

# The Studio

## OF SONYA TERPENING

By Mary Nelson

For want of a door to close, Sonya Terpening's studio was born. Really. How would you feel if you left work at night and your work stood outside your kitchen begging you to return, demanding your undivided attention? That is pretty much the experience Terpening had until a little more than a year ago when her work life changed for the better.

Terpening is excited about her new studio, having recently taken over the master bedroom on the second floor in the Grapevine, Texas, home she has shared with her husband Mark for 28 years. In many respects, Terpening believes she is experiencing perfection. She loves the bright, open studio, which is ideal for painting. Even more important: It has a door.

Her previous studio was right off the kitchen, which opens to rest of the house. Unfinished work on an easel at the end of the day was a constant reminder, nagging at her without remorse to return and complete it. "After I put up my brushes for the day and went into the kitchen to cook, I could still see the unfinished painting, and it yelled for me to return," she says. "Now that [the studio is] upstairs, I can literally shut the door at the end of the day, go downstairs, and I just commuted away from work."

She also likes to joke that she has always wanted a door, but since Mark decided to retire she *needs* a door to slam. Granted, Mark has apparently failed retirement twice, but if the third time is a charm, all will be good. Then she explains in all seriousness that, because the studio was so open to the house, Mark really didn't have any place to go when Terpening was working, so that door is a win-win.

Now, a move like this seems simple enough—you just schlep all the equipment up the stairs and set up shop—but nothing is ever that easy and neither was this change. In fact, once they got going on the studio project, the entire house had to be remodeled to accommodate Terpening's new digs.

The master bedroom was the natural choice for her studio for a couple reasons. One, it already had pretty good north light. Two, it had a vaulted ceiling, which made expansion easier. By extending a north exterior wall, she achieved more space, as well as more northern light than the original bedroom had.

But, enlarging the room meant salvaging and matching the existing wood ceiling, which took time and patience. The extended north wall was prime real estate for a long bank of windows that look out over Grapevine Lake, while French doors lead out onto a





*Shy Maiden, watercolor, 28" by 20"*

is her work area and storage room for frames, which keeps the clutter out of the studio. Meanwhile, her former studio is now a gallery, where Terpening displays her art and entertains clients. Essentially, she has gone from a one-room space that was studio, workspace, library, storage, and gallery to four rooms—office, studio, workroom, and gallery.

As an artist, Terpening's situation is unique in that she works in two mediums, which don't mix well in her workspace. That came about from a quirky twist of fate and takes us back to her college career.

When she studied art at Oklahoma State University in the '70s, Terpening's instructors focused more on abstract and nonrepresentational art and less on traditional art education. "I was a little frustrated at first, because all I ever wanted to do was paint and draw exactly what I saw," she says. "It took me a while to realize that abstract art is pure composition and design. It's a wonderful basis for what art is really all about. If you put feeling, emotion, movement, and balance into a painting with no subject, you can always hang a subject on it and make a good piece of artwork. I think I had a good background in art itself."

private balcony that faces the lake. Terpening added track lighting with color corrected lights and painted the walls a neutral gray. A storage area, cabinet, and shelving rounded out the transformation. It didn't end there, however.

"As we continued remodeling the rest of the house, we moved into the studio," Terpening says. "It served as bedroom, living room, dining room, kitchen, and office as well as work space. About two months ago, we moved back into the rest of the house, and I now have the studio all to myself again."

The 250-square-foot space is roughly the same size as her original studio, but the vaulted ceiling

allows Terpening to paint larger canvasses. "I have display areas for artifacts and research material," she says. "Because it was originally the master bedroom, the studio now includes an executive washroom."

Taking over that space for the studio precipitated a need for a new master bedroom, which they added downstairs. "Since it was not too much more to add an upstairs to that addition," she says, "we did that, too, so I could have workspace."

The couple removed a wall from another bedroom to create her office, a large landing at the top of the stairs, just outside the studio door, where Terpening can read and study art books. Just off the office,


Terpening had been working in oils since she was about 9, but her college curriculum called for her to take, a “stupid watercolor class,” which she avoided like the plague. Unfortunately, she couldn’t graduate without taking it, so she gave in and took the class at the eleventh hour. To her surprise, she fell in love with the medium and abandoned oils. Watercolors gave her a tool to produce light and luminosity that isn’t possible with oils. Because of its difficulty, not many artists use Terpening’s technique, which is described as transparent watercolor, but it sets her work apart. For Terpening, it is magical.

As Western art became more of her focus, however, it became clear that some of her subjects just didn’t work in watercolor. Painting in oil again became necessary if Terpening wanted to tell her story properly, so she began to work in both mediums.

In order to do so, she must move her entire studio around every time she wants to switch mediums. Watercolor paper is hypersensitive and, if any oil or other substance floating in the air lands on the paper, it can leave a spot that ruins the translucent, transient washes, which means anything associated with oils must be stored away from the watercolors.

Making the change means, “I push the oil easel to one corner of the studio, drag out the drafting table, and get rid of the mineral spirits and oils,” Terpening says. “Then I pull out the watercolors and the sable brushes and turn [the studio] over to watercolors. The act of doing that helps me get into the new medium.” To minimize the upheaval, she staggers her use of mediums, painting with one for three months, then painting with the other for the next three months.

Even though change is good, and the door is beyond wonderful, challenges have ensued. The bank of windows on the north wall has affected how Terpening paints, because north light, she says, is blue, and that has changed her palette. “Also a lot more light causes more glare on the oils, and I have had to find new places for my easels and tools,” she says. “It has taken a while for them to tell me where they want to live.”

After a year and a half of construction, the studio is complete and the rest of the house is returning to normal. The new space comes at a time in Terpening’s career when she is consciously focusing more internally, for just a little while. “I call it hibernating, where I try to limit outside influences for a bit and be more reflective, more me,” she says. The new studio allows her to do just that. Now she can shut out the rest of the world when she’s working and shut out the art when she’s not. 

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*Of Grave Concern, oil, 30" by 40"*