Gathering of painters

Photos & Text by Buzz Swerkestrom

Picture this: Eight painters have easels set up in the shade of a large maple tree in a large yard in Taylors Falls.

All of them are fashioning a portrait of a young woman wearing a long black dress with red ruffles who is posing for them.

For a three-hour period of the afternoon the artists paint for 25-minute stretches and take five- to 10-minute breaks.

While this may have the appearance of a painting class, it is not in fact a class. It is simply a group of professional and amateur painters from the area painting together, mainly for fun and practice.

"I kind of think that this is historic, what's happening here," said Mary Pettis, the nationally known artist who brought the cluster of painters together. "It isn't a class; I'm not teaching. These are just painters from the region that are coming in. . . . I just think it's kind of an interesting thing."

In fact, Pettis likens it to a "mini Giverny," alluding to how other artists painted with French Impressionist Claude Monet in Giverny, France.

Interestingly, the group paints where one of the St. Croix River Valley's pioneer painters E. E. Edwards lived. Pettis and her husband own the Angel Hill house that was occupied by Edwards and his family for two short periods in the early 1860s and the mid-1880s.

According to a catalog for a 1990 retrospective exhibition of St. Croix Valley paintings at the Phipps Center for the Arts in Hudson, Edwards, who also was a minister and educator, was one of the first resident artists to paint St. Croix River scenes. His paintings, writings and lectures helped promote the creation of the two Interstate Parks.

"It's so incredible," said Barb Young, a Taylors Falls resident who is one of the area's best-known amateur/semi-professional painters.

"Here we are painting on his property. He was one of the first art teachers in the valley."

"And several artists have painted in the carriage house, I think," Pettis adds. "Unfortunately it's full of my stuff from the farm, so I can't paint there."

Mary Pettis, working on a portrait of model Jennifer Ramoutar in her yard. Other artists from the area also took advantage of the opportunity to paint portraits of a live model.
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The painting group, which has had painting sessions most Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons this summer, consists of a shifting membership.

As few as three painters have shown up.
“Not one has committed to coming,” Pettis said.
“I just let ’em know where we’ll be .... We keep in touch via e-mail when there’s going to be a model, and then everyone just pays the model (directly).”

Most of the sessions have been held in Pettis’s yard—a large yard framed by large trees and accented with flower beds. The group also has painted Plein Air style, or in the open air, at such places as an iris garden near Forest Lake, MN, and a working pioneer farm near Elk River, MN.

Pettis, who has operated art galleries in both Osceola and Taylors Falls, is not the only group member known on the national art scene.

Both Marc Hanson, who lives next door to Pettis, and Kami Polzin, a Stillwater resident who

national art magazines.

Pettis predicts that Hanson is “going to be in the history books.”

“he travels all around the country (and to Europe) teaching workshops, like I do,” she said.

“The bottom line is, most painters in the country who are as good as I am, at least, know about Marc Hanson.”

Hanson, who moved to Taylors Falls a couple of years ago, was

a prominent wildlife painter before switching to Plein Air landscapes.

Pettis followed the same career path.

“We both painted birds and animals for 20-some years,” Hanson said.

“But I think it’s always been the connection to the land as much as the animals, which is why I ended up painting landscapes.”

“So why was he spending time painting a portrait of a human model?"

Might he try to sell the painting? “Oh, no,” he said dismissively.

“This is exercise. This is like calisthenics. They hurt, but (they are) necessary. Anytime you take yourself out of what you’re used to doing and do something different it’s a whole new world. It just moves your brain over there and lets it work a little harder for a while. And then it helps you when you go back to what you’re really all about. It really is calisthenics.”

Pettis likes that analogy.

“And working from the model makes us better landscape painters, and vice versa,” she said. “Painting anything from life is tremendous.”

Hanson said painting in a group takes him back to his art school experience.

“Artists can be kind of reclusive by nature,” Pettis said, “so it’s kind of nice to do this type of thing once in a while.”

“Almost by necessity we’re reclusive,” Hanson said. “How can you not like this?”

“Yeah, good people and a beautiful day and a great model,” Pettis said.

“I kind of think it’s something that people are going to look back at, and look at these photos of this group of artists. I mean, I think it would be fabulous to see pictures of E. E. Edwards and the other painters that he painted with when he was painting in this region. Some of the Hudson River painters even came through up around here and painted with him. But there’s no documentation of it.”

Chris Young, a teacher who lives in Oregon who was visiting his home, Barb Young, for a couple of weeks, feels “out of his league” with so many high profile painters, even though he has painted several murals, including one of the Devil’s Chair rock formation on the side of a building in downtown Taylors Falls.

“I’m not a real artist like these people are,” Young said.

The oldest painter present is Clarence Nelson, a Taylors Falls historian and environmental advocate whose art training goes back more than 40 years. The teacher of one of his classes was the Brown & Bigelow art director.

“I remember him saying, ‘Don’t paint an eye; paint the effect of an eye.’” Nelson said, “...The tendency for beginners is to get too caught up in detail.” He said he came to realize a person arrives as an artist “when you can learn to lay the brush down and take it away and it said what needs to be said.”