

Artist Comments

ARTISTIC BEGINNINGS

My father was an artist. Growing up with an artistic father made life somewhat different. Little things often took on a greater meaning. Everything had an extra sense of 'being'. Fish tanks were landscaped like the ocean bottom with driftwood and natural rock formations. Model trains were elaborate miniatures with canyons and trestles carved from a western landscape. Imagination was made real.

Our home was decorated with his art. It was not a big deal for me. It was just there... like having museum pieces at your fingertips. In retrospect, it was an exceptional environment for me. I was surrounded by his original paintings and sculptures. I marveled at every stroke, every layer, and every color choice.

During my years at home, my father had two paintings that strongly affected me. The first was a large oil-on-panel of a woman sitting with her head propped in her hand. The style would be a mix of a Raphael Soyer figure with a Rembrandt palette. An exquisite work. The background was abstract and the seated figure moved from opaque to transparent, loose yet tight. It looked deceptively simple. Over the years I fell in love with different parts of it. The hands, the for-shortened face, the shoes, the skirt folds, the leg of the chair, each part showed me a greater world than the whole. It pulled me into the brushwork while it embraced a real and solid person. It is a painting and person at the same time.

The second painting was more influential because I witnessed its' process. My father had set aside his painting tools with a family, a house and a job to attend to. But with the acrylic paint rage of the 1960's, he was once more tempted to paint. Acrylics

mix with water and dry quickly, that is their basic advantage over oils, which dry slow and require thinners to clean up. My father was a master of adapting styles. He not only launched into fast drying acrylics, but also employed a pallet knife to apply the paint. He painted a lovely painting over a few days. It was a picture from his head, an abandoned house on a slight hill in summer light. I watched as the layers of color scraped and fell on top of each other. It can only be described as watching magic. He painted with a rhythm and pace that showed as a mix of inspiration and contemplation. Some strokes were rapid and mechanical; others were erratic, or hesitant as the metal tip wandered inches away from the surface. But every move was deliberate. And if it was wrong, he wiped it away.

Understanding the recipe to a finished painting is only a small part of the artist's accomplishment. It is the decisions the artist makes with those ingredients that are the true accomplishment. Witnessing my father's painting methods revealed a basic understanding of the physical process of painting. It also left me in awe of his accomplishment, but it didn't teach me how to make the decisions during the process. That has to be learned through experience.

I painted my first canvas many years later. I didn't know if I had the talent to paint, but I wanted to try... good or bad. During all the time previous, I had studied art and drawn and hoped but never tried to produce a true painting. Honestly, I was afraid I didn't have the ability. On that day I remember sitting on a folding chair. I propped the canvas on my lap. Two feet directly ahead stood a group of fruit and a teapot laid out as my subject. Each was nicely arranged on a linen towel, which was draped over my desk.

I don't clearly recall painting individual brushstrokes, just the beginning pencil sketch, the color mixing and the final realization that I was done. It just happened. All the

stored up knowledge gathered over the years came out automatically. And most importantly I wasn't embarrassed by the results. It was far from perfect, but it had a certain appeal. It was the defining moment when I knew I could paint. I also enjoyed the painting process and wanted to do more of it. It gave me the confidence and urge to continue.

MY SECRET LIFE

It is many years later. I am a Sunday Painter. That means I paint in my spare time. I have a regular nine-to-five job, a family, a house and all those other life demands everyone else has. My painting is done between those demands. At critical times in my life, I willingly chose the part-time artist life style. I had other hopes and needs than the difficult road of the dedicated artist. I admire artists who are able to build a painting career. My goal in my later years is to travel and paint full time. For now, I like my life and accept all the bills that are associated with it. I will keep my nine-to-five job.

WHY I PAINT

Artists paint what they see with their eyes or with their mind. The ability to impart emotions into their artwork is that elusive 'genius' quality in art.

I live and travel where I do because it interests me on many levels. I enjoy nature, history and life. I like things to be simple, but I also have a restless curiosity about the complexity of life.

I prefer painting the area where I live. It gives me comfort. It is hard to explain, but I want to know more about the places I see everyday. Exploring my neighborhood through art gives me a sense of belonging and the confidence of knowing what is around me a little bit better. I can see my life from fresh angles, or in a different light. In the end,

I am seeing a more complex version of what I take for granted each day. I am exploring, re-experiencing and revealing my everyday sights.

The neighborhood around me as I see it and experience it is my subject. When I am out and about, the light and shadow catches my interest. I'm attracted to the contrast, the color and shape of things as well as the atmosphere or meaning of a place. The color revealed in light and shadow is a very powerful magnet to me. I focus on painting the color of light and shadow. The truth is, I enjoy working with color. I want to know and understand its influences. As I paint I ask myself, "*How far can I push those color shapes to enhance my feelings for this image?*" When I work a painting through, the challenge of color always keeps me intense.

THE MATERIALS

The tradition of oil-on-canvas is my favorite medium. I prefer to paint on a canvas surface that has a tooth, which is the opposite of smooth. If the surface is too smooth the paint has nothing to grab hold of. I like to work the surface, rub, scrub, dab, glaze and any other action word I can think of. The surface has become more than something to hold the paint in place, it is part of the artwork. I think of my paintings as illusions *and* objects. The painting surface has to perform two functions, to exist as an illusion of the real world, and to be a painted surface. I want the painted surface to be exciting and bold. I want to see the paint and the brushstroke up close and have it melt away into illusion as I move back.

I prefer stretching my own canvas. Here in laborious detail is my method. There are many ways to make your support. Fashioning your own support is part of the artistic tradition. I also enjoy the craftsmanship of building my own support. It gives me extra

time to rethink the image I want to paint while I work. Although there are probably other methods and possibly better, this is my preferred approach.

I make my stretchers from pine using 1 x 3 inch or wider boards that I rip cut into 1 x 1 1/4 inch stretchers. This gives me at least two stretchers from each board. I confess to looking through every board at Home Depot until I find the straightest planks possible. Even the slightest twist will cause extra grief later when I'm trying for a tight and square joint. If I find a bunch of straight boards, I'll splurge and buy them all. Back in my workshop, I will rip cut the whole group and set aside till I need them.

The stretcher lengths are determined by the size of the final painting. Once cut to size, I mount the stretchers to the back of a wood panel the exact size of the final painting. The stretchers are glued and screwed with a right angle joint. The panel is cut from common wall paneling with the blank-side out. I buy the cheapest sheets of wood wall paneling I can find. I go to the nearby lumberyard and buy what is on sale. If you flip my paintings to the back, you will see some of the most hideous paneling in America. I buy paneling for it's light-weight qualities. It is lighter than Masonite and stronger than Luanne. The panel is attached with glue and brads counter punched and filled with wood filler. Any panel surface irregularities are filled and sanded.

Next I stretch the canvas over the face of the panel and staple it along the stretcher sides. Corners are folded and tucked. I use cotton duck canvas such as Fredrix brand or Dick Blick brand. Both are available by the roll as either primed or unprimed, I prefer unprimed. When I first started painting many years ago, I stretched raw canvas and shrunk it 'drum-tight' with rabbit skin glue. This I coated with formaldehyde to kill any mold or fungus that might develop. Next, a layer of white lead. I did all this to mimic the

old masters. I don't bother anymore. It may have been educational, but I am more satisfied with the commercial gesso products available. The wonderful advantage of priming your own canvas is the resulting form-fitting stretch you end up with. I coat and sand my surface two times. Never more than two because I want to retain the rough tooth of the canvas. That is what grabs the paint from my brush.

If I am painting a color study, I'll use a canvas panel. They are convenient and inexpensive. I typically use a 9 x 12 inch panel, small enough to complete quickly and large enough to execute an image without small labored brushstrokes.

My choice in paints is oil. The brands vary based on color availability and lightfast qualities. Winsor & Newton has a wonderful olive green while titanium white is strictly a priced commodity. I buy the large 200-ML tubes whenever possible. My pallet may include Grumbacher red, yellow ochre, cadmium yellow, cobalt blue, burnt umber, burnt sienna, sap green, Winsor & Newton olive green, vermilion green, magenta, titanium white, and ivory black. Occasionally I may use all these on one painting but that is the exception.

I have painted in most styles and mediums over the years for pay and for play. From photorealism to abstract colorfields and everything in between. In oils, watercolors, acrylics, gouache, and whatever else is out there. I would not give up one experience. Each has brought first hand information that allowed me to learn more about the infinite number of material choices and how they perform. Knowledge is power and in art, experience builds knowledge.

PAINTING STYLE

Every artist expresses art with his or her own distinct language. It is a language that is felt and conveyed through the brush. A painter's style is unique like a fingerprint. It is the same with storytellers. A story is rarely retold exactly the same way each time it is repeated. Each storyteller relates the tale slightly different. It receives interpretations and emphasis on different words, sentences and even content. For my own part, I have never read the children's story *The Cat In The Hat* to my kids the same way twice. It's always different, always with a new feel or delivery. That is the artistic interpretation. You can never paint the same subject exactly the same way twice, (unless you memorize the act, but that we call copying).

Painting is a skill. A trade you can learn. And like all trades, how you apply your skill determines your success. Gifted artisans who push the limits will excel beyond others who merely maintain competency. The most admired are described as geniuses. If you have a natural talent or ability to visualize and the dexterity to produce it, you're well on your way to being an accomplished artist. You need only to hone those hidden talents through learning all you can about your craft. And this comes from experience. You can't learn to ride a horse by reading about it in a book. You have to climb on. You can't learn to paint unless you begin to paint. I studied art for many years but knew nothing of painting till I actually painted a picture.

Painting is an evolution, a journey. It is about learning. Wanting to know more, then satisfying your curiosity. The painting you just completed will probably not be as nice as the one you will paint next. Each painting will provide more insight and knowledge for the next challenge. How you absorb and retain your painting experiences

will provide information you will use on your next artwork. Ultimately what you gather and utilize will develop into your own style.

The quantity of paintings you complete is not as important as what you learn from each painting. I feel each painting is a stepping-stone to something better. During the process of painting, each brushstroke is a learning decision. I never play it safe. If something is almost acceptable, but not quite perfect, then it requires more work. Unfortunately, I am rarely satisfied with my final art. It is only as good as I can do. I see my limitations. An artist will always need to learn more to improve their art.

A painting is never really finished for me. If it is framed and on the wall and untouched for several years, I may still pull it down, (to my wife's dismay), and try to fix that part I never quite mastered years earlier. Each painting is a learning piece for every painting that comes after it. If I should pull down a painting and rework it and make it worse than what I had, then back it goes on the wall until I can figure a new solution.

DEVELOPING TECHNIQUE

I paint mostly in the studio. Although Plein Aire (outdoor) painting is my favorite, it is too difficult in my current lifestyle. So I paint from photos as time allows. It works for me because I needed to find a way to paint and this became my solution. Some grimace at using photos, but most artists have worked from photos at some point, so I'm not shy about it. It helps that I also worked as a photographer. The photo is just a reference tool in your kit. Even the great Vermeer used optics. Anything that assists you in achieving your painted image is acceptable.

As opportunity has allowed, I have taken a variety of commercial illustration projects and commissions. This has kept me active and moved my artistic evolution

along. Painting to meet a client's approval and time frame forced me to make higher demands of myself. I looked at the great illustrators like N.C. Wyeth and Norman Rockwell for direction. Their work placed lofty goals for me to strive toward. Commercial illustration has allowed me to experiment with different techniques: airbrush, gouache, ink, and watercolor. Each media brought more insight and new methods. I was inventing and creating to meet a visual need. This was a great training ground because I was after results. Before, I was trying to master a media in a traditional approach. In illustration, tradition is unnecessary, the image is everything. And when you receive your first check, it helps move you from hobbyist to professional.

SUBJECT MATTER

Selecting my subject has little to do with a mysterious craving to paint. There is never an dramatic mental possession to create an artwork. For me it is about ownership. Painting is an action I use to learn and acquire visual information about something I see and desire. *"I like that flower. I want to recreate it for myself."* The painted canvas is the result of your learning experience. It is the measure of your exploration and discovery. If you do it well enough, your painting will have emotional impact.

ART THEORY

My favorite artist's statement came from Edward Hopper. He said in conversation, *"What I wanted to do was paint sunlight on the side of a house."* It is a blunt, challenging, straightforward and honest statement. The sunlight caught his eye.

I often read statements from painters that sound so complex and self-evolved that I can't see how they ever work up the nerve to put brush to canvas with all the intellectual baggage clouding their actions. In fact, often the most complex statements

describe the weakest art. Describing a painting with words is near impossible for even the most gifted linguist. To delve into the personal psyche of your own mind trying to explain your art is a bit daft. You paint because you wish to paint. Your style is the way you like to paint. My advice is not to let painting go to your head. If you love the glow of sunlight on a house then paint it. Artists paint what they see with their eyes or within their mind. Leave the intellectual interpretation to your critics. It's part of their job.

Frank James Fisher