

Subtle **Beauties**

BY PEGGY ARENZ





It's difficult to surpass nature in her beauty or design," says artist T. Allen Lawson. But after working outdoors on location for many years, he became interested in developing images that require more time than plein air painting allows. "If you look at original work of some of the great painters," he says, "you can see that there are nuances, beautiful layers of color, paint surfaces that are more exciting than the subject matter. Critics called John Singer Sargent 'Slick Johnny' because everything seemed to come so easily to him, but actually he used a lot of glazes, and you can't get that in plein air painting."

However, Lawson continues to work outdoors much of the time. "All of my inspiration still comes from outside," he explains. "When I'm out there, I see all those little things that I can't just invent in the studio. And I still feel more comfortable outside than indoors. But between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. the sunlight ranges from very low to a high

angle, and this gives conflicting lights even in a two-hour span. If an artist paints outside and gets great results, that's wonderful. But just because he or she does it outdoors doesn't automatically give the piece any merit."

A modest, unassuming man in his late 30s, the artist pursues this subject to emphasize that a painting should reflect a bit of the painter as well. "If artists are going out to get information, they want to be accurate about what's in front of them," says Lawson, who usually works in oil on linen. "But painting of any kind should be much more than just copying. Artists spend so much time mastering the craft, but after it's been mastered, it's up to them to get to a higher level. I can put something of myself into it by making key decisions. For instance, I can say, 'I see that color, but it's not what I want to state in this painting. I want it to be more subdued.' A great painter such as Sorolla could certainly paint a correct value if he wanted to, and he made those choices to express his

Above: Rainy Day on Lower Prairie Dog Road, 2000, oil on linen, 10 x 16. Collection Bradford Brinton Memorial Museum, Big Horn, Wyoming. "Roads have a natural appeal," Lawson declares. "In a painting they almost always lead a viewer's eye. When I stopped to do this, it was raining. Most objects have brighter colors when they're wet because the dirt is washed away. I used a pochade box on my lap inside the car, and as the rain stopped, I was fascinated by both the color of the road, a pinkish kind of dirt, and the rich spring grass, with some dead grass caught up in the fence. The real focus of this painting was the atmosphere of everything wet and damp, and the rain moving away. But what attracted me to the scene was the complementary colors of the road and the rich grass."

Previous spread: October Moon, 2000, oil on linen, 24 x 38. Collection the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming. This painting was the winner of the Artists' Choice Award and the William E. Weiss Purchase Award for the Center in the Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale in 2000. "I saw the barn and the beautiful violet sky coming against the warm grass, a natural complement," Lawson says. "As I got ready for a quick study, the moon rose, but in a different location." He first painted the moon's surface in pure white, using a palette knife to make it smooth. "The next day, while the paint was still wet, I added a little texture with a brush and let it completely dry," explains the artist. "Then I was able to use some glazing and scumbling." Later, he added sheep because it was an element that did not distract from the moon. "I had that band of tall grass against the bottom," he recalls, "and once I had a fence leading back. I tried to put cow trails in there but it just didn't work."



Above: Thumbnail with color notes of *January on the Big Goose River*.

Below: *January on the Big Goose River*, 2000, oil on linen, 10 x 14. Private collection.





personal vision. That's when you start to open up the door to art. Painters such as Len Chmiel and Denver artist Mark Daily can take an average subject and bring beauty into it by filtering out all the unnecessary things, by exaggerating important features, downplaying others, and by expressing their vision."

Lawson's vision centers not on the spectacular Wyoming features that are familiar to most residents and visitors, but rather on more ordinary, perhaps humble, subjects. "You know," he muses thoughtfully, "we have the Grand Tetons, Yellowstone, and the Wind River Mountains, and I think the Bighorns are as pretty as any mountain range I've seen. However, not everyone can see the beauty in rolling hills of sagebrush." The artist is enticed by landscape subjects that gently invite viewers to experience the warmth of the sun, the chill of a frosty winter morning, the broad sweep of plains, or the stillness of a peaceful meadow. At first glance these images may appear simple, but they invite the viewer to contemplate and enjoy the subtle beauty that Lawson reveals.



To capture a first impression he may spend 15 to 30 minutes making color notations, and before beginning a painting he always does four or five quick thumbnails to resolve problems. "It's almost impossible for me to work without first doing a thumbnail," he says. "Most students think this is a waste of time, but oftentimes they want to paint everything they see. Five or 10 minutes taken on a thumbnail can save an artist 45 minutes to an hour on a painting. It can keep a painter from chasing the light around as it changes or questioning the focus while painting. It should answer all the important questions: Where I want the brightest color, highest contrast, center of interest, where to place major elements, relative sizes, what to include or omit."

When Lawson is ready to start painting, he sets the chosen thumbnail right in front of him and works from it to block in his image on the linen. "I'll lay in broad shapes—a horizon line, an indication of where I want trees, maybe a squiggly line to remind me I want

Right: *Evening Along Cabrillo Boulevard*, 1999, oil on linen, 14 x 12. Private collection. "With the mountains on the south and east sides of Santa Barbara, I was moved by the beautiful evening light creeping down," says Lawson.

Opposite page, above: *Tea and Cookies*, 2000, oil on linen, 20 x 18. Courtesy Simpson Gallagher Gallery, Cody, Wyoming.

Opposite page, below: *Still Life With Apple*, 2000, oil on linen, 18 x 18. Collection John and Melissa McDonald.



some patterns going back up in the picture," he notes. "Then I'll work on the part of the painting that I feel most capable of hitting correctly in both value and color. As I get the relationships working, I can start to look at some of the nuances—for instance, how something cools in comparison with something else, or textures in a tree."

Even with his years of experience, Lawson admits he can get side-tracked. When he came upon the scene depicted in *January on the Big Goose River*, the artist was excited by the myriad colors in the water. "I started my thumbnail and paid a lot of attention to the abstract shapes of cast shadows," he recalls. "Then I

did a 12"-x-16" painting. I got some correct information in the water, but my composition was completely wrong because I was emphasizing the shadow of the little tree in the water and a rock shadow on the snow. I needed to answer the question, 'What is the subject matter here—the shadow of a tree or the colors in the water?' I had subjects for two, almost three paintings."

He set aside the piece and months later, while looking through a stack of field sketches on a hot August day, he came across it and remembered how much he had liked the scene. With the aid of new thumbnails, he made it work. "I chose to play the trees, which are basically the same

warm color, against the water so I had the excitement of those colors repeated in the trees," he says. "Subtle variations in the branches come through, mostly warm with a few dark-violet accents. I kept the water on the warmer side of the spectrum and was able to play up the violet on the surface of the snow."

Lawson's compositions are based on abstractions, and he first decides on value. "If it's going to be a high-key painting, the darks will be the most important aspect, because the viewer's eye will always go toward the minority elements with strong contrast," explains the artist. "Paintings tend to be more exciting if the proportions are unequal. A painting

with 50-percent sky and 50-percent yellow trees or warm ground gets a little stagnant. If I cut out 30 percent of the sky and add it to the ground plane, not only does it work on proportions, it also works on the color scale and temperature. Now the painting has 20 percent cool to 80 percent warm. But if the compositional devices are obvious to the viewer, the purpose of the composition is lost. If it looks readable, as if it could really exist, I think it's a more successful composition."

Sensitive to color relationships, intensities, and temperatures, Lawson offers examples of color combinations and their effects. Pointing out that a red apple looks quite different on a gray background than on a blue one, he adds, "It gets really exciting when I can see what's happening. If I want to paint a bright autumn color, I won't put an intense yellow against a dark-blue sky because they are going to cancel each other out. If I concentrate on the yellow, I'll see that the sky becomes a bluish gray. I have to ask

myself, 'Am I focusing on this beautiful, brilliant blue sky? If so, the colors in the landscape have to be subdued a bit.' If the focus is the aspens or cottonwoods in peak color, screaming yellow in full sunlight, I can add the complementary violet to the cobalt blue. Great painters push the violet or gray-down the sky so the trees stand out."

Another point he emphasizes is the effect of distance. "It's a fallacy to think that objects always get cooler as they recede toward the horizon," notes Lawson. "Warm colors do get cooler as they go back, but cool colors—such as snow, or a white house—get warmer. Fresh snow in the foreground is much cooler, brighter, and lighter in value than snow in the distance. Intense colors get grayer and light colors get darker. Distance brings things to a middle ground."

Furthermore, a painter must consider the influence of weather. "If an artist is painting autumn trees on a dark, rainy day, and a few days later he or she paints the same trees in

bright sunshine, and those trees in the paintings are close, then the artist has a world of problems," says Lawson. "The trees shouldn't look anything alike. All of the relationships should be different, even the yellows—maybe a cadmium yellow in one and yellow ochre tones in the other. The number one failing in sunny outdoor paintings is making the sky too blue. I have to make comparisons and to realize the limitations of the medium. Artists are trying to paint an illusion with pigments in a narrow scale compared to the actual range of values in nature."

Indeed, Lawson employs an ample palette for outdoor work. He uses mostly Old Holland oil paints, which include ivory black, burnt sienna, yellow ochre, alizarin crimson, cadmium orange, cadmium yellow medium, cadmium yellow light, ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, cerulean blue, viridian green, and titanium white. He also adds Holbein's Indian yellow, Sennelier's Indian red, Grumbacher red, and occasionally sap green, rose dore

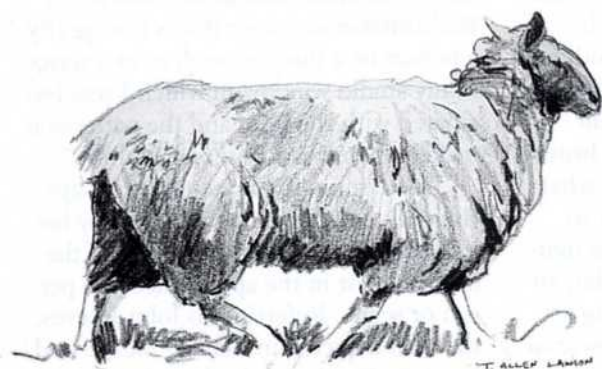


madder lake, and dioxazine mauve. "I'm not opposed to adding any other colors, although I usually use only one-third of the ones I've set out," says the artist.

On location his only medium is turpentine, but in the studio, he uses a little Liquin if he is glazing or scumbling. Lawson uses a variety of linen canvases, but the one he most often employs is Claessens Style 66, an oil-primed Belgian linen that he mounts on Gatorboard. It's a lightweight, rigid foamboard, impervious to the weather and available in thicknesses of $\frac{3}{16}$ " to $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Recently Lawson has begun to experiment with pre-texturing his canvas using white lead, but he rarely tones a surface prior to painting.

He believes in the value of experimenting and continually pushing oneself. "If artists keep doing the same routines, they become jaded," Lawson warns. "They start to think, 'Well, I know the top of this tree

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Top: *Amid the Goldfield Mountains*, 2001, oil on linen, 10 x 12. Courtesy Simpson Gallagher Gallery, Cody, Wyoming.

Above: *Feeding Canada Goose*, 2000, Conté, 6 x 10. Courtesy The Easton Gallery, Santa Barbara, California.

Above left: *Ewe*, 1998, charcoal, 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11. Collection Jeffrey and Missy Schlesinger.

Far left: *Preening*, 2000, charcoal, 9 x 10. Collection David and Rosalee McCullough.

Left: *Rosalee's Catbird*, 2000, graphite, 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$. Collection David and Rosalee McCullough.

Opposite page: *Evening in Paradise Valley*, 2000-2001, oil on linen, 16 x 20. Courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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grays out as it gets to the sky,' without really looking to see how it grays. This is how an artist becomes what I call a formula painter and in landscape painting, that's the kiss of death."

Lawson continues to be a determined and enthusiastic student. After a brief workshop with Daily, plus the excitement he experienced when viewing a New York City exhibition of Emil Carlsen's still-life paintings, Lawson began experimenting with his own setups. Carlsen's images, he says, "were the most beautiful, pictorial applications of paint I've ever seen. It had a profound impact on my paintings and on what I strive for now." In *Still Life With Apple*, Lawson used two pitchers of similar size and shape, and he emphasized their differing qualities of texture and reflective surfaces. The apple was added for a touch of color that wouldn't overpower the other objects.

Before the workshops, his education included years of study at the American Academy of Art in Chicago and the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts in Old Lyme, Connecticut, plus the guidance of established artists such as Geoff Parker, Ned Jacob, and Skip Whitcomb. In fact, Whitcomb showed him the basics of the etching process. "It's a great medium," Lawson says with obvious delight. "It forces me to draw a little bit more. I don't know anything about it, but that's never stopped me, and I love doing it. I've always enjoyed painting, and through sheer will I kept at it. I'm still not a gifted draftsman, but I'm able to get by. I work hard at color and do a lot of study in composition."

Lawson wants to accomplish much more with his paintings. What keeps him studying and painting, he confesses, "is the struggle to see if I can ever get one right. You can never learn it all. If you get a pretty good handle on color, and how to

manipulate color to create effects, then you can work on drawing or the subtleties of composition.

"If somebody is moved by what I paint,' Lawson continues, "and if they see beauty where they hadn't before, I've opened their eyes, and it's contagious. Once people start to see a little bit, then they look more closely at other things, and they are enriched by it. That's huge praise, and it makes all the hard work worthwhile."

Lawson has won numerous awards, including the John F. & Anna Lee Stacey Scholarship Fund for Art Education in 1994; the Colonel "Red" H. Smith Award from the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in 1995; the Jurors' Choice Award at the Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale in 1999; and both the Artists' Choice and William E. Weiss Purchase Awards in the Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale in 2000. He has had nearly 20 solo exhibitions, including ones at The Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery in Lindsborg, Kansas; Bradford Brinton Memorial Museum in Big Horn, Wyoming; and The Cooley Gallery in Old Lyme, Connecticut.

In 2000, a book entitled *T. Allen Lawson—Selected Works, 1993-1996* (Soldier Creek Associates, Rockport, Maine) was published in hard- and soft-cover editions (the hard-cover edition includes an original etching). The artist is represented by Simpson Gallagher Gallery in Cody, Wyoming; Gerald Peters Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico; The Easton Gallery in Santa Barbara, California; and Craven Gallery on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Recently the artist and his family moved from Wyoming to Maine, where he has built a studio. For more information on the artist or his book, write: Soldier Creek Associates, P.O. Box 477, Rockport, ME 04856; or call: (207) 236-7077. ■

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