

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."



DARK VIOLET
ACCENTS

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



