

Adrienne Stein: PAINTING POETRY

by Molly Siple

STEP INTO THE PAINTINGS OF ADRIENNE STEIN and you enter imagined worlds that coexist with everyday life. This accomplished artist draws on mythology, archetypes, and literature to create her special take on narrative realism. Stein paints truths we all have experienced. This is figure painting with substance.

Stein is best known for paintings of women exploring different aspects of what it is to be female, a theme she is strongly drawn to. “I have a lot of wonderful women in my life, both family and friends,” says Stein, “who have generously posed for me. Knowing who they are allows me to come up with settings that reflect their lives and personalities as well as their intrinsic femininity.” Painting a friend who lives in both the United States and France, for example, Stein conceived of her as Persephone, the Greek goddess who yearly travels between the underworld and life above, on earth. For another work, a portrait of a woman known for her wild and untamed spirit, Stein surrounded the figure with blossoms of dogwood, a fast-growing plant that grows freely in the countryside.

For this artist, these figurative paintings also have personal meaning. As Stein says, “The women who



Adrienne Stein in her studio

appear in my paintings are avatars, reincarnations of spirit beings. I feel they are different aspects of myself that I have the opportunity to express through each character. Some are more innocent, some more wild, some are quiet, some intense.” And, she continues, “Some aspect of myself is in each image, which I don’t think is rare in portraiture. I’ve noticed that for most artists their persona tends to fit with their work.” In Stein’s case there is often a familial resemblance

between herself and her women, thanks to her flowing hair, the graceful drape of her figure, and her quiet gaze. Stein’s soft presence pervades her work.

Imagery of beautiful women framed by flowers, in lesser hands, would risk seeming overly romantic and somewhat contrived but remains high art in Stein’s case, thanks to her considerable intellect and fine classical training. Stein’s art schooling



Enchantress

Oil on copper 5" × 7"
Private Collection

began when she was only eleven. Her parents realized their daughter's natural talent and allowed her to begin studies with a family friend in a classic atelier setting. The curriculum followed the French Academic tradition, whose standard was ancient classical art, the European tradition, and historical subjects, with long hours of drawing, and studying techniques such as grisaille and glazing, and still life painting. Stein attended the classes at least once a week until age eighteen, always keeping, she said, "a razor-sharp focus" on what she was learning.

During this training, Stein was introduced to and copied the paintings of the great seventeenth-century Dutch masters of still life. Her present skill at rendering flowers stems from these days. She was also introduced to the works of the **Pre-Raphaelites**, such as **Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882)**, **John Everett Millais (1829–1896)**, and **John William Waterhouse (1849–1917)**, and happily embraced their aesthetic and values. "I love the generous visual imagery in Pre-Raphaelite painting, and in my own work I make a point of filling in the background around my figures with meaningful

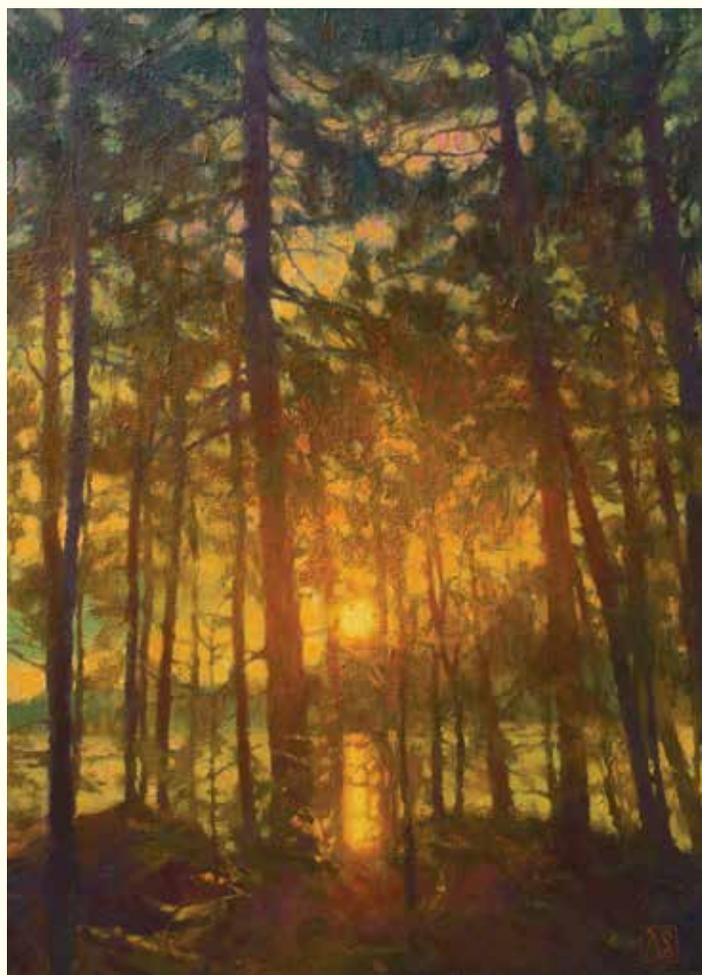
content. So much can be told through the supporting elements in a picture." And she continues, "My affinity for the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic is also fuelled by changes I see in our world, the relentless urban development and threatened environment, much as the earlier artists offered their paintings as their stubborn response to England's Industrial Revolution which dehumanized daily life. They offered a Garden of Eden to the viewer with their richly detailed, dreamy scenes."

MAGIC REALISM IS ANOTHER ARTISTIC TRADITION THAT shows up in the artist's complex work. "When I was just a teenager, a painting by **Bo Bartlett (b. 1955)**, *Dreamland*, transfixed me. The work was in a group show that my parents took me to, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Here was this very cinematic kind of painting. There were multiple figures in an outdoor setting, a circus fool, a bride, and others, all strangely together and striding in the same direction across a barren field. I loved that the scene, although thoroughly realistic, took me to another place, one that was mysterious and outside of time." Stein was fascinated by this imaginative take on



Forest Reverie

Oil on linen 30" × 20"



Canadian Lake

Oil on linen 28" × 20"

Private collection

narrative painting and, when so inspired, creates from this perspective to this day. One work, *The Stirring*, features a book, its pages in the process of spiralling upward to the ceiling. For another, *Night Walker*, Stein places an image of her sister in a setting that includes a house on her college campus where, long past, a woman was murdered by a suitor she refused. “I turned to **Edgar Allen Poe’s** *Fall of the House of Usher* for inspiration and painted just one light showing in a window of the house,” she explains, “to build a little tension.” While Stein certainly enjoys portraying scenes that could be described as enchanted, she also relishes creating drama or, as she succinctly says, “More Poe, less Disney.”

Stein’s vanitas-themed paintings are also in this vein, following the Dutch tradition of still life that makes use of objects to express the transience of all things, and which Stein was introduced to in her early training. In *Spring Circle*, Stein juxtaposes life and death symbolically, combining the body of a fallen bird, a ring of fresh flower petals, and the jawbones and head of an animal she came across during a walk through the woods. “The animal likely died in isolation, a touching history that inspired me to paint the image.” And she freely admits, “Painting these bones is also my homage to **Georgia O’Keefe (1887–1986)**.”

BECAUSE OF HER EXTENSIVE EARLY ART EDUCATION, Stein was well on her way to becoming a knowledgeable artist while still in her teenage years. Yet that was only the start for this dedicated and adventuresome student. In 2003, at the age of seventeen, Stein spent the summer in Monte Castello di Vibio, Umbria, Italy, in the Plein Air Program of the International Center for the Arts. “Up to then I had only been working in a controlled setting, painting objects set inside a little box and lit by a single light source. Now I was immersed in plein air painting with the Italian countryside laid out before me! I had to choose a composition, deal with shifting light, and try to paint *a la prima*. As challenging as this was, I began to develop a keenness for seeing the specific quality of light and its colour temperature at a given time of day and I learned to make quick decisions, a way of working I still follow now, even on paintings I may have been working on for a month.”

When it became time to have more training at a formal art school, Stein chose the **Laguna College of Art and Design**, studying there for four years beginning in 2004. Her chosen curriculum focused on painting from the model, with her sights set on mastering figurative realism. Classes included six-hour long poses and group figure composition. Stein also attended an impressive range of classes on adjunct subjects, such as art history and critical thinking addressed through the lens of religion and philosophy. She had speech and acting classes to prepare her to speak with skill about her art, as well as a class on the business aspects of being a professional artist. Stein graduated with a BFA Magna Cum Laude.

Boston University was next on the agenda, earning her an MFA. Quite remarkably, Stein dared herself to enroll in the school’s oil painting program, which took a decidedly contemporary approach. “I chose to follow my path of most resistance to explore a different vocabulary and speak a different language,” she explains. “I realized, to develop as



Corazon
Oil on linen 30" × 20"

an artist, I needed to expose myself to hot criticism and be vulnerable. I wanted to find out if I could defend my work and I had lots of opportunity! We all shared a huge studio space and could easily see each other’s work. There were also hotshot contemporary artists passing through from New York. I was told my paintings were irrelevant and dated and that my subjects were too sentimental.” And she continues, “Of course I wanted my work to be taken seriously which led me to rethink my painting. I began to work in a spirit of exploration, trying different mediums and adding collage. In the end, the exposure to contemporary art only made me bolder about how I paint and more assertive about the results.”

AS AN ARTIST WHO HAS LONG BEEN SET ON STRETCHING her creative self, Stein is currently in the process of subtly transitioning her work into a more pensive experience for the viewer. As Stein explains, “I’ve always appreciated the quietness of **Andrew Wyeth’s (1917–2009)** work and these days I find I’m thinking less and less about the message in a work and more about the meditation that each painting is. I think of



Bacchante II

Oil on linen 19" × 18"

Image courtesy of American Legacy Fine Arts



May

Oil on linen 30" × 30"

Private collection

each work as having its own colour world and vibration. At some point I realized I want my paintings to be like poetry which can simply segue into what one is trying to say. The best poetry automatically transports one into the poet's inner world. A poet does not need to be literal and neither do I in my work. The viewer may want a scene that grabs them, but more and more I now want to offer people a slower experience. I think of **Jules Bastien-Lepage's (1848–1884)** grand painting *Joan of Arc* in the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** in New York, which gives one so much to meditate on. For me the painting is a rich, visual experience that stands out in my memory and lets me review it over and over. This is my hope for my own paintings as well."

INTERESTINGLY, ALTHOUGH STEIN'S PAINTING THESE DAYS is less about story-telling, her creative process still includes language. Stein keeps a journal of concepts for paintings that come to her and also often writes a poem during the process of creating a painting to guide her in developing the imagery. However, this is a private practice and she keeps these to herself.

At this year's **Portrait Society of America's** annual convention, a portrait demonstration by Stein partnering with master artist **Quang Ho (b. 1963)**, was the much-anticipated grand finale, each tackling the subject in their own unique way. A posting on social media commented, "They lit up the stage." These two gifted artists are also building a life together, dividing their time seasonally between the beautiful farmland of Western Pennsylvania and the grandeur of Colorado. Stein's story is proof indeed that choosing the path of the artist can lead to an abundant life. 📖

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*About the Author: Senior Editor **Molly Siple** studied painting and art history at the **University of California at Berkeley** and is an Artist member of the **California Art Club**. She has also taken formal training with master artists **Shuqiao Zhou, Jove Wang, and Ian Roberts**. In addition, Siple has contributed to numerous national art publications, and is co-author of *Enchanted Isle, a History of Plein Air Painting in Santa Catalina Island as well as California Light, A Century of Landscapes: Paintings of the California Art Club, and Painting California, Seascapes and Beach Towns: Paintings of the California Art Club*. She also recently completed a biography of her father, Southern California architect **Allen G. Siple**.*