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WORKING ARTIST

BY DEBORAH SECOR

Workshop Confidential

From demonstration disasters to unexpected tears of joy, your favorite pastel instructors reveal the stories behind their most memorable workshop experiences.



TEACHERS LEARN TWICE: once as they accrue knowledge from experience and again as they pass it along to their students. Painting workshops concentrate the process of teaching and learning, often resulting in especially touching, frustrating and sometimes humorous moments.

Recently, I asked a few well-known pastel instructors to share some of their most memorable workshop experiences. They generously shared their tales of painting breakthroughs, unexpected triumphs and the kind of memorable trials that only make us smile in retrospect.

It's precisely these kinds of experiences that make workshops so vital—not only to students, but also to those of us who are learning twice.

Battling Assumptions

Kim Lordier (<http://kimfancherlordier.com>) recalls one particular workshop student who just didn't seem to absorb what she was teaching. "Every time I stepped up to her easel, we would butt heads," she says. "I'd look at the scene she was painting and offer advice, but what she was painting wasn't even close to what I was observing." Frustrated, Lordier finally turned

Both workshop instructor Jack Pardue and his students find reward in at-the-easel encounters.

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to her and asked, "Why are you here? How may I help you?"

As it turns out, the student was an abstract painter who wanted to learn to use more expressive color. "You could have tipped me over with a feather," says Lordier. "I just assumed she wanted to paint what she was seeing in a representational manner, like the other artists in the class. That explained so much, and we had great exchanges for the next two days."

Subsequently, Lordier decided to send out a pre-workshop questionnaire. "This helps me understand where the artists are coming from, what inspires them, how they paint and what they're

interested in learning, so that I may work with them on an individual basis," she says. "It was huge for me—I learned never to assume!"

Honest Risk

"My worst and best experience is actually the same story," says Julie Friedman (<http://juliefriedmanart.com>). She often demonstrates in her workshops, incorporating exercises and information the group has explored.

"It's always a little daunting for me," she says. "I talk through the painting, so everyone can hear my thought processes as I go along. Since I never know how a painting is going to play out,

I always worry about failing, especially since I take big risks to prove points appropriate to the workshop theme."

One day a demonstration painting just wasn't working out. "My biggest fear had come to pass," she says. "I started to sweat, feeling all those eyes on me; it was definitely my worst teaching moment. I turned to the group and said, 'Whoever thinks this painting stinks, raise your hand.' Of course no one raised a hand until I raised mine."

Slowly, the group then agreed. Friedman gave everyone the opportunity to come up to the easel, identify a problem and contribute something

to the painting. "We discussed the decisions and evaluated them to see if they were helping or hurting," she says. "Because I admitted my failure, it gave everyone permission to be honest about their own painting struggles, good and bad. It turned out to be my best teaching moment by far."

No Pressure

Imagine painting a demonstration in front of some of the nation's finest curators and conservators. Alain Picard (www.picardstudio.com) will never forget the honor of painting live at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The location was in the

hall where "Pastel Portraits, Images of 18th Century Europe" was showing.

"The whole experience was so incredible," he says. "I was surrounded by exquisite pastels created by some of the finest French, Italian, German, American and Swiss portrait artists. The audience was an unthinkable assemblage of curators, conservators, art dealers and private collectors. I had 90 minutes to leave a lasting impression on them. Fifteen years of pushing pastels on paper culminated in this

one moment, before this rarified group, who would collectively judge whether my decision to become an artist had proven to be wise or foolish."

Wisdom prevailed and despite the pressure, "the demonstration went incredibly well," Picard says.

Breakthrough Opportunity

Sometimes, an individual student can be memorable. Casey Klahn (<http://thecolorist.blogspot.com>) recalls an older man, rather grumpy, who began

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a workshop by declaring how much he disliked an artist he knew to be one of Klahn's favorites. This proved, however, to be a fine opportunity to open up the subject of each person's private tastes and how integral they are to individual ideas and artwork.

"By the end of the workshop, this student had painted what was, to me, a very moving and personal pastel work," Klahn says. "He reached inside himself and made a subtle, gentle and authentic pastel that was a development of a lesson presented during the workshop. It was personally gratifying for me to highlight it for the class. This is the meaning of a breakthrough experience."

a thousand miles today in your work!' and offered to show her a few ways to add a little more sparkle."

Adding some strokes to her painting, he explained what he was doing. "All of a sudden, I heard sniffing and turned around to see tears streaming down her cheeks," he says. "I said, 'I didn't mean to upset you!' Through her tears she replied, 'No, Jack. It's quite the contrary. I'm overwhelmed that you like what I'm doing, and it's such a great experience to watch you splash in those final touches in the painting. These are tears of joy and recognition that I'm starting to get this.' That was a rewarding afternoon for both of us."

New Possibilities

Teaching young students can be particularly rewarding, but also risky. Ilene Gienger-Stanfield (<http://ilene-gienger.fineartstudioonline.com>) recalls her apprehension when teaching high school students. She was anxious about their notoriously short attention spans, yet was confident a live model would pique their interest. "The workshop was to last two hours before the students rotated out to another workshop," she says. "In my demonstration, I introduced them to value, edges and a few drawing tips. Then it was their turn to give it a try."

Four hours later, Gienger-Stanfield was gratified to notice that none of the

students had rotated to another workshop. "They were enjoying success and learning concepts that were new to them," she says. "It was quite rewarding to give some young people another possibility to pursue in their lives."

A Thousand Miles

Jack Pardue (www.parduestudio.com) remembers a student who wanted to paint more expressively. Making the rounds in the classroom after his demonstration, he asked how she was coming along. "She didn't want to show me her painting," he says, "but I was very pleased to see that she was getting looser. I said, 'You've come

International Language

Christina Debarry (www.debarrystudioarts.com) recalls a workshop held in a magnificent lodge within a little eastern Quebecois town, attended by local artists. "My students were shy at first, quiet but eager to work," she says. "They spoke only French. My interpreter was a very pleasant student."

Working on elaborate floral still life subjects, Debarry was inspired to invite the students to come back in the evening to continue painting. "Nearly all returned and were animated, chattering back and forth," she says. "The interpreter related local history, and we shared stories about art and our families."

When they discovered Debarry's love for music, the next evening the students happily shared their favorite local French-Arcadian music. "We painted while the music played," she says. "Considering how difficult it is to communicate without the local language, we seemed to bond. Art and music are international languages. The experience of creating art surrounded by lovely music and friendship was the key." ■

DEBORAH SECOR (www.deborahsecor.com) offers two pastel video workshops at <http://artistsnetwork.tv>. Her book, *Landscape Painting in Pastels*, can be read at <http://landscapesinpastel.blogspot.com>.