

AMERICAN ARTIST

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See The
High-
Flying
Mural
Painter



**How To Create
Action With
Vibrant Colors**

**Get A New
Perspective On
Landscapes**

**Step-By-Step
Drawing
Demonstration**



COVER: VOICES OF GLADYS (DETAIL) BY ISA BARNETT

Beginning and Ending En Plein Air

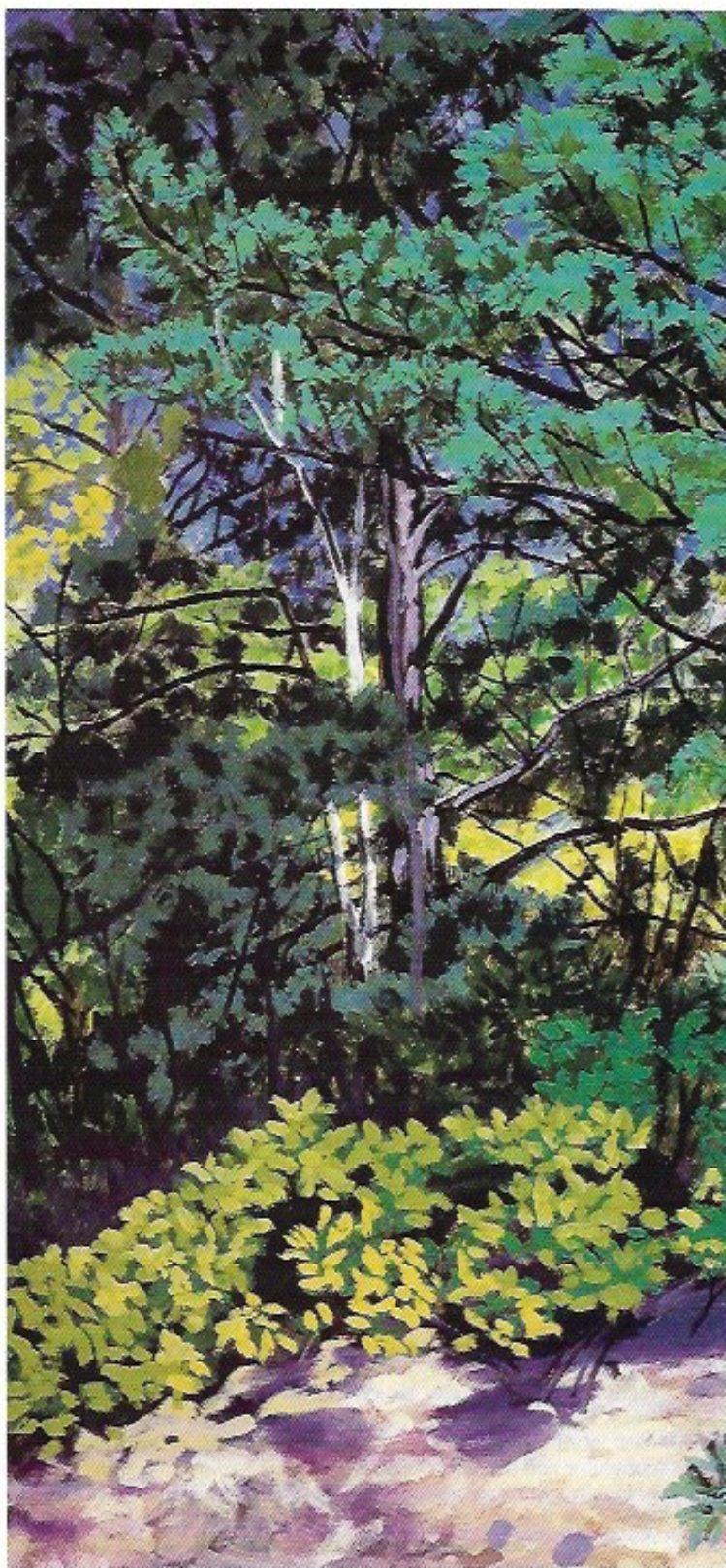
BY MARY AVIS MURPHY

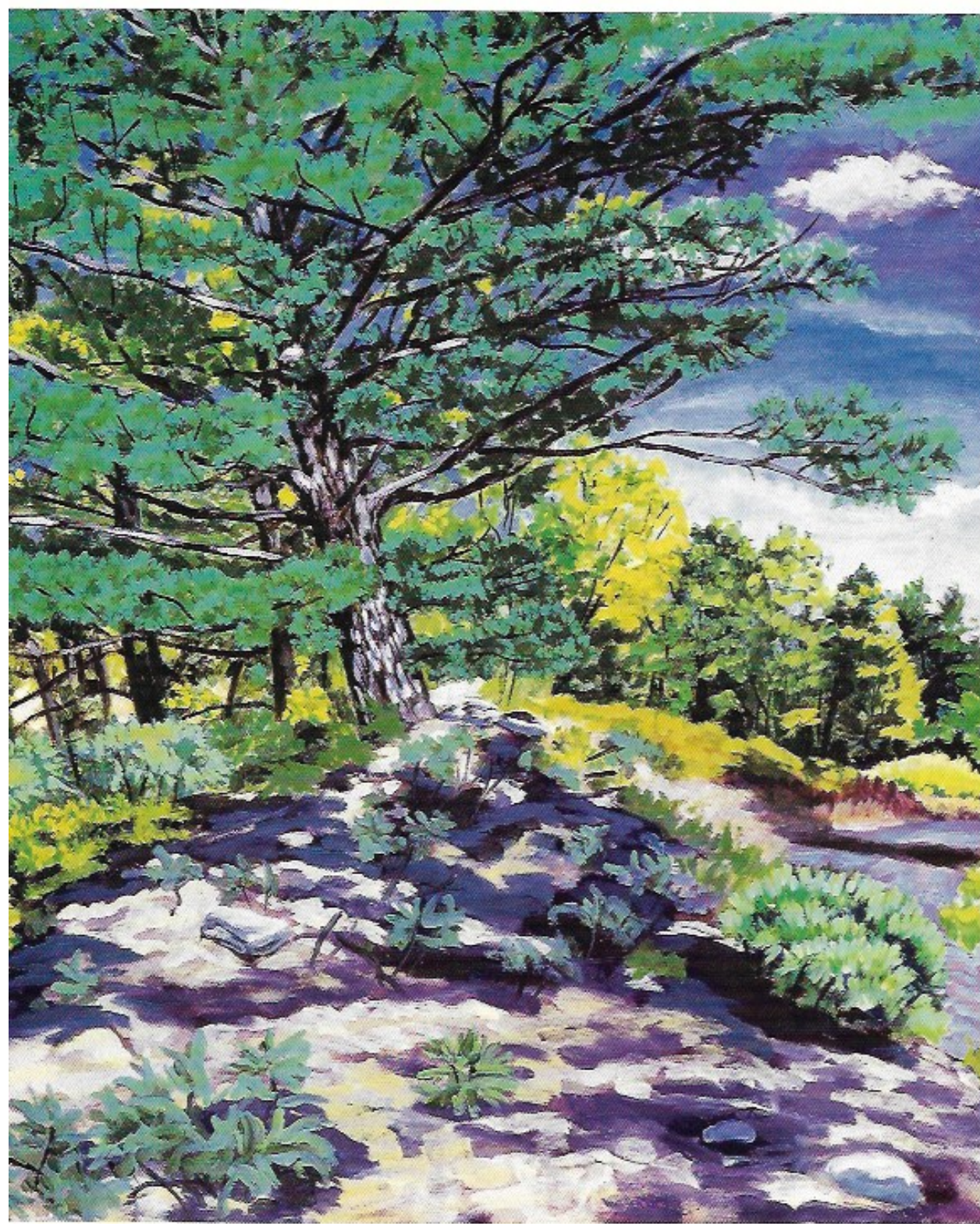
*Portland, Maine, oil painter
Charles M. Thompson works
from start to finish
in the great outdoors.*

The quintessential Maine landscape painting has as its subject great, roiling waters, far-reaching mountain ranges, or dense woodlands. For the past century, the famous and not-so-famous have celebrated this majestic landscape, with artists such as Winslow Homer, Fairfield Porter, and Rockwell Kent putting brush to canvas here. Like his predecessors, Charles M. Thompson has found inspiration in Maine's vistas.

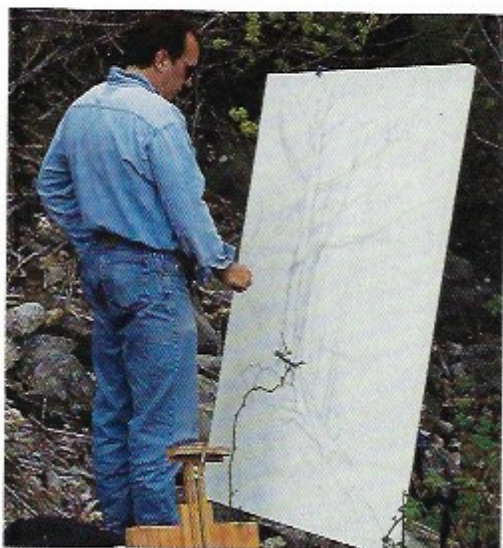
In 1986, he was lured to the state by a close friend for a summer teaching session and fell in love with the unique light of the Maine sky. "Here, more so than anyplace else I have worked," he says, "the clouds are very close to the earth, which brings the light and sky into a unique relationship with the landscape." On an earlier visit to artist Jack Beal's farm in upstate New York, Thompson had been inspired by the singular beauty of the old trees on the property. This experience was the catalyst for his transition from cityscapes to landscapes. "When I began painting trees, I did it in a different style from my other works," he says. "I loved it immediately. So I committed myself to fifty canvases. I think I've completed about thirty so far."

*The Sand Ledge, 1993, oil, 36 x 48. All artwork this article
courtesy O'Farrell Gallery, Brunswick, Maine.*





PLEIN AIR PAINTING DEMONSTRATION



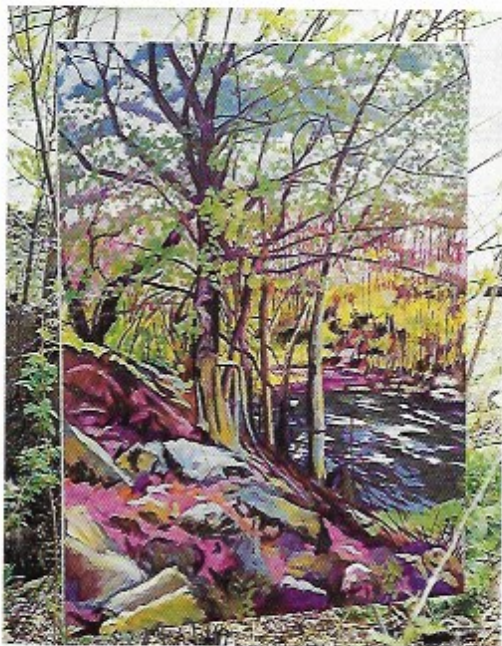
Thompson begins by drawing the scene in graphite directly on the canvas.



He next uses bold, bright colors such as blues, pinks, and yellows to map out the landscape.



As the work progresses, he adds darker colors and earth tones.



This photo shows the painting in its final stages. By applying the color in layers and adding darker and lighter tones, Thompson creates unusual lighting and textures.

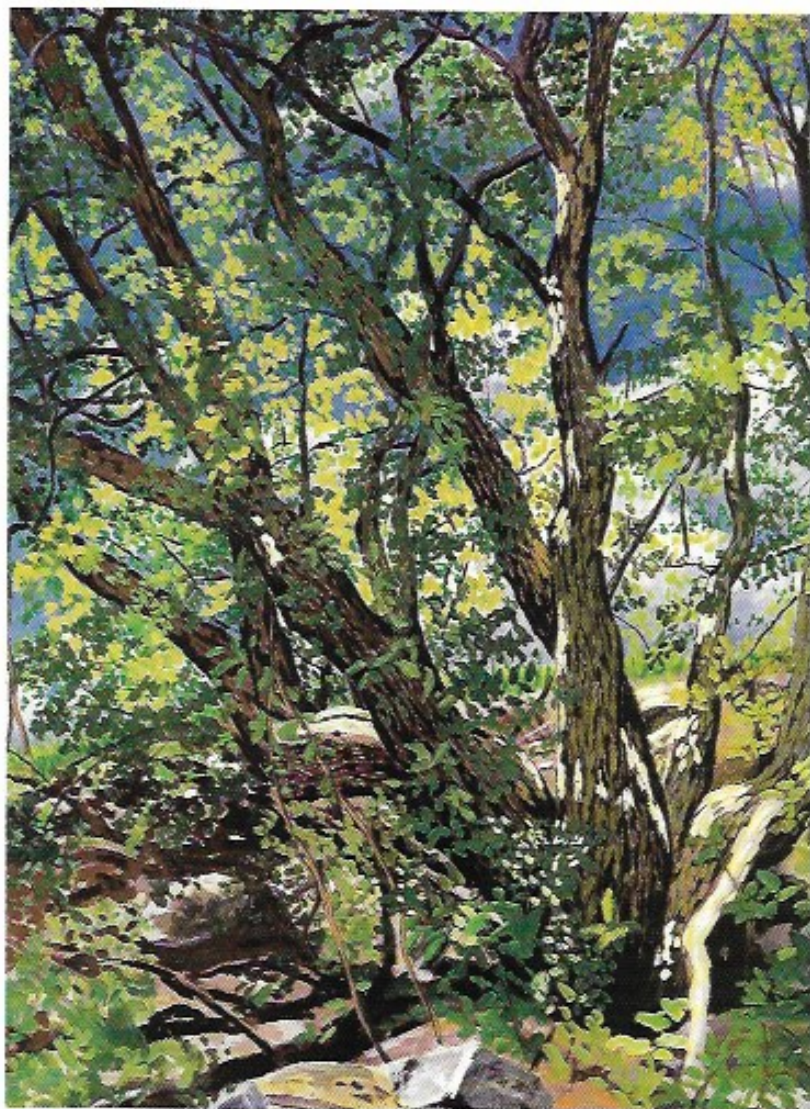
Jack's Tree is, appropriately, the first in Thompson's series of experiments with light, color, and form.

The artist paints solely en plein air and says that by responding to nature in a direct way, he has developed a spiritual connection with light and atmosphere. As most landscape artists are aware, painting in the open is not without its hazards. Thompson notes with a grin, "When I lived in Philadelphia, I worked right on the street, inhaling a lot of exhaust fumes. In Maine, I'm not bothered by cars, but I'm allergic to just about everything outside." It doesn't affect his determination, however. He sets out each morning with his gear, canvas, and lunch bag.

When Thompson finds an appealing spot, he first makes a study in pastel or watercolor. Then he embarks on a larger, more finished piece, which takes about four weeks to complete. "Because of the time involved in each work," he explains, "I must be devoted to the painting. By doing a study, I can explore the nuances of the place without being committed to anything."

The artist begins by drawing a light sketch of the scene on his canvas, which he then covers with an underpainting made up of intense blues, yellows, and pinks. Focusing first on the background, Thompson applies layers of color followed by darker and lighter tones to create the unusual textures and lighting that characterize his work. "The paintings are more restrained in the final stages than they are in the beginning," he notes. As a result, many of his compositions have a luminous quality. In creating *Among Woodchucks*, for instance, Thompson began with a vivid ultramarine blue underpainting for the background. The tree trunk, limbs, and boulders in the foreground were later painted with a combination of cadmium orange and ultramarine blue. Later, the artist added clouds, foliage, and shadows, all in layers.

Since Thompson uses a broad range of greens and yellows, he mixes most of the colors himself. His palette consists of ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, cadmium orange, lemon yellow, sap green, ultra-



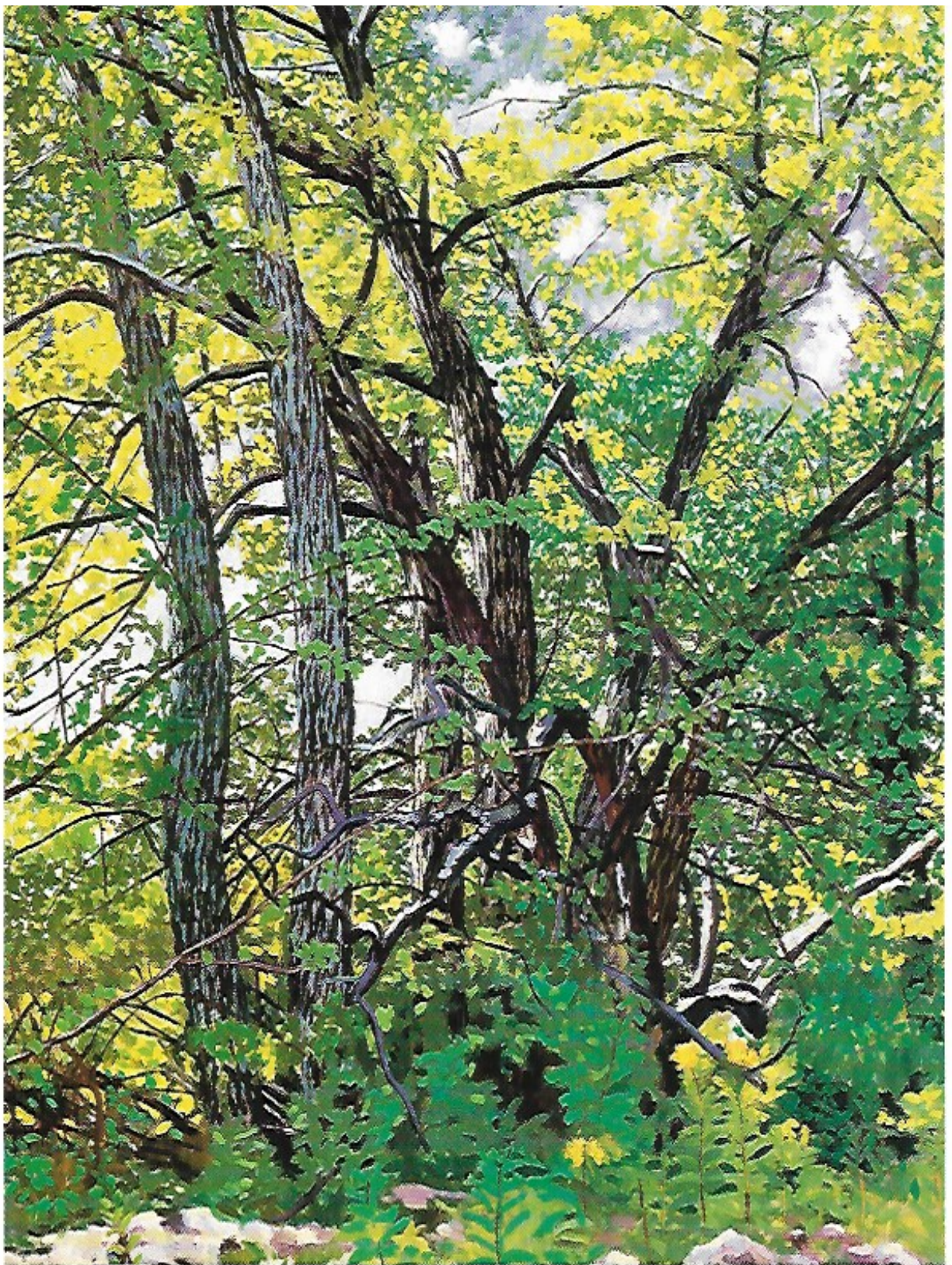
Among Woodchucks, 1994, oil, 53 x 42.

rine violet, burnt umber, and titanium white. He also uses alizarin crimson, which he reserves for producing dark, rich browns.

Although Thompson considers himself a painterly realist, his brushstrokes are not unduly heavy or undirected. Rather, he uses his brush in strong, even strokes that correspond to how he has conceived the composition. In *Jack's Tree*, for example, the unique shadow effects of the brushstrokes bring this gnarled, twisted tree to life. The way he has handled the paint makes the viewer

want to reach out and touch the rugged ridges of the old bark.

It's not surprising that Thompson has been especially influenced by artists who, like himself, use powerful brushstrokes to execute their visions. In particular, he cites the great seventeenth-century Dutch master Frans Hals (ca. 1580-1666), who, the artist says, "used his brush in a very sophisticated manner of small, simple strokes to achieve incredible results." Thompson also acknowledges a debt to Janet Fish, whom he met many years ago while



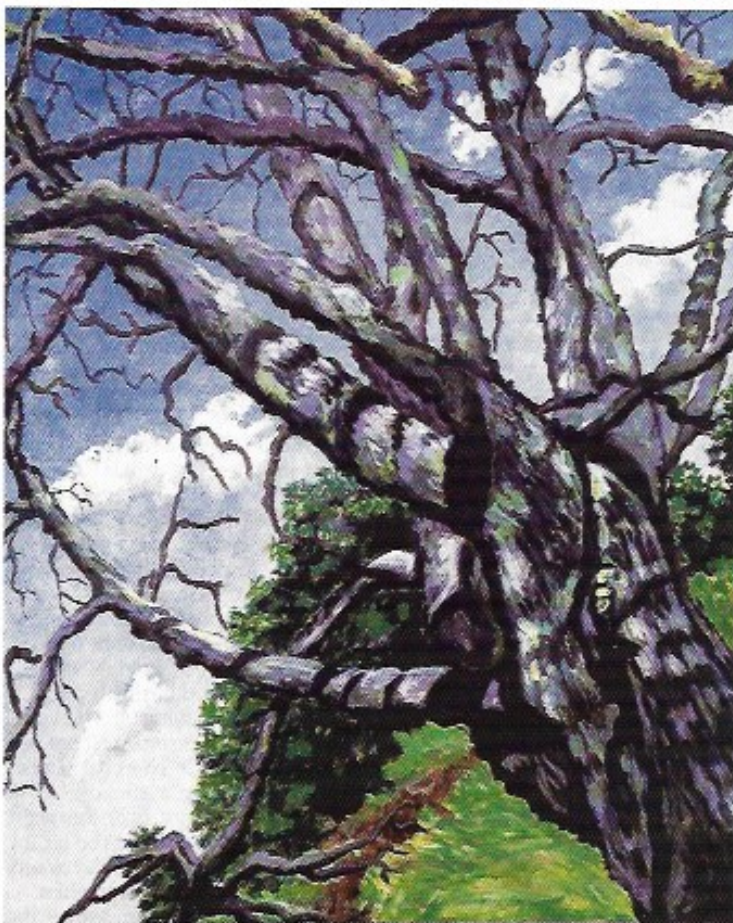
attending the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. "From Janet," he says, "I learned the value of painting from real life."

From experience, Thompson learned he must carefully consider the relationship between the light in the landscape and the scale of the painting. Light is a critical element in his compositions, and he makes an effort to work at approximately the same time every day. "The angle of the light transforms the entire picture," he says. "If I run into some rainy days or am distracted by another painting, I may not return to the picture for several weeks." By then, notes Thompson, the light may be totally changed—a situation he wants to avoid: "In Maine, the seasons are so short that I can literally start a painting in one season and finish it in another."

Considering that Thompson works on-site and must transport his own supplies, it's remarkable that he prefers large canvases ranging in size from 36" x 30" to 60" x 44". It would be a formidable challenge for most artists to simply reach the top of these canvases, but for Thompson, who stands 6' 4" tall, it's an easy stretch.

Thompson attributes a lot of his productivity to his work schedule. As the acting chairperson of the art department at Saint Joseph's College on Sebago Lake in Maine, he devotes several days a week to his academic demands. "I paint when I can during the fall and spring semesters. Once May comes, I go out and paint from nine to five every day until September," he says.

A native of southern Indiana, Thompson graduated from Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, and later moved to Philadelphia, where he received an M.F.A. degree from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University. He studied for a year at Tyler's school in Rome and afterward spent a year making small, wooden, neoclassical sculptures. He soon returned to the canvas energized, spending the next decade painting the cityscapes of Philadelphia and, later, Portland. His work has been displayed in numerous solo and group shows, including



exhibitions at the now-defunct Noel Butcher Gallery in Philadelphia and the Barridoff Galleries in Portland. He is currently represented by O'Farrell Gallery in Brunswick, Maine, where he recently had a solo exhibition of fifteen landscapes. ■

Mary Avis Murphy is a freelance writer in the Portland, Maine, area.

Top: *Park View*, 1995, oil, 29 x 65.

Above: *Jack's Tree*, 1992, oil, 37 x 30.

Opposite page: *Light Summer Dance*, 1993, oil, 60 x 44.