

Leslie Watkins

To be a painter today seems more than ever a feat of derring-do, a feat of heroic proportions only to be undertaken by the stalwart. Consider striving against the odds, bucking conventional wisdom and flying in the face of all reason, pursuing a way of life and a modest living in an occupation that, for well over a hundred years, pundits have been warning is a lost cause. "Painting is dead" has been a common refrain for so long now that we can even hear it uttered amongst artists themselves. "It's all been done!" they cry, desperately seeking that new twist which will bring them to the public (if not critical) attention. What prompts a person to pick up a brush, colors and canvas when even their fellows decry the wisdom of trying to make a living by plying craft?

Yet here is Leslie Watkins, soft spoken, gentle, quietly self-possessed—hardly the swashbuckling image of one we might expect to take on impossible tasks—painting pictures with all the careful skill and dedication we now only identify with past masters. Not only has she chosen painting as a profession, but finds her greatest pleasure painting landscapes—a double onus since by most accounts landscape painting is the deadest art of all. Still to be a painter of landscape seems to have been Leslie's destiny from the very beginning.

Born with a propensity for introspection, raised in a rural area, an isolato by choice, and a tree-hugger before the term became fashionable, she found her only true solace in wandering wooded areas, communing with the grand silence of nature. A tom-boy who felt more at ease in jeans and climbing trees than in sitting at home, it was her self-appointed task to discover and explore the woods near her home in upstate New York. Unlike her male counterparts who usually set out to conquer nature, Leslie sought communion, a near-sacred relationship that spoke through her eyes to her soul. An especially poignant memory from her childhood was spying a rabbit scurrying under a snow-clad hemlock one winter day. Like Alice, she crawled under the low-slung branches to see where the animal had gone only to discover a magical, tent-like shelter of tenebrous snow-filtered light—the perfect haven for this child of nature and one which would become a favorite haunt in all seasons. Protected from prying eyes, here under the cover of needly branches she could dream and pretend to her heart's content.

Drawing appears also to have been a natural part of her childhood, and sketches would fill the margins of her school books as teachers droned on about "lessons". For Leslie, however, the only lessons she might have been interested in would be those which could teach her how to master pencil and paper so that she could reproduce the fascinating world around her. If those lessons would not become a reality until years later when she would take formal classes at the Art Students League in New York City, neither the practice of sketching nor the desire to improve her skills was ever quite satisfied as she grew into teenager, adolescent and adult. As with so many artists, long before the technical skill had been learned, the discerning eye and passion were already in place, already an integral part of her character.

She knew that she was on track at the Art Students League when she entered the classes of Gustav Rehberger—a kindly instructor who not only made her feel welcome in the world of artists, but made further instruction possible by steering her toward monitoring jobs and merit scholarships. Rehberger was wise enough to know when he had brought her as far as he could and encouraged her to explore further, so she took classes with Robert Philip, bolstering her painting instruction with the study of anatomy with Robert Beverly Hale. It was when she began studying with Frank Mason, however that she knew she had found her way home and that her destiny as a painter was sealed. Whatever doubts she may have had at first were quickly dispelled when she heard Mason speak of "tree-hugging" to his students. Here would not only be instruction in improving her skills of hand-eye coordination, not simply an introduction to the secrets of the craft, but genuine discourse with a kindred soul on the wonders of nature. For Leslie Watkins, her future lay clearly before her.

Whatever debt she feels she owes her instructors, the fact is that Leslie Watkins came to the League fully primed, awaiting that special moment when her creative floodgates would be opened. Instructors may encourage or stifle a talent, but they can never "make" an artist—as the life stories of past masters prove time and again.

Artists are artists in spite not only of the world into which they are born, but of themselves as well. Not even Mason, a popular Art Students League instructor who has been credited with inspiring a whole cadre of young painters, can instill that original spark, that all-consuming desire found in the true artist. Leslie Watkins came to his class fully equipped—she simply had to learn *how* to satisfy that urge to create. At bottom, it was simply a matter of making her materials conform to a vision already full-blown in her mind's eye.

That vision, of course, was to present nature to others as she herself saw it—a place of beauty, mystery, and peace—a magical place of spiritual rekindling open to those who choose to open their hearts and minds to its wonder. Once she mastered the tools of her trade, the only task to overcome was to communicate that vision to others. Today, so successful has she been in attaining that goal that she now holds classes of her own, initiating others into the craft so that they may, in turn, express their own visions.

If, in my estimation, her landscapes are among her finest works, I would be remiss if I neglected to point out that Leslie Watkins does not confine herself to this genre. I made the mistake of concentrating on her landscapes in the past and have no desire to repeat the error in this profile. I first saw her work at the Garrison Art Center, in Garrison, New York, some six years ago, when she had a joint exhibit with fellow artist Keith Gunderson. So movingly expressive were her landscapes in that show that I made the critical mistake of weighing them too heavily against her other work—her still life and figure painting—finding these other subjects "less interesting" (the words I used in the critique of her work that I wrote in our December 1990 issue). I have been since following her work and have learned, much to my chagrin, that my original assessment was too glibly made. For if it is true that her landscapes are classically rendered—serene, softly modulated and consummately executed—Watkins is surely as equally expressive in whatever subject she chooses to paint.

Recently, in preparation for this profile, I had the occasion to visit Leslie Watkins at her studio located on a quiet, tree-lined street in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. A charming and cozy space in spite of non-nonsense atmosphere as a workspace, her studio is filled with on-the-spot nature studies strategically placed along shelves for easy reference. Much as *plein airistes* have done in the past, Leslie makes regular forays into the countryside to update her "note-taking," bringing these studies back to her studio for re-working and/or elaborating into larger compositions. She has, for example, a large triptych presently in progress (only the underpainting is completed) into which she will incorporate elements from various studies, with a tree, a rock outcrop, or a hill, each from different locations, eventually finding themselves part of the final painting.

During the afternoon I spent with her, I had the opportunity to see a larger sampling of her work. By any reasonable critical standards, she is more than simply a competent artist, her still lifes and figure studies inspired by a confident vitality that bespeaks an ever growing mastery of her craft. Yet, for the this writer, and perhaps because of my own on-going love affair with nature, it is her landscapes that speak to me most profoundly. Not even the fact that she is now a city-dweller with a studio in one of the world's largest metropolitan areas has diminished Leslie Watkins' natural bent to express herself most powerfully through her landscape paintings. Like Corot, like Gainsborough, like Lorrain—like all the great landscape masters of the past—Leslie Watkins had first the love of nature instilled in her heart and mind and *then* learned the skills of capturing its beauty in paint on the two-dimensional canvas. Once implanted, it seems that nothing can deter the progress of the artistic spark—as it is said in the teachings of Zen, when you are ready the Master will appear. As in all endeavors, great soul must precede great painting and I do not believe it can happen in reverse.

—Raymond J. Steiner, Art Times Jan/Feb 1997

Leslie Watkins' work has been exhibited in many group and one-person shows in the Northeast and is represented in both public and private collections. She offers classes in drawing, watercolor and oil painting at various art organizations throughout New England. More information about the artist, her work and her classes may be found at:

www.lesliewatkins.com