Inspirational Journey: People and Places

Leigh Ann Withrow
Virginia Commonwealth University

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Inspirational Journey: People and Places

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Leigh Ann Withrow
Bachelor of Science, Mary Washington College, Fredericksburg, Virginia, 1997
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, 2000

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2006
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Inspirational Journey: People & Places

My paintings are inspired by the places I have seen, as well as the people God has placed in my path.

The individuals in my portraits are some of the people with whom I have shared a special bond. Upon reflection, they have been instrumental in deepening my faith. Their love, prayers, support, and deep questioning of my beliefs have enhanced my understanding of God and helped to strengthen my relationship with Him. I am very thankful for the ability to paint their portraits as an expression of my gratitude and love.

God has also blessed me with opportunities to travel and experience His creation in different areas of the world. One moment I felt closest to Him was in Alaska as I stood awestruck at the bottom of a glacier-coated mountain, without a manmade object in sight. The vastness and icy glow of the mountain surrounded by lush greenery filled me with a sense of God’s presence. In my landscape paintings, I attempt to capture these moments on canvas. I can never quite attain the original beauty of the landscape but I use vibrant colors in an attempt to recreate the majestic nature of God’s creation, the original master artist.
Introduction

The passion to draw and paint influenced my decision to major in business and art at Mary Washington College and pursue an art career in the advertising field. However after graduation, the business world did not prove fulfilling and a desire to teach children prompted my decision to return to school. After receiving a second bachelor’s degree in art education from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), I became an art teacher for Fairfax County, Virginia. The summer after my first year of teaching, I began taking classes through Virginia Commonwealth University’s off-campus Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) studio art program. This program has fostered my development as an artist. The professors and exposure to other artists and their work have given me a greater understanding and passion for art, particularly painting.

My discovery of oil painting occurred during my undergraduate coursework at VCU when I enrolled in a Saturday painting class at the Shockoe Bottom Art Center in Richmond. This class provided the perfect opportunity to learn to paint in oils, a medium I had yet to explore. Rhoda McCallum, a frail woman in her eighties taught the course. The paintings in her studio displayed vibrant colors and brush strokes which captured the places and people she had encountered during her travels. Rhoda’s life and art was the catalyst for my newfound passion in oil painting. Rhoda introduced me to the basics of painting and to a simple color palette, later reinforced in me during the MIS program.
Inspiration to Paint Landscapes

The first MIS course I took was a landscape painting class at River Farm, near Mt. Vernon, Virginia. Painting outdoors presented a new and exciting challenge, since my prior experience was limited to painting in a studio. Now, I could combine my passion for nature and the outdoors with painting.

While painting at River Farm, I enjoyed taking in and carefully observing the setting. The sun glistening on the water added brilliant luminosity to the landscape but was difficult to paint because the sun continually altered the reflection on the water. Trying to capture these changes and the beauty of the scene on canvas proved to be a thrilling, yet difficult experience. After several attempts at painting slowly and precisely, and feeling frustrated by the shifting light, I decided to try painting more quickly and in the style of Impressionists, such as Claude Monet (1840-1926). Monet tried to capture the changing light by painting quickly and using short brush strokes of color to create an overall impression of the scene rather than taking time to paint objects in detail. This approach inspired my diptych Mediterranean Potomac (Appendix, 1-2). I painted very quickly with short strokes, adding white and light yellow strokes to capture the highlights and some darker purple and blue strokes for the shadows. I did not stop and labor over details and found this painting to be successful at capturing movement and light.

In addition to the changing scene, the physical conditions for painting outdoors created a challenge. The heat, wind, biting flies, and humidity did not allow me to paint the entire scene outdoors and forced me to move inside to finish my work. Although painting a landscape indoors is not always ideal, it gave me the freedom to experiment
and change the landscape rather than feeling bound to the details of the actual scene. For example, Van Gogh’s *Potomac at River Farm* (Appendix, 3) was begun *en plein air*. I then altered this painting in the classroom, using the painting style of Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890). Adding expressive, forceful brush strokes in the sky and river, and sweeping strokes in the plants and trees gave the landscape a new dimension of movement and expression. It also was an opportunity for me to reference an admired artist.

I took another outdoor landscape painting class revisiting familiar settings, which gave me an opportunity to paint and compare the same scenes I had done previously. This experience allowed me to feel a deeper connection with the river and to see my growth as an artist. At this time, I painted the triptych *The Potomac at River Farm* (Appendix, 4-6) from the same viewpoint as I had painted the diptych, Mediterranean *Potomac* (Appendix, 1-2). The largest panel on the right of the triptych, *The Potomac at River Farm* (Appendix, 6) is the same view as the right panel from the diptych, Mediterranean *Potomac* (Appendix, 1), which shows the river and tree line fading into the distance. In the triptych, I decided to diverge from an Impressionist approach, yet I wanted to maintain a spontaneous, painterly feel in the landscape. My brushstrokes are more fluid and the colors in the trees are more naturalistic than the Impressionist palette. However, I did add more variety of color in the water by applying brighter yellows for highlights and deeper reds for shadows. Both the diptych and triptych paintings maintain a similar color palette and view, but the application of paint differentiates the two.

In addition to painting during class, I enjoy traveling and taking photos of the
amazing varieties of landscapes throughout the world. These photos provide wonderful material to take home and recreate on canvas. Painting a setting that I have personally experienced and visited adds true excitement and joy to the painting process. It brings back the memories and feelings of awe that inspired me to savor the moment and take the initial photograph of the scene.

A couple of my paintings were derived from pictures I took while visiting Alaska. A photograph of a snow-capped mountain and its flawless reflection in the still, clear lake below inspired *Alaskan Mountain Reflection* (Appendix, 7). Trying to recreate this scene on canvas helped me to truly appreciate the beauty of the scene and its immaculate reflection. Rather than trying to recreate my photo, I chose to focus on the colors and intensify them to express the landscape’s beauty and the moment I witnessed this breathtaking sight. I find that trying to paint an exact copy of a photograph never does the landscape justice and that accentuating color is an expressive way to maintain the scene’s majestic nature.

Another painting of Alaska, titled *Alaskan Sunset* (Appendix, 8), is inspired from a photograph I took while hiking Flattop Mountain. On the way down the mountain, I paused to watch the sun fade into the distance and was amazed at the colors in the sky as the sun set at 11:00 pm in the evening! In my painting, I exaggerated the bright colors to emphasize the excitement I felt while standing on the mountain at such a late hour watching the sun set over the vast expanse of land.

Whether painting on the Potomac River close to home or painting scenes from photographs of my travels such as the wilderness of Alaska, I never tire of the natural
world in which we live. I continue to dream of traveling to new lands and the thrill of seeing something for the first time, like a child. I flip through books filled with photographs of other regions in the world and feel an utmost respect for the variety of landscapes and vastness of our land. I most enjoy feeling totally immersed in nature without manmade structures or objects, which seem to distract people from the beauty of nature. I find peace and solace when I am taking the time to appreciate nature and can escape from the distractions that man has created in our world. I hope my paintings will prompt others to take time out of their busy lives to appreciate our natural world.

**Extending The Boundaries: Portrait Painting**

As my comfort level of creating landscapes increased, I desired a new challenge in painting. In previous classes, I was exposed to portraiture but the intricacy of the work seemed to require skills I had not yet attained, and attempting such a task seemed overwhelming. However, my confidence grew during the program and gave me courage to face this challenge. Once I felt prepared to begin portraiture, I turned to my heart for inspiration. I wanted to express my love and gratitude for the people in my life, who had cared for and supported me, by painting their portraits.

Valerie, a very dear friend and co-worker at school gave me a close up photograph of the two of us, which seemed perfect for a portrait painting. After receiving some suggestions from a fellow MIS student, I began the painting *Val and Leigh Ann* (Appendix, 9) by blowing up the image on a projector and tracing the image onto the canvas. Afterwards, I used burnt sienna mixed with turpentine to fill in the darkest areas
first, a similar technique I used in my landscape paintings. Once I had established the
basic values in the painting, I experimented with different color mixing methods to create
skin tones, highlights, and shadows. My professor, John Figura, helped me throughout
the process and his expertise in color mixing proved invaluable to my progress. Despite
the difficulty of attempting my first portrait, I became truly engrossed in the process. I
wanted the portrait to capture the joy and closeness Valerie and I shared as friends. I
hope that my portraits will convey to others the irreplaceable value of true friends and
meaningful relationships.

The portrait *Ryan and Leigh Ann* (Appendix, 10) was a wedding gift for my
husband and dearest friend. My inspiration came from the love I felt for this wonderful
man, whom I was about to marry. I began the painting but only had time to work on it
once a week in class. I had worked on *Val and Leigh Ann* everyday for two weeks,
working wet into wet paint. But during the weekly course, I found that each time I
worked on the painting I had to re-establish myself. Painting on a drier surface was
difficult and I felt like I was starting over every class. However, despite these
frustrations, my eagerness to marry Ryan and express my love for him with this portrait
encouraged me to continue until the work was complete. Ryan, through his faith, love,
and encouragement, has challenged me to continue growing as an artist so that I may use
my gifts and talents to glorify God. Expressing my love for others in portraiture is one
avenue in which I am able to share my gift with a wider audience.

My most recent portrait, *Granny & Papa* (Appendix, 11), was also sentimental. I
painted it for my grandmother after she lost her husband last February. Papa always
wanted me to paint his portrait and I felt connected to his spirit while painting. I wanted the final piece to look just like Granny and Papa and to reveal their loving personalities. In all three of my portraits, I felt successful in representing the individuals with a painterly touch, highlighting their personalities through their facial features and expressions. I believe taking time to paint someone’s portrait shows how much I care for the person in ways that words cannot describe. I hope as others view my portraits they will reflect on the people who are significant in their lives and desire to express their appreciation for loved ones in meaningful ways.

**Contrast of Style: Landscapes versus Portraits**

I enjoy the contrast of style in creating landscapes and portraits. Switching from the looseness of my landscapes to the fine details of my portraits keeps me motivated as an artist and prevents me from tiring of my work. Since I did not attempt portraiture until later in the MIS program, the style of my landscapes developed first. Through experimentation and learning from other artists, I discovered several techniques in painting landscapes that have proved useful. To avoid a tight piece, I do not draw in pencil first, but rather etch out my scene in paint with a neutral wash, usually burnt sienna. In a more recent painting titled *The Potomac at Belle Haven* (Appendix, 12), I referred to another artist’s work, *Moments of Life* (1993) by Martha Saudek for the painting process and color scheme. In learning her process, I discovered that even before laying out the scene, painting a wash over the entire canvas creates a background color that can enhance the overall tone of the scene. I began *The Potomac at Belle Haven* by
painting the canvas with a wash of Indian Yellow, which brightened the entire landscape to create a sunny atmosphere.

Whether on a colored or white canvas, I look through a viewfinder and sketch the composition in a neutral wash. I then divide the picture plane into shapes and designate areas of similar color. I mix the paint for the most dominant color and begin filling in the largest areas. I usually begin filling in the dark shapes first and then moving to the lighter shapes, leaving the highlights until last. In this process I enjoy exaggerating a color that is subtle in the actual landscape but appears obvious to a more artistic eye. For example, in the painting *The Grist Mill Pond* (Appendix, 13), I chose a bright orange to reveal the shallow areas of muddy water, and then used the same orange for bright highlights on the bank.

In my landscapes, color is essential for reflecting nature’s beauty. I look closely at the colors in the landscape and then intensify them with brighter more exaggerated hues on the canvas. I do not completely invent my own palette. Instead, I merely exaggerate the intensity of the palette. For example, in the *Mediterranean Potomac* (Appendix, 1-2) I exaggerated the intensity of the purple in the leaves and I painted the foreground tree on the left side of the right panel in purple, even though the actual tree only had a hint of purple. I used the same shade of purple in the tree to add shadows to the mountains and water. I think it is important to use similar colors as highlights and shadows throughout the painting to maintain optical color and a cohesive painting.

In addition to my use of color, I use brush stroke as an expression of the vibrancy in my landscapes. The brush strokes are loose and flowing to emphasize texture and
movement in nature. I move the brush in the direction the leaves are flowing to reveal the leaves' patterns. In *South Carolina: Flowers With An Ocean View* (Appendix, 14), I added darker green lines to show the texture and pattern in the leaves.

I also apply thicker paint to the canvas to create leaves and differentiate the plant life from smoother surfaces, like rock. In *California Cliffs* (Appendix, 15), I applied a thick coat of paint to the plants to create contrast with the smooth surface of the rocks. I extended some of the leaves into the cracks of the rocks to repeat similar lines and patterns connecting the leaves to the rocks and unifying the elements in the painting.

In all of my landscapes I use loose gestural brushstroke. Painting loosely with energetic gestural brush strokes frees me from a tight, rigid picture and allows for a more natural, spontaneous painting. My style is grounded in Impressionism but has more detail. My brush strokes vary in size and shape in contrast to those of Impressionists such as Claude Monet, who tended to use the same brush stroke throughout his landscape.

Often, taking a photograph makes it easier to capture an interesting perspective in my landscapes. Through a photo lens I am able to focus on a smaller section of the landscape and capture more creative viewpoints. When I painted *South Carolina: Flowers with An Ocean View*, I began with a photograph that I took lying down on the ground looking up at the flowers reaching into the sky. The image gave the flowers a gigantic look as if they were reaching to the clouds. I used a similar approach when I took the photograph for *California Cliffs*. Again I lay down in the dirt and took the picture with the camera tilted up towards the sky to make the small dirt hill look like a gigantic cliff. I enjoy using the camera to focus and intensify the view of a scene. I find
that utilizing a camera and working *en plein air* both have advantages, and I find fulfillment in both methods of working.

My painting process for creating portraits is similar but much more meticulous in finalizing the details and capturing the correct colors. I start with a burnt sienna or neutral wash of the basic shapes and then fill in the basic colors of the skin tones, hair, and clothing. I try to choose a background color before working too much on the hair and face. Then I can paint loose strands of hair over the background to keep the hair looking natural and less stiff. I spend the majority of time working on the minute details in the face. My portraits take much more time than my landscapes because I want to portray the actual person without losing a painterly feel. I find less freedom to experiment with color and gestural brushstroke in a portrait but find excitement in perfecting the fine details of a person’s expression and facial features. The process of creating a portrait is more involved since I have a specific end result in mind but it is also extremely rewarding.

**Giving Glory To God**

Before I dedicated my life to Jesus Christ, I knew Him, but not on a personal, deep level. I recognized Jesus as the Son of God and saw God as the creator of all things. However, this limited view of a God, who is truly personal and intimate, caused me to neglect His presence in my daily life and to fail to recognize and acknowledge Him as the source of my talent and inspiration.

However, as time passed my relationship with Jesus grew stronger. I eventually
desired to surrender my entire life to Him, realizing that He already sacrificed his life for me when He died on the cross for my sins. Romans 3:23-25 states:

For all have sinned; all fall short of God’s glorious standard... We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us.

Consequently, God began to penetrate into all the areas of my life including art. While observing nature’s glorious and diverse textures and colors, God revealed himself as the perfect master artist. The brilliant changing colors of a fall sunset over the mountains are breathtaking and trying to capture these magnificent colors on canvas creates a true appreciation for the beauty and complexity of His original work. Nature, the plants, trees, changing colors of the seasons and time of day and its precision, beauty, and complexity can only lead to an ingenious creator who carefully designed it all. Creation cannot exist without a creator.

As God has revealed himself in nature, He has also revealed how the people in my portraits have drawn me closer to Him. Through prayer, love, support, and deep questioning of my faith, the individuals in my portraits have inspired and challenged me to seek God on a deeper level.

God not only used the subjects of my paintings to strengthen my faith but the process as well. I began to recognize God as the source of my talent and how to lean on Him during the painting process. Instead of just stopping to step back and observe a work in progress, I would take prayer breaks, asking God to provide me with talent and a critical eye to help me recognize the areas that needed improvement and make decisions that would lead to a successful work of art. Little by little, I would work on these
paintings and in the end have always been amazed at the final product. I do not think of myself as a naturally gifted painter but somehow God has been able to use my efforts to create work that I truly admire.

I also give God the credit for my passion to paint. He has given me a love for the outdoors and has blessed me with many opportunities to explore nature in different areas all over the world. I desire that my paintings will inspire others to notice the beauty of our world and to contemplate God as they reflect on nature and man.
Bibliography


Appendix

List of Digital Images

Figure 1. Mediterranean Potomac, diptych (right), oil on masonite, 16”x20”, 2000.

Figure 2. Mediterranean Potomac, diptych (left), oil on masonite, 16”x20”, 2000.

Figure 3. Van Gogh’s Potomac at River Farm, oil on canvas, 18”x24”, 2003.

Figure 4. The Potomac at River Farm, triptych (left), oil on canvas, 18”x24”, 2005.

Figure 5. The Potomac at River Farm, triptych (center), oil on canvas, 20”x24”, 2005.

Figure 6. The Potomac at River Farm, triptych (right), oil on canvas, 22”x28”, 2005.

Figure 7. Alaskan Mountain Reflection, oil on canvas, 16”x20”, 2003.

Figure 8. Alaskan Sunset, oil on canvas, 32”x50”, 2005.

Figure 9. Val and Leigh Ann, oil on canvas, 22”x28”, 2003.

Figure 10. Ryan and Leigh Ann, oil on canvas, 22”x28”, 2004.

Figure 11. Granny and Papa, oil on canvas, 28”x22”, 2005.

Figure 12. The Potomac at Belle Haven, oil on canvas, 20”x16”, 2005.

Figure 13. Grist Mill Pond, oil on canvas, 28”x40”, 2000.

Figure 14. South Carolina: Flowers With an Ocean View, oil on canvas, 16”x20”, 2002.

Figure 15. California Cliffs, oil on canvas, 20”x16”, 2002.
Digital Images

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Figure 12. *The Potomac at Belle Haven*, oil on canvas, 20”x16”, 2005.
Figure 13. *Grist Mill Pond*, oil on canvas, 28”x40”, 2000.

Figure 14. *South Carolina: Flowers With An Ocean View*, oil on canvas, 16”x20”, 2002.
Figure 15. California Cliffs, oil on canvas, 20"x16", 2002.
Leigh Ann Withrow

EDUCATION:

2006  Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Painting and 3D
      Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

2000  Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art Education
      Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

1997  Bachelor of Science in Art and Business
      Mary Washington College, Fredericksburg, Virginia

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

2000-present  Art Teacher, William Halley Elementary School
               Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax Station, Virginia

2000  Student Teacher of Art, Thomas Dale High School
      Chesterfield County Public Schools
      Chesterfield County, Virginia

2000  Student Teacher of Art, Beulah Elementary School
      Chesterfield County Public Schools
      Chesterfield County, Virginia

1999-2000  Rock Climbing Instructor, Peak Experiences
           Midlothian, Virginia

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

2000-present  Writer for Art Newsletter in school newspaper,
               Halley Heartbeat, William Halley Elementary School
               Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax Station, Virginia

2000-2005  Art Committee Sponsor, William Halley Elementary School
           Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax Station, Virginia

2004  Organized and Assembled Student Art Show
      William Halley Elementary School
      Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax Station, Virginia
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONT’D:

2000-2003
Afterschool Art Enrichment Teacher,
William Halley Elementary
Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax Station, Virginia

2002-2003
Created Student Art Display, Famous Virginians
Featured at General Assembly Student Exhibit,
House of Delegates, Richmond, Virginia

2001
Afterschool Student Art Club Coordinator and Supervisor,
William Halley Elementary
Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax Station, Virginia

GRANTS & AWARDS:

2005
P.T.A. Grant for Art Display Boards
William Halley Elementary
Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax Station, Virginia

2005
Wal-Mart Grant for Elementary Art Program
William Halley Elementary
Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax Station, Virginia

2000
Ruth Hyland Hibbs Scholarship
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

1998-2000
Golden Key National Honors Society,
VCU Honors Society
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

EXHIBITIONS:

2005
Inspirational Journey: People and Places,
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition,
Verizon Gallery, Annandale, Virginia

1999
Richmond Artists Exhibit,
Shockoe Bottom Art Gallery, Richmond, Virginia

1999
Festival of the Arts, Maymont Park
Richmond, Virginia

1997
Senior Student Art Exhibit, Mary Washington College
Fredericksburg, Virginia