

HOW I BECAME AN ARTIST

by NANCY TOPPING BAZIN

The oldest memory I have is of my mother giving me my first lesson in art. I had a blackboard that resembled an easel, and at the top was paper that you could scroll down a few inches or up a few inches; on the paper were drawings of animals. My mother taught me how to draw those animals on my blackboard when I was young--probably about five years old. This was followed by art classes in school.

My first more important painting lessons began when I was in 8th grade. I was selected by my art teacher to take free art classes on Saturday mornings in Pittsburgh. This marvelous program was for children not only from Pittsburgh but from the towns surrounding it like my town of 10,000 people—Oakmont, PA. From then on, every Saturday morning, I joined a group of several hundred teenagers in a huge auditorium. The Irishman, Joseph Fitzpatrick, who taught this class, did so for more than thirty years. Each week he discussed paintings he had selected for honorable mentions and explained why he had chosen them. Then he gave us an assignment for this new day, and we proceeded to a circular balcony where each person had an easel and paints. We completed the assignment and then handed in our work to him. I have never forgotten that among the honorable mentions I received was a painting of a milk cart drawn by a horse. I had mistakenly painted the horse's back legs bent in the position of front knees. He made the point that accuracy was not so important, and he did give my painting an honorable mention despite my lack of experience with horses! It had other qualities that merited the honor.

We had frequent dances in high school, and I was often chosen to decorate the gym. For one, I recall making polar bears to attach at the two ends. For the middle, I constructed an iceberg.

When I went to Ohio Wesleyan University, I thought I might major in art. As a freshman, I took an art course. However, I did not particularly like the

teacher or his course or his art, so I decided to have a double major of English and French instead.

When I went to Paris, France on scholarships to get my Master's degree in French, art came back into my life in the form of a year-long course in art history by a well-known teacher, Max-Pol Fouchet. We went to the Louvre with his assistant every Wednesday to see the paintings our teacher had discussed the week before.

Although my love of art continued, my visits to art museums were rare when I attended Stanford University to get a PhD in English. When my first career as an English professor and Director of Women's Studies at three universities ended in the year 2000, I returned to my early love of art.

I had noticed a small studio called Studio of Fine Arts (or SOFA) in the little shopping center on the corner of Colonial and 21st St. It was created by Missy Berent, a young woman who had recently graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. Since it is "never too late," to change direction, I stopped writing scholarly books and articles on literature and women's studies and focused entirely on my new career in art.

Since the rooms were small at SOFA, the classes were small; we received a lot of individual attention. The Senior Center called Prime Plus and the annual Art Walk in the neighborhoods called Colonial Place and Riverview were the first places I displayed my work. As I gained self-confidence, I expanded the area where I took art lessons and showed my work. I took lessons in Virginia Beach through the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Hampton at the Charles H. Taylor Visual Arts Center, and in Newport News at the Peninsula of Fine Arts Center. I exhibited my works at these locations and at other locations with the Tidewater Art Alliance, The Chesapeake Bay Watercolorists, and the Chesapeake Bay Art Association. I also exhibited at the Riverview Gallery in Portsmouth and in two Suffolk galleries. For several years, I was one of five managers who ran the Pembroke 4 Art Gallery and participated in each of its exhibits. From 2006 until January of 2024, I exhibited continuously at the Artists Gallery in Virginia Beach and exhibited almost as long at the Gallery Shop in Portsmouth. Meanwhile, in 2017, I was juried into the D'Art Center, now

located on Busch St. in Norfolk, where I still have a wall on which my art is displayed.

Over the years I have sold over 700 of my paintings. At this point I have only fifty more to sell before I can retire from this second career in art.

But in the early days of all that, something major had occurred. The Virginia Art Association had a workshop in Hampton and then another exhibit, meeting, and workshop in Staunton, Virginia. When they occurred, I had never participated in a workshop, but I courageously signed up for both. Each of the two workshop teachers encouraged me to go to the fall and spring workshops at Myrtle Beach, SC. That revolutionized my world. I began to sign up for three workshops at the Springmaid Hotel every fall and three more every spring. During those six weeks, we had a choice each week of six topics and teachers. Their art teachers were excellent and came from all over the United States. The serious artists who attended these workshops every year were like a new-found family. I, too, attended these workshops each year until my back began to resist working from 9:00 am until 10:00 pm for three weeks in a row. Unfortunately, a few years ago, Hilton Hotel bought the Springmaid Hotel in Myrtle Beach and those autumn and spring workshops ended. The only one that remained was one each summer on Springmaid land in Spruce Pine, NC.

It was while at Myrtle Beach in 2012 that I discovered my signature topic and my signature style. Each painting was uniquely mine just as my signature is uniquely mine. Any artist who knew my style would easily recognize my whimsical bird paintings as being mine. From somewhere in my subconscious came a combination of the right techniques and the right subject for me. I have always loved pattern and color, and this process allowed me to feature both.

Here is my process: I select which birds I want to use from various books. I choose birds with fascinating attitudes and funny or unusual poses. It may seem incongruous to see these birds I select together. They make us laugh. I choose which birds to include so they suggest a story. I draw what I envision on a sheet of paper as large as my biggest white watercolor paper. Then I cut a piece of aluminum foil as big as the watercolor paper. I

coat one side of the aluminum foil with black gesso and put the black side down on the white paper. Next, I completely re-draw my composition on the clean side of the aluminum foil. The scary moment is when I lift the aluminum foil off the white paper to see what I have blindly drawn on the clean side of the foil. In contrast, the fun part is to create more patterns and to combine the colors of the patterns in an effective way that makes the painting appear unified and appealing in color, pattern, story, and attitude. The eyes of the birds are also very important in suggesting how the birds feel about one another. The eyes should also suggest the birds' whimsicality. We should view the birds as amusing!

I have drawn and painted forty sets of birds. I wrote a little book about my whimsical birds, because a girl at Myrtle Beach casually asked me (as we passed each other in a hall) why I painted birds. At that time, I did not really know. I wrote the book to answer her question—to tell her why I love to paint birds. I was not a bird watcher, but I do love their colors and patterns--especially on birds who live in jungles. People tell me my painted birds with all their patterns and colors make them feel happy. Colorful and amusing birds make me feel happy too!

I have twenty-six bird paintings left, and I have decided to keep them as a collection with the hope that, when I die, my son Michael F. Bazin (who lives in Salisbury, Maryland) will find public places (medical buildings, universities, businesses, etc.) to display them where they will make people happy! Suggestions of where we could loan them for a few years at a time would be welcome. The first place I expect them to be displayed is at Wells Fargo Advisors in Norfolk, Virginia.