child are distinct and have different roles in the family—each panel is necessary to form the whole picture.

Mothers nurture their children. They bestow, prepare, incline, cultivate, awaken, sustain, brace, and carry their children. These many aspects of nurturing are represented by the numerous feathers this mother holds. Metaphorically, mothers give nurtured wings to their children for their eventual ascent in flight. A bird stripped of some or all of its feathers finds flying difficult if not impossible. The mother is blowing at the feathers to symbolize the influence she has to gently guide and direct the life of a child.

Fathers provide for their families, hence the nest, which is essential for the birth, growth, and safety of a bird. The nest provides physical shelter, protects from predators, and maintains a haven for leaving and returning from exploration. Metaphorically, the father builds a nest that provides a place for his child to be physically sheltered.

Each partner has a role in aiding the child; therefore, their hands are at equal heights, signifying that they are essential counterparts and parental peers. The head of each is lifted in recognition of their valued roles. Neither is, nor need be, ashamed of his or her role.

The tree is a reminder of the refuge that is found in families. It also, represents parental posterity, while the leafy canopy represents future genealogy. The missing tree limbs are a reminder that families are not perfect. Nevertheless, the family still provides the fundamental fortress for strength.

The bird symbolizes the child. The bird without the nest, feathers, or tree, is handicapped and healthy progress is difficult, if not impossible. The metaphor is clear for the responsible raising of children.

—Shannon Christensen