

## Emily Sander, "My Path as an Artist, Part 1"

We all have followed paths, many, many paths; some we chose, others were thrust upon us. It's worth noting who or what helped us along those paths and what hindered our progress. Sometimes what appears to be an obstacle actually ultimately improves the outcome. So as you read this piece, I invite you to reflect on your experiences along the paths you have followed.

I also think helping other people along their paths is something we do well in our senior years. We have been there; we have some experience. I am grateful to people of all ages who took my art seriously, asked about it, wanted to see it, felt art contributed to the world, cut out articles about how art enabled people with Alzheimer's to uniquely respond or be stimulated, believed art could communicate when words sometimes failed. So as you read this, you may want to consider your own experiences along a path and reflect on what helped.

### *History*

My artistic path is not long. For most of my life, I considered myself totally lacking in artistic skills. The only doodle I made was a heart, but I made very good hearts. So now when someone says that they would like to paint but they lack talent, I reply that, if they would really like to paint and have the time and the means to buy supplies, please find a good teacher and go for it. I have heard this belief also expressed about singing, but I am not convinced it could turn me into a great singer.

### *Retirement*

In the late 1980's after some years of feeling very fortunate to be working in the child psychiatry clinic at Mass. General Hospital as a social worker, I began to feel that there was a whole world both outside and inside that on my deathbed I would regret not having explored more fully. I was always very earnest about responsibilities and didn't easily take time to explore other possibilities. So the time seemed right to shift gears. Also, my husband Frank was going on some exotic trips, and I wanted something to fully engage me on those trips.

### *Choice of Painting*

I realized that I didn't just want to leave a job; I wanted to *start* something. Beauty was important to me, but I had to consider whether beauty was materialistic or superficial. Around that same time, I read a pamphlet by Quaker Bruce Birchard about his winter camping in the woods. There had been a snowfall. He left his tent in the middle of the night and walked to a nearby waterfall; a full moon was shining on the trees, the water and the snow and it was so beautiful. He saw the scene as part of a whole and was inspired to realize that he also was part of that whole. I felt if beauty can help us reach beyond our particulars to feel so connected, it must be worthy.

I then considered the process of creating different forms of beauty. I loved beautiful music, but I didn't like to practice. I cherished wonderful books, but I didn't enjoy writing. But I could look at beauty for a long time and not be bored and even yearned to express it in some form. I decided that I would give myself three years, and, if at the end of that time, my efforts were laughable, I would try a different focus. But, in the meantime, I would take my artistic efforts seriously because, if I didn't, no one else would. My late 50's and early 60's were a good time for me to make decisions. I didn't feel my marriage or friendships depended on whether I painted well or not. I also felt, if I didn't take a risk then, when would I?

### *Beginning*

My husband and I give differing dates to when my artistic career began. My husband feels it began in 1990 when he was invited to stay for a month at the Rockefeller Conference and Study Center in Bellagio, Italy. He was meant to think for a month, and I had no responsibilities. What a moment to try something artistic!

### *Preparation for Trip*

We were scheduled to go there in the spring, and he reminded me in December that I had three months to prepare. Pastels seemed like the medium that required a minimum of techniques to learn. So I signed up at the Cambridge Adult Education Center for a "Drawing from Nature" course that met weekly. One class made clear that I needed far more instruction. So I signed up for three other classes including a "Basics" course and an "I Can't Draw a Straight Line" class with Ellen Stutman.

In Ellen's class, I arrived late one week with my large newsprint pad and charcoals. We were told to draw a large object. I had never been able to draw a good circle, and I thought I might just as well be up front about it. So I drew a wobbly circle. Then we were meant to draw something small. En route to Italy we were planning to go via Egypt, so I drew a pyramid. At the end of class we lined our pads up against one wall while we gave a critique from across the room. When they came to my drawing, they said, "That is so dynamic! What's going to happen when that big boulder hits that little object? Will it be deflected or squash the little object?" I could hardly believe that they found something to talk about in my flailing efforts. Encouragement touches a vulnerable spot as one starts on a new course.

Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, with its 52 acres of garden and hillside, was where we stayed in Italy. The scenery was incredibly beautiful. Lake Como has two branches that meet at a promontory and leads up toward the Alps; that promontory is where we stayed. We were with a group that changed each week and included a rich mix of poets, writers, artists, sociologists, composers, epidemiologists, and others. I hadn't thought ahead about not having an art teacher there, but the artists there were generous and giving in their help. Being in such an inspiring milieu and company carried me past self-doubts and helped produce pictures that were acceptable as beginning efforts. However, when my mother saw them, she exclaimed, despite being legally blind from macular degeneration, that there was no sun in the pictures. She was right, and since then I have always been aware of light in my work. That's an example of what felt like an obstacle actually making my art better.

### *Second Beginning*

I regard 1993 as the beginning of my artistic career. In 1993 I finished being clerk at Friends Meeting at Cambridge and committed myself to learning to paint. In a landscape class I thought that people painting with watercolors were having more fun and producing more interesting effects than I, so I changed my medium to watercolors. In addition to watercolors, I took life drawing and portrait classes for about five years.

### *Life Drawing*

One of the gems from Life Drawing class with Monique Johannet came when I asked her how I could make my lines look less wimpy. She told me to draw with the side of my charcoal. She must have said it twenty times before, but suddenly at that time I was ready to hear it and I thanked her for being so generous in telling me yet again. She knew what I was talking about because in her Yoga class, after many repetitions, she had finally absorbed some information. It's curious how we learn.

### *Watercolor Teacher*

My watercolor teacher, Marian Parry, changed my ideas about teaching and learning. I have learned many things during my lifetime but have always felt clumsy and unhappy about the process. With Marian there was a joyfulness and excitement. She took our bedraggled efforts, puts mats around the pictures and that automatically made them look better; then she would find some spot, perhaps totally off-perspective, and she would delight in it. And after she pointed out this special area of note, the rest of us could see its merit. Early on she taught us what to do about our mistakes, so we weren't afraid of making them. She would also point out how the painting could be improved but in the context of valuing what we had already done. Her suggestions were exquisitely effective.

### *First Watercolor Class*

In the first class I took with Marian she asked us to paint a blue line across the top of our paper and then continue it back and forth adding water with each line for a total of one third or two thirds of the paper. (What's called a 'graded wash'.) Then we were to turn the paper upside down and paint the remaining third or two thirds the same way with an earth color. When we had finished, we were told to turn the paper right side up and paint a landscape. I looked at her in horror. That was what I had come to the class to learn, and I had no idea how to do it. In addition, class seemed to be over, and everyone was packing up. I didn't even know if the pigment could be saved or needed to be cleaned off the palette each time. Anyway, I tried to use up all my paint and just put it on the paper. Then I looked and saw what might pass for a landscape.

#1 "First Landscape"



I was so excited by that first year of watercolor class that when Friends Meeting at Cambridge, which has rotating exhibits of members' and attenders' work, asked if I would show my paintings, I willingly accepted. Actually most of my paintings were class exercises. One person said to me that after seeing the show, she took up dance as she had always wanted to do. I was so pleased because the fun of learning was exactly what I had hoped to communicate.

*Circles and Colors*

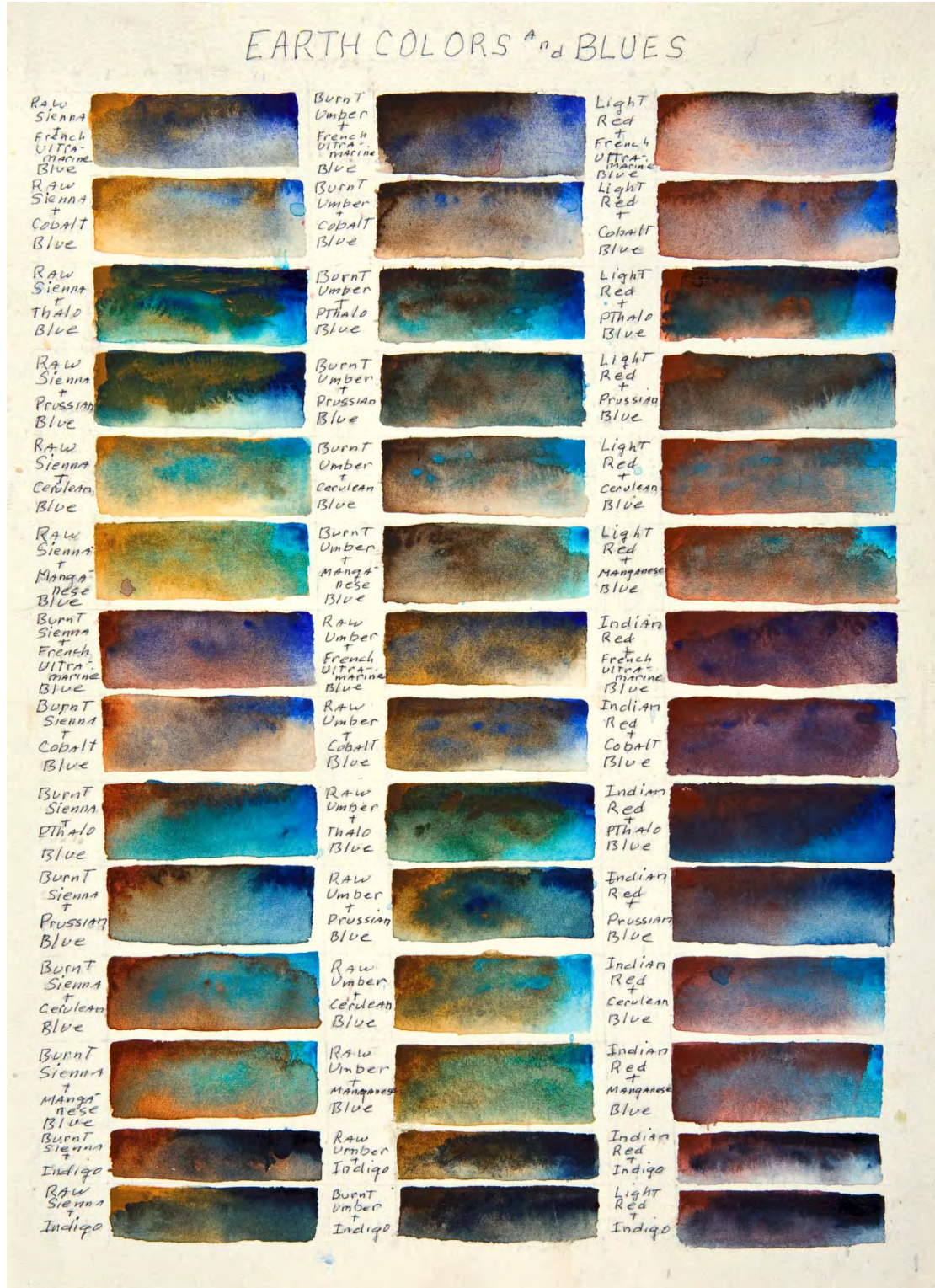
#2 "Graded Circles" Marian was generally very open to different ways of painting but she felt that we all ought to be able to make a respectable circle so we worked for awhile on circles.



#3 "Color Circle" Marian gave us list of pigments to use, but everyone adds to that list. I have another circle similar to this with other colors on it and a page with earth colors; those three sheets include all the pigments I use. Color and light are what matter most to me in a painting.



#4 "Color Chart for Earth Colors and Blues" Keeping track of the colors and the combinations they make seemed very complicated. I spent hours on color charts. Until that time I felt a bit fraudulent saying I was an artist, but after those hours I felt I had to some degree earned the title.



#5 “Colors Advancing and Receding” Marian showed us how to use color to make objects come forward or recede. In general, bright colors, especially reds and yellows, come forward, and dark ones go back. Colors generally become grayer as they recede.





*Wet into Wet*

#6 "Blue Vessel" "Wet into wet" is one of my favorite techniques. Onto a wet piece of paper you drop paint; you can direct it in some ways by tilting or blotting or by the amount of water and pigment you use. But actually, it feels totally out of control. However, when our class compared our under control paintings with our out of control paintings that had used that technique, the "wet into wet" ones were far more interesting.



*Assignments*

#7 "Imaginary Flowers" Marian was sensitive to the differences in the amount of experience people in the class had had. Sometimes we painted from ink blots, sometimes we made ink blots with toothbrushes, string, sponges, corks, etc., sometimes we painted imaginary flowers. No one could say "That's not how an imaginary flower or inkblot look." There was a playfulness to the process.



#8 "City at Twilight" Our titles often came after we saw what we had, such as with this painting entitled "City at Twilight".



#9 "Monastery" One time our assignment was to paint from a new perspective. I didn't know what Marian meant so I painted this monastery with its parts meeting at different angles. Later we learned that Marian wasn't sure what she meant either.



#10 “Abstraction with Tree Trunk” With abstract paintings I sometimes begin by trying to paint what I see, and then the painting starts going in a different direction and generally giving an effect that I couldn’t have captured if I had tried.



#11 “Land and Sea” Robert Henri, a famous art teacher, once said that if your painting doesn’t surprise you, it won’t surprise the viewer either. I think he valued surprises in a painting.

