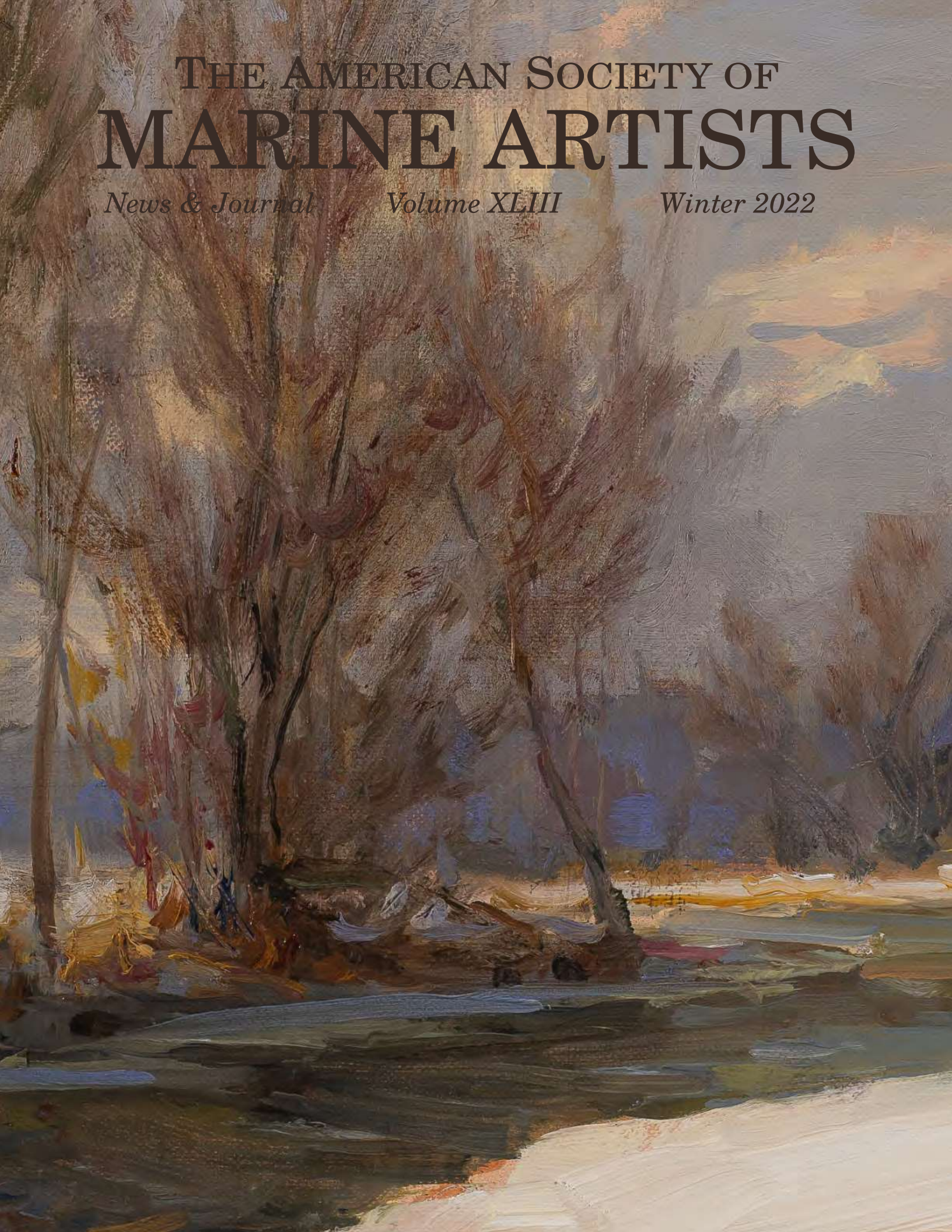


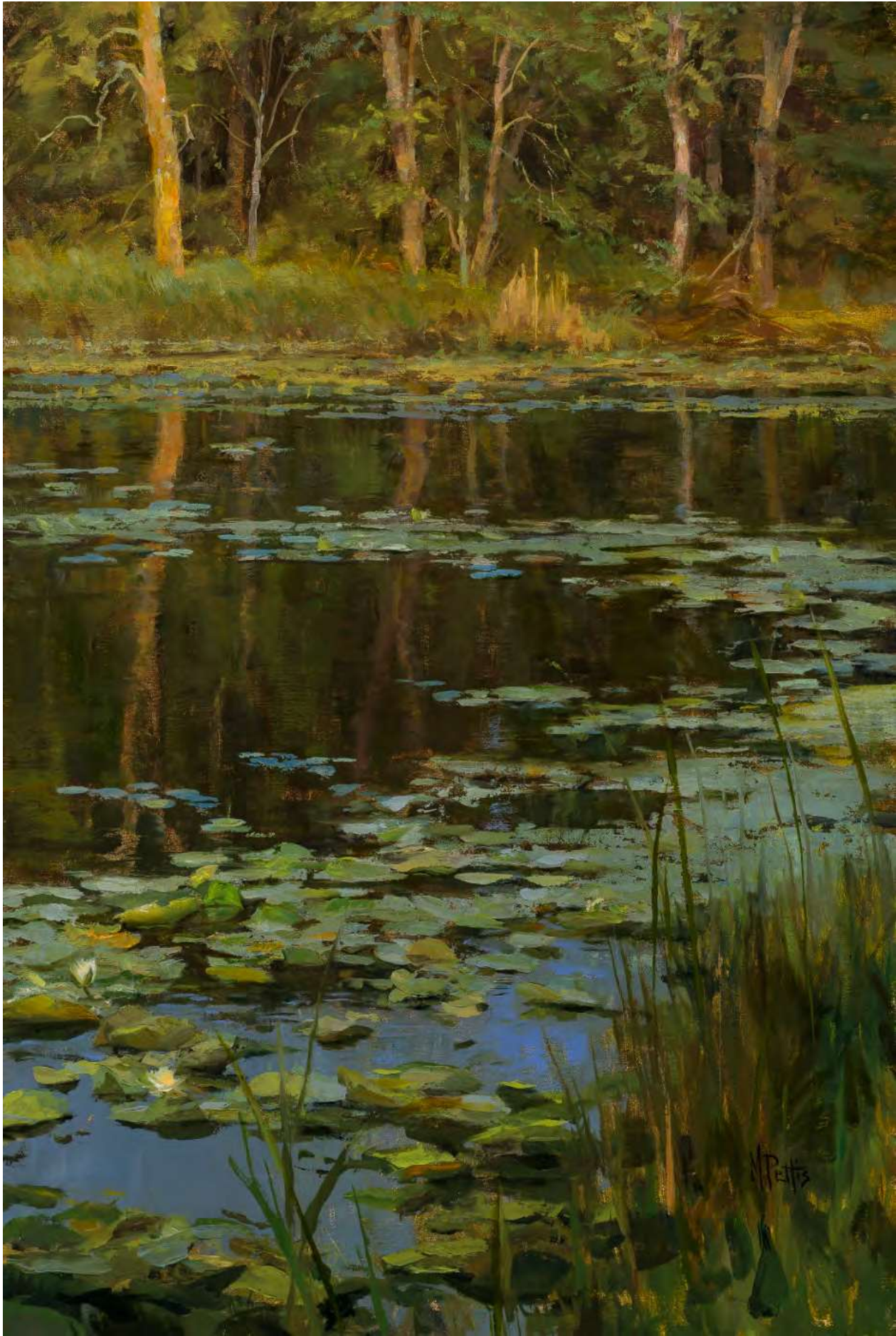
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# MARY PETTIS:

## *A Surge of Connectedness*

by Nicolas Fox, ASMA

I got to speak with Mary Pettis recently about her life and work. Despite the grim November weather, Mary's vibrant appreciation of how art illuminates and connects us made the day feel bright and filled with possibility.

Mary grew up on a farm in southern Minnesota. Her mother's side of the family came from the Bavaria in the 19th century. Her father's family arrived in the country before the Revolution.

Art didn't play much of a role in her childhood life, but she was sensitive to it when it crossed her path. Mary loves to share her fond memories of staring into the Bierstadt landscape print above the couch in her family home as a child. She was also captivated by pottery that had been painted by her great-aunt. "It was a lemonade set with lighthouses, and cottages in the mountains, and European villages. I would just stare at those as a child and wonder what it would be like to be able to paint something so beautiful out of your head. Although our home was filled with music and beautifully hand-crafted heirlooms, my Great Aunt Alie, who I never met, was the only family artist who inspired me as a child."

Early on, Mary was captivated by nature. "Growing up in Minnesota, there are so many pockets of beauty

The land just... imprinted on me. I felt deeply connected to the change of the seasons. Even as a kid it seemed to me like rocks were alive. I remember in a grade-school science class they said that even inside rocks there are molecules that are moving. It felt like a truth I already knew.

"There was this surge of connectedness to all the living things around



me. I felt like I could sense an oak tree that was 300 steps away when I was walking on the ground. Reading the transcendentalists' observations about how nutrients flow up through the roots of a tree in the same manner that the blood flows through my veins... things like that sparked a wonder inside me, an inner resonance. I had to fight against the idea that it's silly to think about such things."

Mary's family were hardworking farmers who had little time for her "daydreaming" about such things, exhorting her to clean out the chicken coop if she "needed time".

"One of my favorite jobs was to

check the electric fences skirting the pastures. Walking along the fence line, I was able to start being alone in nature for a few hours at a time. That's when I started feeling that... connectedness.

Mary did all the things an artistically inclined farmgirl might do. She drew, acted in plays, sang, and engaged in public speaking. She was recognized for her representational artwork by her teachers. "My high-school art teacher said, 'Don't ever let anybody try to teach you how to draw and paint. Just follow your heart,' which--God rest his soul--was horrible advice. But he knew I loved nature. I think what he was trying to say was 'don't go off to

college and have them tell you that only abstract art is art." Mary's parents were wary of her interests. "I know they were proud that I was so prolific in the Arts, but I suspect they hoped there would be some practical application."

In 1971, Mary headed off to the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota, the nation's only Benedictine college for women. The college operated in concert with nearby St. John's University.

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*All paintings by Mary Pettis*

OPPOSITE: *Fermata*, oil, 24 x 16 in



Once there, she immersed herself in the arts, pursuing drama and painting. “I spent the fall semester of my freshman year in the play *Macbeth* and also working on my first still life. My grandfather had recently passed away and I decided to paint a collection of some of his things—a duck decoy, a scarf, his cap, and a few shotgun shells.

“After the play, when we struck the set from *Macbeth*, I realized I had nothing to show for it but a program, whereas at the end of the still life class, I had a painting! And not only that, if I made more, I could sell them! So I thought it would be plenty practical to learn how to do this and be a painter. Piece of cake! Except I didn’t really know how to get better...but I

knew I loved nature and now wanted to paint.”

On seeing the work of Bela Petheo, a portraitist and artist-in-residence at St. John’s University, Mary immediately enrolled in his classes. Born in Hungary and educated at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna had emigrated to the US in 1951. He’d studied under Karl Lueger and was interested in Kokoschka’s School of Seeing. “He painted intriguing portraits, and he led me toward finding a way that would be acceptable to still be a representational painter, but paint loosely enough that it wouldn’t be frowned upon, or considered calendar art.”

Conscious of her family’s desire for practicality, Mary was studying

*All paintings by Mary Pettis*

ABOVE: *Moonset, Sunrise*, oil, 16 x 20 in  
OPPOSITE TOP *Solitary*, oil, 16 x 20 in  
OPPOSITE: *Sandhill Crane Morning*, oil, 24 x 24 in

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Secondary Education in addition to Art and French. “My parents really wanted me to be able to take care of myself. I think they were worried that I wanted to be an artist. Secondary Education was a “sensible” career.

“I was taking a class at Mankato State in the summer to be able to also get a degree in Humanities, and between classes I found an old *Artists Magazine* from the summer of 1971. It was mostly in black and white, but one article in the color section was about Richard Lack. I thought it was

written about an old master; I was so surprised to discover that he was still alive, and in fact, teaching in Minneapolis!

“I wrote him a letter about studying with him and he wrote back telling me how his atelier worked, adding ‘I don’t have any women students, but on your way back to college, why don’t you swing by? Bring some of your work and we’ll talk.’ And that’s what we did. The following summer, I was accepted on a trial basis, and did well enough that he said ‘okay.’

“I told him my mother would kill me if I didn’t finish my college degree, and that I had to go back to Saint Ben’s at least for the first semester of my senior year. And so I packed all the courses in and ended up graduating with majors in both Art and Humanities and a minor in French. I skipped student teaching to go directly to the atelier. That was when I made the decision to become an artist. Going to Minneapolis to study with Richard Lack was probably the first adult decision I ever made.

“It was a tremendous honor to be admitted, and just the idea that I could ever paint in this style was truly a dream. We started out with models right away, every morning. Afternoons were spent on charcoal drawings and paintings of casts, then on to still life and portraits--all over a three-year period. During my last year, I also learned the art of copperplate etching from Daniel Graves, who was at the atelier at the time.

“Knowing I wanted to be a landscape painter, Mr. Lack taught me the French Impressionist way of handling landscape. This meant comparing outdoor color values to a piece of black velvet, which results in a really high-key painting. I did a series of paintings in that manner that my colleagues loved, and Mr. Lack was really pleased, but when all was said and done, the paintings didn’t feel to me the way nature does. I wanted to





somehow find a way to capture the richness and depth that I felt when I connected with nature.

“After Atelier Lack, I married and moved to the St Croix River Valley in Wisconsin. I always had a wet painting in the dining room as I raised three kids. Unexpectedly, I ended up being the primary breadwinner in my family. I taught classes and did etchings to pay some of the bills. Because of my training I knew how to mix color and what brushes to use. I painted a lot of wildlife because it was something I knew, as I had grown up hunting and fishing. And wildlife paintings would sell for enough money to pay three month’s rent. We opened a gallery on Main Street in our little town, and painted all manner of subjects, commissions, and es-

pecially landscapes. After our divorce, I opened a gallery and classroom space in Taylors Falls, MN, where I now live.

“I dated Randy for four years before we got married in 1997. During our courtship, we took a trip out to Jackson Hole with the kids. It was our first long distant family vacation and a real adventure. And that was where I first met Jim Wilcox.”

Jim was a plein air painter whose work, *Home of the Beaver*, had won a \$50,000 National Arts for the Parks prize. “When we went out to the Tetons, I saw the original, and when I went up to it, I just couldn’t believe how beautiful it was. It was loose and yet masterful. I didn’t know how he did it. Painted in a bravura manner, the brushwork was so fresh and thick!

It had the richness and depth that was missing from my Impressionist attempts. And so when I saw an ad in a local magazine advertising a Jim Wilcox workshop, I thought, ‘I’ve got to meet this guy!’

“With Randy’s encouragement, I signed up. I will never forget the first day. He did a demonstration showing us how he just how he toned the canvas and wiped it down and then did a quick drawing in cadmium red light and then started applying the paint. He was almost done and someone asked, ‘And how many times will you return to the scene?’ And he said, ‘Well, I usually try to finish it in one shot, on one day.’ My jaw dropped. And I literally danced. I was jumping around in circles. I was so excited. When I came to my second work-



All paintings by Mary Pettis

OPPOSITE: *Road to the Sea*, oil, 30 x 40 in

ABOVE: *Rippling Light, Ponte Vecchio*, oil, 18 x 28 in

shop, Jim said, 'I remember you. You're the one who danced!'

"That was where I found out about plein air painting, that it was possible to go outside and do a painting in a few hours. That just blew my mind. The idea of being able to identify the story I wanted to tell, put the right stroke in the right place and then be done was another world. There was just no looking back for me. I became obsessed, ready to do whatever it took to learn that language.

"I took another workshop at Jim Wilcox's studio from Zhang Wen Xin. That was my first introduction to Chinese interpretations of nature in painting. He didn't speak English very well, but his work resonated with

me. I tried to memorize everything he was doing with his palette knife and his brush to get such incredible expression in his work, but I didn't yet understand the difference between imitation and expression. So I put it on the imaginary shelf for future use.

"Also, during that workshop, someone recommended Richard Schmid's book, *Alla Prima - Everything I Know About Painting*. I bought it but didn't read it right away. Having a classical realist point of view, and loving the Hudson River School, I didn't really care for his work...yet. Once I started reading the text of the book, I began to understand what he was after and started opening my mind a little. I saw the beauty and mastery in his work. Because my kids were still young, I would record chapters from the book, especially the chapters on edges and color harmonies, and then listen to the tapes in the car when I was carting them around. I'd listen to the tapes over and

over until his teachings sank in. And I became a big fan. I did all the color chart work, learned to use a palette knife, I felt like I was now starting to get a handle on how to see and use colors in ways in which I hadn't been previously trained. I painted hundreds of alla prima studies over the next few years.

"I think my next pivotal art experience came in 2004, in Scottsdale, Arizona. I had won an award from the Plein Air Painters of America at the 'Best and Brightest' Art Show at the Scottsdale Artists' School in Arizona, so we traveled down to see the city and the show. At the same time, there was an exhibition called *Historic Treasures Utopian Spirit: Selections of Russian Impressionism* at the old Fleischer museum there in the city. I went there expecting to have just another educational museum experience; I had no idea of how much it would change me. When I saw the paintings, the bottom fell out of my stomach



and I just started weeping. Tears were streaming down my cheeks at nearly every painting. These were huge paintings of all subjects, everyday scenes, portraits, genre paintings, landscapes, and it's not like they were strenuously posed and licked to perfection, you know? I had this completely unexpected visceral connection to the creators of this art from halfway across the world!

"I'd never seen anything like it before. They used heavy, heavy paint like cake frosting and even thicker, they were life-size with gorgeous bright and unpredictable colors. Not the colors that you see when you inspect a subject closely, but in a way that spoke to the mood and story of the painting! I could see that they understood how the warmth or coolness of a color, for example, could be used as a vehicle of expression, and in the way that they handled their contrasts, the purples and yellows together, or high chroma

against low chroma. Something was happening in the instinctive application and simple alchemy of the paint. It was loose but still somehow grounded. It wasn't careless or slapdash. It was deliberate bravura. In the articulation of the wrist bone of the hand, for example, you could see the knowledge behind that expression. I melted inside, I vowed to myself I would seek to understand why I was moved so much. That show really changed my life. That's when I decided expression is paramount, and knew, more than ever, that I needed to dive deep into the technical vocabulary.

"After that, I stopped painting for the market, pretty much, for a long time. I studied everything I could about how those Russian artists were trained. I even started examining the work of Chinese artists that I knew had links to the Russians. That led me to meet Jove Wang, who was a pivotal

*All paintings by Mary Pettis*

ABOVE: *Waiting for the Light*, oil, 40 x 60 in

OPPOSITE TOP: *The Color in Greys*, oil, 8 x 14 in

OPPOSITE BELOW: *The Old Dock*, oil, 16 x 20 in

instructor for me. He encouraged me to paint from my instinct. It felt like he was the connecting piece somehow. I didn't know any Russian artists that were teaching that could fill in this blank, but Chinese artists like Zhang Wen Xin and Jove Wang had a direct student-teacher link to the Russian artists. Zhang Wen Xin studied under Maksimov! Because of those guys, I went to China, then also Russia, and closely studied the works of Serov, Polinov, Fechin, and Repin.

"Since then, I have been trying to understand what they did and how. What is it that helps us get emotion into our work? How does that happen?

"One book that really unlocked a lot of things for me was Hongnian





Zhang's *Yin-Yang of Painting*. I believed the philosophy of Chinese art could inform my technical classical training. One of the steps in my exploration was understanding that we use all of the tools we're familiar with, you know, brushwork, color, texture, all the things oil paint can do...we use those for the purpose of expression. And we can't forget that we learn the vocabulary so that we can say something. Expressive Realism.

"I'm big on technique and getting under the hood, really understanding how to draw and gaining a really strong mastery of the medium. But it's so important to understand that the language is only meant to serve the content and the expression.

"As soon as we pick up a brush, we bring it all to the easel. We bring all our training, all our knowledge of what makes a good painting, how to apply paint, but when we go out in front of nature, we respond intuitively. I try not to intellectualize at all anymore once the brush is in my hand. Jove taught me to set the brush down when I need to think. I learned after doing thousands of little paintings that it's better to just respond as I paint... And I find that's the pure expression. The spark that comes usually is a given; I wouldn't have set my easel up in that spot if my intuition wasn't guiding me. So I'll feel that spark and start working. The analyzing part comes during my first wash when I put the brush down...I'll know right away that it's the shapes, or the lines, you know? I can dissect what it is that I'm responding to, and usually, it falls into one of the categories of line,

shape, value, color, or you know, the edges and texture. After years of composing paintings, now I know what will carry the painting even before my brush touches the canvas, or even while I'm putting my paints out. I will look at the scene and just know.

"I've been teaching for a few



decades, and I always recommend painting small works to figure out who you are and what you need to say. The method I came up with, and I have this in my *Masterclass Handbook*: go out, set a timer, and paint for

one hour. Then: brushes down. I think it's really helpful to artists, because if they only have an hour they have to prioritize what's important about the scene. The first dozen studies are usually really hard, but they have to have faith and do fifty or seventy-five. Then I tell them to lay them

all out along the floor board or in their studio and sit back and just dissect them and separate their favorites. Do they see a particular recurring strength? Figure out why they love those pieces: is it that the shapes were great, did they have good, clean color, or not too much detail?

"I think being an artist is about having powerful feelings that have to get out in one way or another, and having a vocabulary to express them. I think maybe everyone has it inside of them to be an artist, it's just uncultivated. But mastery – mastery of the medium and mastery of the content – requires meditation and internal work to understand that first instinct. When I get twenty minutes in and I can see the evidence of the finished painting, it still feels like a miracle to me. All of this study is gelling, finally, in the work that I'm doing now. Although my better works are my simpler ones. A lot of my attempts at poetry become accidental novels.

"The two great dialects of art are instinct and intellect, or message and medium, and I have to honor both. It's a dance, a pas-de-deux, between right brain and left brain, the abstract and the concrete. Art has been an incredible journey for



*All paintings by Mary Pettis*

OPPOSITE: *Serenade*, oil, 28 x 16 in

ABOVE: *North Shore Beckons*, oil, 32 x 48 in

BELOW: *The Day Spent with Lilies*, oil,  
16 x 20 in

me, connecting all the different schools and different influences over the years. This is what I've gathered that I can pass along: once we've studied and learned the vocabulary, and once we've studied and learned who we are, we have to just sit back and ask 'what are the tools that I need to say what I want to say right now?' We need to be happy in the process and gentle with ourselves. Trust that we have the knowledge we need to do the painting we want to paint today. Try to stay present and do the work, and then show up and do it again tomorrow!"

