

The background of the entire page is a painting of a landscape. It depicts a wide river or lake winding through a valley. The water is a pale, milky white, suggesting a misty or overcast day. The banks are lined with dark, silhouetted trees and shrubs. In the far distance, a range of mountains is visible under a sky with soft, hazy clouds in shades of blue and white. The overall mood is serene and atmospheric.

# MARY PETTIS, ASMA INLAND WATERS

THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF  
MARINE ARTISTS

# INLAND WATERS

## *Awareness, Reverie & Absolution*



by Mary Pettis, ASMA

It never occurred to me that the historic and contemporary paintings of our midwestern lakes and waterways would be considered marine art. Now, especially as a new board member of the American Society of Marine Artists, I am thrilled to know of the Society's broad interpretation of the genre. I've been asked to share a bit of what it's like to be a painter of the inland waters I've been trying to decode

for more than 50 years. My 'Walden Ponds' are named Emily, Big Balsam, St. Croix, and Superior. They have nurtured my soul in unexpected ways. As I have studied and painted these waters, they have ferried me through life to a place of introspection, connection, and meaning.

It's hard to say exactly when my love affair with the waters of Minnesota began, and how that love formed who I am as an artist. I will try.

I grew up on a farm in the rich loam of southern Minnesota. My great, great grandfather drove goods and lumber in ox carts along the Minnesota River to the Great River Road of the Mississippi. I remember vivid stories, stewarded by my great Aunt Ila, of how the native friendly tribes warned our family to lay low in their country homes on the east side of the river, because trouble was brewing (during what came to be known as the US - Dakota War of 1862).

The Dakota haunts were my first childhood stomping grounds generations later, particularly a small ravine embracing Chankaska Creek. Chankaska, a Dakota name used by the 1830's French explorer, Joseph Nicollet, means "forest-enclosed", and was a mile from our home. There, I would sneak up on wood ducks, race stick-

and-leaf sailboats in the rushing water with the siblings I was babysitting, and dash through the hills when I heard the distant locomotive whistle. I'd try to get to the trestle over the creek in time for the conductor to wave to me (an accomplishment I viewed, in retrospect, with great satisfaction!)

My entire childhood I remember trying to imagine what it would be like to be on a sailing vessel, or to go sit on an ocean beach and listen to the surf; that thirst wouldn't be quenched for a couple of decades.

We worked hard during the day caring for the gardens, fields, many little siblings, and livestock (I showed beef cattle at the county fair). We baled hay and walked the beans, working our way down the rows of hundreds of acres of soybeans and hand-pulling out the weeds. We had great suntans from the waist up! Playing on the water was our reward when the work was done. On nearby lakes, we went fishing, swimming, and water skiing. In autumn, we push-pulled through our sloughs hunting in flat-bottomed, double-pointed duck boats. We had huge Pollyanna picnics on a point of family land on Lake Emily, which happened to look like the lake and cottonwood painting above our sofa, except without the mountains, of course (a reproduction of a Bierstadt, but that's another story).

Our "Up North" getaway was one week every summer at a former logging camp turned resort. Unlike the broadleaf trees and fields that dominate southern Minnesota, Up North has huge white and red pines, native birch trees, and more lakes than fields. My folks would pack the station wagon and boat to the gunwales with supplies and sleeping kids. We would leave at 4:00 a.m. and try to get to our halfway point—magical Mille Lacs Lake—by breakfast. The reason it was magical, in case you were curious, was because we couldn't see across it! After the first few years, my mom decided that she would answer the incessant sleepy "Are we





Up North yet?” queries with “When you see the big lake, then we’re Up North!” Mille Lacs is situated along original Ojibwe land, covers 207 square miles and is Minnesota’s second largest inland lake. After breakfast, our Rockwellian troupe was back on the road to northern (very northern) Minnesota. I’ve spent a week each summer at this same resort now for 57 years. The seven lakes and the lily padded streams that connect them are as much in my blood as they are in the hundreds of paintings they have spawned.

Occasionally, we would visit Lake Superior, with its own haunting history and charm. We would tour the Lake Superior Maritime Museum, watch the huge iron ore ships go under the Duluth lift bridge, and feed the seagulls. We’d adventure up the shoreline to gorgeous Gooseberry Falls.

My father was a gentle, philosophical farmer. He would not know that he’d have gotten along well with both Emerson and Hume, but he taught us a way of being in the world. He belonged to several organizations trying to make our corner of the world a better place. He would tile (drain wet spots from) the fields, but would concurrently create deep, stable habitat ponds for wildlife because it was the right thing to do. He felt that nurturing the land and caring for the water was an important part of his very noble profession.

So, I came by it naturally to be active and knowledgeable in soil, water, and wildlife conservation. We built bluebird houses, bird feeders, and wood duck boxes. We dotted the habitats we planted with pheasant feeders. I gave speeches and 4-H demonstrations on water pollution that won blue and purple ribbons at the Minnesota State Fair (which was kind of a big deal for a teenager). In high school I tried my best to paint landscapes of the lakes and sloughs that I loved.

During my years at the College of St. Benedict, I traveled to Europe on an art history tour for a January interim. At neighboring St. John’s University I studied painting with Hungarian artist Bela Petheo. I went on to

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OPPOSITE ABOVE: *Mary and grandson Oliver on the St. Croix river*

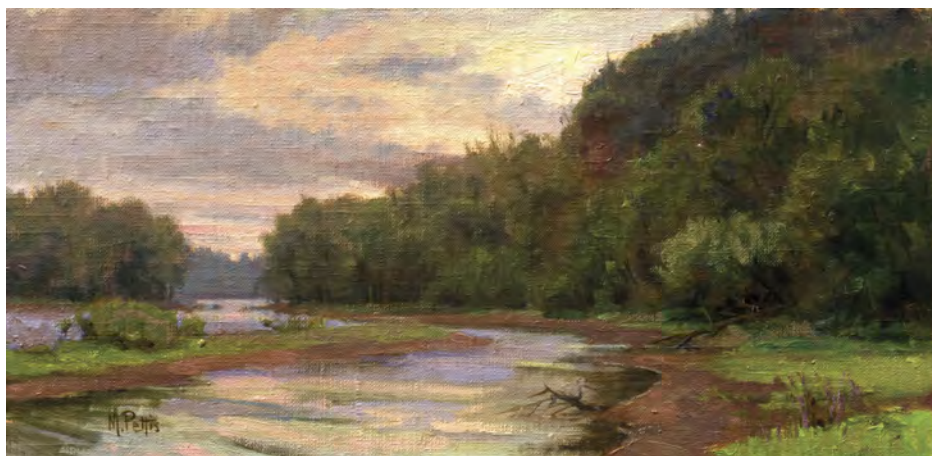
OPPOSITE BELOW: *Logging Camp Cabin*, oil, 8 x 12

ABOVE: *Time Stands Still*, oil, 48 x 30

RIGHT: *Adagio*, oil, 20 x 20







graduate with a double major in Art and in Humanities and a minor in French. Much to my parents' dismay, instead of student teaching the last semester of my senior year, I began a full time, three year apprenticeship with Richard Lack, whom I had read about in an American Artist magazine. (I had completed a successful trial period with him the previous summer, in 1974.)

I was at Atelier Lack at the same time as Daniel Graves, who went on to found the Florence Academy of the Arts. It was from him that I learned the art of copperplate etching.

I was very grateful to find out that the remembered scenes from my childhood could be reproduced relatively quickly, while I was trying to figure out how to paint landscapes in oil. The etchings helped pay for groceries and rent for more than a few years.

In 1980, now somewhat of a painter, with a husband and 1.5 kids in tow, I moved to a country house with a farm

pond on 8 acres near Osceola, Wisconsin. Osceola is nestled along the St. Croix River Valley which forms much of the border between Minnesota and Wisconsin. In addition to the allure of the river, much of this area's charm for me is that the woodlands are a mix of both 'Down Home' and 'Up North'. Osceola is filled with beauty and historical romance. I joined the Osceola Historical Society.

This community is a river town in every sense of the word. The Mounds Builders were the first arrivals, followed by the Sioux and then Ojibwe, following the Blueberry Trail. Cascade Falls, a short jaunt from the river, has been a visual and practical treasure for a few centuries. You see it as you walk down Main Street, a National Historic site. When the first white trappers, the voyageurs, and lumbermen came up the St. Croix, they recognised the power of the falls. Flour, grist, and lumber mills were numerous here in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The first of many steamboats on the St. Croix River was built at Osceola Landing in 1854. The first mill at Cascade Falls was built in 1845, creating a mill pond. Still, on any sunny summer day, the very same pond above the falls becomes alive with children throwing their first fish line just like kids did so many years ago. I can't count the times I hiked down the 97 steps to the base of Cascade Falls with my french easel on my back, in every season! I'd often paint while my children played around and behind the falls. It was against their white t-shirts that I learned to see the color in the falling water!

My then-husband and I had a beautiful gallery on main street in the center of

town. In the 17 years I lived in Osceola, I made a meager living while trying to learn how to paint that waterfall; I also painted wildlife, commissions, and anything I thought might sell. I taught art classes and mentored gifted and talented programs. I raised honeybees, pumpkins, and three kids. I always had an in-progress painting in the corner of the dining room!

In 1997 I married my husband Randy and moved across the river to Taylors Falls, Minnesota. Taylors Falls, only 20 minutes upriver, is like Osceola on steroids! It is a midwestern artist's dream, with rapids dashing through a 200 foot gorge formed by the glaciers. Here, the St. Croix River is among the cleanest in the nation, earning its designation as one of the first National Scenic Riverways.

For three quarters of a century steamboats were the primary mode of transportation. They whistled and churned through the bluffs and cliffs of the St. Croix, along the footpath hiking trail that is 2 minutes from our home. Those shallow-draft river boats traveling the inland waterways of mid-America bore little resemblance to the deep, rounded hull and heavy keel of Robert Fulton's steamboat. That being said, I confess that I don't know much about the architecture of boats. I do know how the chunking sounds of the paddle wheels echo against the rocks of the gorge; how the sunlight hits the water carried upward and over the top of the red wheel.

My imagination stirs thinking about how our little town was the last stop for the emigrants who travelled up the river from places as far away as Sweden, Norway, and Germany.

Our historic section of the river was made famous in Vilhelm Moberg's books, *The Emigrants*. Inspired by those books, I painted a depiction of settlers at our steamboat landing. The first print was presented to King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden during his visit to America marking the Sesquicentennial of the mass Swedish Emigration.

Riverboats still ply the St. Croix here at home and also downriver at Stillwater, Minnesota, although nowadays solely for education and enjoyment. I have taught dozens of workshops along the riverbanks and watched with delight when my





painters, wide-eyed under their umbrellas, saw the Taylors Falls Princess or the Taylors Falls Queen glistening gently past them for the first time! We live in the 1861 home of E.E. Edwards, an artist who also painted the river. He was also an author and a civil war chaplain for the Union. The view from our home in late winter is depicted in my painting, *Largo*, exhibited in the current ASMA 18th National Exhibition.

The past 25 years I have been able to expand my artistic horizons by getting to know several plein air mentors around the country. My art has taken me out of the midwest to the far horizons I imagined in my youth. I have painted the mountains out west. I've painted China and Russia. I've painted seascapes in Maui and Kauai, painted 3 hours alone in Monet's Pond, painted and taught workshops all over Europe, especially Tuscany and in the Cinque Terre. I've been so fortunate in all this, and yet nothing can match painting scenes of the waters that are woven into the fabric of my Minnesota DNA. I understand water as a metaphor, and as a



*All paintings by Mary Pettis*

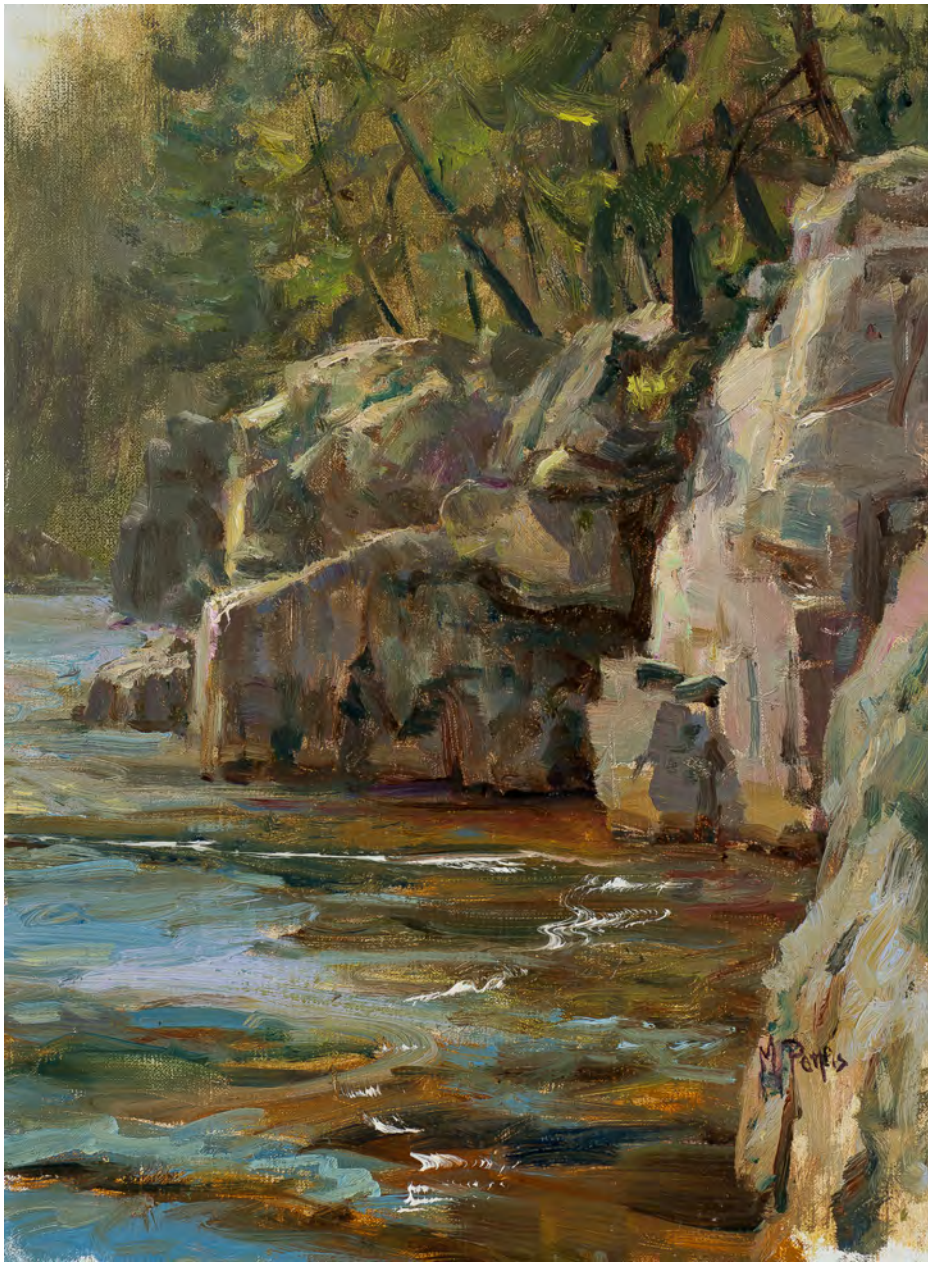
OPPOSITE ABOVE: *St. Croix Silence*, oil, 8 x 16

OPPOSITE BELOW: *Cascade Falls in Winter*, oil, 8 x 12

TOP: *Sunrise on the St. Croix*, oil, 20 x 30

BOTTOM: *Drenched in Sunlight*, oil, 16 x 20





vehicle for contemplation. Since 2017 I have had three large solo exhibitions at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis. These were curated with dozens of mostly water paintings where, through catalogs and handouts, we drew parallels between the languages of paint and music. The exhibitions paired with the Minnesota Orchestra's performances of Debussy, Respighi, Shostakovich, and Beethoven.

Today, I find strength and comfort painting the rivers, lakes, and ponds in my life. A few years ago the local newspaper announced: A Sure Sign of Spring - Mary Pettis Paints on the Bridge! My memories of my youth mingle with my understanding of the artist I am today. I paint the St. Croix and its watershed. I travel and paint along the North Shore of Lake Superior, and still go Up North to our old resort every August. I stared into the water off the front of the fishing boat as a child, and I still do today. When I look into the waters I feel connected to the plants with their feet in the muck, who reach up to the surface to become water lilies. Kissing these lilies are the heavens, brought down to earth by the reflections of the sky. When I paint them, they seem to mirror my life.

Randy and I start nearly every day with a swim in the St. Croix as soon as its temperature hits 60 degrees in May, and we continue through September. This physical intimacy with the water seems to extend my visual awareness and understanding of its story.

The waters invite reverie, absolution. They hold the stories that connect us to our past while also offering us the sublime. They urge us to care about their existence—their survival—and to teach others their sacred nature, so that we might become the stewards who will love and honor them back to wholeness.

I hope, in some small way, that my paintings will help to carry this message as well.

- M. P.

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ABOVE LEFT: *River Study*, oil, 12 x 9

BELOW LEFT: *Currents of Change*, oil, 22 x 28

