## Fluid Iransitions

## John Geraghty explores the difficult yet seductive medium of watercolor, focusing on past and present masters, including Sonya Terpening.

By John Geraghty

?ach month I am provided the opportunity to share with you my personal perspective on an artist whom I respect and call my friend. I attempt to interject their personal stories, their struggles and accomplishments and identify what I believe defines their work.

Artists have always attempted to convey their passion through their God-given talent-be it a poet, dancer, singer, sculptor or painter, each
in their own way-and always from the heart.
The artist senses are refined, astute and sensitive. The painter defines what they observe. A mountain range becomes an ever-changing pattern of abstract shapes and shadows as the sun moves across its surface, or a tree becomes a form of light and shadows filled with multiple values of color.

Each artist finds their individual way of expressing their interpretation of these
observations and experiences. For the painter, there is no medium that provides the same level of vitality, reality and substance as watercolor.

I have always had an affinity for watercolor, and with this article I will attempt to share with you my appreciation for this complex, uncompromising medium, and invite you to share my perception of this unique art form.

The spontaneity inherent to watercolor creates intrigue that cannot be accomplished in


John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), Above Lake Garda (at San Vigilio), executed in 1913. Est: \$200/300,000, sold for $\$ 218,500$ at the May 21, 2009, Sotheby's New York American Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture auction. PRIVATE COLLECTION, COURTESY OF DEBRA FORCE FINE ART, NEW YORK, IMAGE COURTESY OF SOTHEBY'S INC.


## Donald Teague

(1897-1991),
illustration for the story,
Saddle by Starlight, appeared in
Collier's Weekly, June 28, 1952,
watercolor on paper, $14 \times 20$ "
Est: $\$ 15 / 20,000$ at Cowan's American
Indian \& Western Art Auction,
March 26, 2010.
COURTESY COWAN'S AUCTIONS, INC.

John James Audubon (1785-1851),
Two Bank Mice, 1846, watercolor and pencil on paper, $123 / 4 \times 185 / 8^{\prime \prime}$
COURTESY JKM COLLECTION, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART


Sonya Terpening, Sanctuario San Xavier, watercolor, $18 \times 23^{\prime \prime}$
The artist says... The sunlight spilling through the doorway of this mission resulted in a riotous glow of color on the walls and floors. I used pure transparent color washes to let the brilliant white of the paper reflect back through the paint, similar to light through veils of colored silk.
any other medium. You are never exactly sure what's going to happen with watercolor; this is one of its greatest attractions. The variety and challenges are endless and the rewards are beyond measure.

There is one basic difference that separates transparent watercolor and other heavy painting mediums - transparency. An oil paint can place one obscure color over another to achieve the desired result and whites are created with opaque white.

The watercolorist approach is the opposite of painting with oil, in essence, instead of building up color artists reduce the consistency with water, allowing the white paper to create the white and lighter values, with darker accents placed on the paper with little or no
thinning. The more water in the wash, the more the paper reflects the colors. A warm red will gradually turn into a cool pink with additional water.

Transparent watercolor allows for a freshness and luminosity in its washes, and purposeful, carefully organized brushwork provides a most alluring result.

A quote describing the rewards of watercolor by one of America's greatest artists, Donald Teague, says "Who among the watercolorist would deny that the medium is the most completely captivating of all, to me it is as beguiling as a beautiful woman, so female in its capabilities for change and stimulation, so voluptuous when it smiles on you. At times I feel as though I have been seduced!"

Watercolor is a tradition that spans the chronicles of history. Primitive man used pigments mixed with water to create cave paintings. Ancient Egyptians used water-based paints to decorate the walls of temples and tombs, and created some of the first works on paper.

It was the Middle East where the first watercolor schools and predominant styles emerged. Chinese and Japanese masters painted on silk as well as exquisite handmade paper. Their art was filled with literary allusion and calligraphy, but the primary image was typically a landscape. This characteristic anticipated what was to be a central aspect of Western watercolor traditions in later centuries. Michelangelo's famous Sistine Chapel of the

Vatican, painted from 1508 to 1512 , was accomplished with pigments mixed with water and applied to wet plaster. With the production of higher quality paper in the late $18^{\text {th }}$ century, the first national school of watercolorists emerged in Britain. This watercolor tradition began with topographical drawings encompassing visual identity of ports of sea and surrounding landscape.

In 1768 influential topographers founded the Royal Academy, which encouraged watercolorists to carry the medium beyond
their own technical achievements. The most talented watercolorist from this period was English painter Joseph M.W. Turner (1775-1851), who went on to become one of the greatest painters of the $19^{\text {th }}$ century. His contemplative landscapes were tremendously influential on dozens of artists during later decades.

In the 1780 s a British company began producing paper made especially for watercolorists that was treated with sizing, or glazing, to prevent washes from penetrating

the fibers of the paper. In the late $18^{\text {th }}$ century portable cakes of mixed pigments were available, and in 1846, Winsor and Newton introduced colors packaged in metal tubes. This expanding technology encouraged many European artists to experiment with watercolors until eventually the tradition spread to America.

Noted American wildlife painter John James Audubon (1785-1851) completed his first wildlife study in 1805 and eventually devoted himself to recording this aspect of the North American continent in a manner seldom equaled in any other medium. American artists worked in the shadow of European masters until the late $19^{\text {th }}$ century. Gradually, skilled and talented artists like Thomas Eakins (18441916), Winslow Homer (1836-1910) and James A.M. Whistler (1834-1903) began to develop artworks that challenged European artists.

These American artists were free of ridged English traditions and the slow evolution of the British school; they were interested in experimenting with watercolor in their own way. They created works that were uniquely individual in comparison. This American school developed with an abundance of important artists, including John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), John Marin (1870-1953) and Maurice Prendergast (1859-1924). Each artist represented an individual and unique approach to the medium. This entire group represented "individualism" as a key factor in the development of American art.

Today, there are numerous important American contemporary artists painting in the medium of watercolor, including Dean Mitchell, Tom Hill, Thomas William Jones, Steve Hanks, Thomas Quinn, William Matthews, Joseph Bohler, John Fawcett and Sonya Terpening, to mention a few.

I have decided to focus attention on Sonya Terpening as I have closely watched her progression since 1995, when, as one of the Prix de West committee members, we invited her to participate in this prestigious event.

Sonya is diverse in subject matter, and

Sonya Terpening, The Morning Room,
watercolor, $28 \times 20^{\prime \prime}$
The artist says...I am not sure if this painting would have evoked the same response if painted in any other medium. The backlit sheer curtains, the glass balls on the table legs, the contrast of glowing transparent lights and rich darks, the fluid bleeding of colors; all are watercolors virtues.
she believes painting in watercolor is lyrical, poetic, joyful and contemplative, and it is the expression of the emotion felt by the artist at the moment they recognize their subject, painting the emotional reality created within one's self.

She believes the basis of a successful painting begins with the recognition of something beautiful and unusual in subject matter. It may appear when you least expect it, occasionally it may be something that sends chills up and down your spine. This moment of recognition and emotional response is the foundation of what may produce something better than anything you have accomplished previously.

Sonya believes the result of each work of art is dependent on your God-given talent, originality based on firsthand experiences, self-discipline, hard work, knowledge and emotion.

From the beginning, Sonya's parents encouraged her interest in art, painting with oils at age 9 and taking professional lessons through her junior high school years. She recalls what she describes as the pivotal moment in which a nebulous dream came together into a lifetime goal. That magical moment occurred when she and her paternal grandfather sat down with a pencil and sheet of paper.

Sonya says, "My grandfather had artistic talent, but he was a farmer who rarely had time to indulge his talent. One day, while I was watching, he drew scenes from his childhood in Chicago. The sketches were done quickly and out of his head. This was the first time I had seen that particular kind of spontaneity. I realized then artistic ability was a unique and wonderful gift."

She recalls taking only one general art course in high school. She was continuing her professional art classes and the classes offered in school were less advanced. Her individual instruction and commitment to art allowed her to compete at an early age, winning awards and receiving recognition that was encouraging to this youngster full of wonderful dreams.

Sonya entered Oklahoma State in Stillwater as an art education major. Although the curriculum was focused on non-objective abstraction, she found the courses interesting, and this experience provided a greater appreciation of the diversity in art. She
learned the values of shapes, forms, design and composition through abstraction and was motivated by the comprehension and structure from this fundamental education in art.

This curriculum, although difficult for someone who only wanted to paint what they saw, has become an asset in her work.

Always an oil painter, she did not explore
the challenging medium of watercolor until her senior year.
"At first I found painting in watercolor difficult, however I was intrigued by this medium that was so mobile and alive, and as I began to grasp the fundamentals, I became obsessed with mastering this illusive art form and became so intrigued I thought I would never again paint


Sonya Terpening, Everything and the Kitchen Sink, watercolor, $22 \times 15^{\prime \prime}$
The artist says... Transparent subjects, such as these lace curtains, are suggested using very thin washes of pigment. Variations in the amount of pigment and water give a more opaque passage creating the illusion of the folds and designs in the curtains.


Sonya Terpening, Daisies, watercolor, $12 \times 16^{\prime \prime}$
The artist says... The only way to portray shape and volume of a white subject when you are working on white paper is to use washes of color. The more transparent the washes the more "white" the subject appears. The lace is a matter of painting the holes rather than the cloth.
in oils," she says.
Sonya graduated from Oklahoma State with a degree in both art history and literature, and she also received her teaching certificate, though she never taught in public schools. She instead made the decision to fulfill her childhood dream of being an artist and has never looked back.

She married her childhood sweetheart, Mark Terpening, at the age of 19. Mark had majored in radio and television, and pursued a career in communications while she concentrated on developing her art career.

The first years were a period that she describes as rough and slow. Her first break was an invitation to join Talisman Gallery, and through this exposure she was invited to
participate with other galleries and several important nationally recognized art venues.

When Sonya finds a subject that stimulates her, she will draw and paint several small studies, often at different times of the day to capture the perfect moment when the light and shadows are ideal. She carefully establishes her color choices through the use of these small studies.

Often Sonya will make notes as to her thoughts of what has inspired her, and this will assist her in retaining her enthusiasm while working in the studio.

Today Sonya clearly believes she is in control of her watercolor 98 percent of the time. She acknowledges that this medium is seldom twice the same and is confident
in her technical abilities; however, you are never exactly sure what may happen with watercolor, this is its greatest attraction. The variety and challenges are endless and the rewards are beyond measure.

Occasionally something may occur that is totally out of your control, yet as a professional you can generally direct it into something positive.

I remember an incident that took place while I was watching my friend, master wildlife artist Bob Kuhn, paint a major work. He had the ability to capture his animals' personalities with what seemed pure realism while actually only suggesting most of the detail. He would then introduce these wonderful abstract designs into the landscape, complementing the image


Sonya Terpening at her studio in Grapevine, Texas.
with washes of thin translucent acrylic.
While establishing an orange band of color across the sky suggesting a sunset, the thin wash began to run down the canvas, right in the middle of the painting. I commented, "Bob, what are you going to do about that," and he calmly stated, "John, I kind of like it, I think I will leave it there. After all it is my painting and I can do whatever I want with it." He then purposely allowed the orange wash to appear to run down an area on the far left of the painting. When the work was finished, it looked as though this was part of his master plan. This painting has hung in our bedroom for at least 25 years and we have enjoyed it every day.

Sonya acknowledges that any painting can be affected by the mood of the artist and consequently she prepares herself before ever picking up a brush. She clears her mind of any stress or outside thoughts, and sometimes listens to background music.

Unlike painting with oils, the design and
composition requires careful planning as there is no room for change or modification with watercolor. Often an area is overlooked or a small negative space in your study becomes a major unbalance in the composition of the larger image and the work must be discarded and started over.

In most cases, once a major watercolor painting is started, Sonya will complete the work without interruptions, other than eating and sleeping. This allows her instincts and emotions to work at their fullest.

Each of these contemporary watercolorists I previously mentioned are recognized as established accomplished artists. To live with the works of either of them is a pleasure beyond measure.

All the past masters' works, other than those of the great Donald Teague, are either in museums or major collections and their values are well above most of our available annual budgets.

I choose to discuss Sonya Terpening's
work not only because I have followed her career closely over these past years, this would also be true with many other contemporary watercolorists, with many of their works a treasured part of our personal collection.

Sonya Terpening has that same intensity and commitment to her craft as the first day I met her. She continues to challenge herself with every painting and she is seldom fully satisfied. I find it exciting to watch her experiment and continue to develop her skills. These are the qualities I wanted to share with you.

Sonya, as with most watercolorists, continues to also paint in other mediums. She is a serious oil painter, and she is convinced the diversification of these mediums provides her a personal capacity of understanding her work while promoting self-confidence and consistent progress.

When first developing the Masters of the American West Exhibition and Sale, I invited Sonya to join us in the formation of this project. She agreed, and in 1999, became an


Sonya Terpening, Touch of Red, watercolor, 19x13"
The artist says... This is a painting of contrasts; sunlight and shadows, reality and reflection, foreground and deep background, bright white and heavy darks. I am not sure any other medium could catch these fluid transitions quite like watercolor.
active member of this prestigious group of artists. In 2008 she was presented with the Gold Medal for Watercolor.

Even with this recognition she had concerns as to the direction of her art. Her first love was watercolor, however it was obvious the average collector did not appreciate the medium of watercolor and were drawn to oils.

We spent considerable time discussing her alternatives and came to the conclusion that she was overcommitted. She needed time to step back and look at the big picture, to make a logical decision on what her priorities should be. We agreed she should take a couple years off from the Masters and once she was comfortable, and felt the time was right, she could return rejuvenated and totally committed.

She has continued to focus on both her watercolor and oils and I continue to watch her progress. Her formula of pricing is conservative, and her collector base continues to grow. I am convinced the future will treat her well, and I am looking forward to her again presenting her paintings at the Masters.

When you have the opportunity to meet this exceptional artist, introduce yourself. You will find her gracious, appreciative and sincere, a true heart.

Sonya has been featured in several national art publications and is highly respected by her peers. She received her Signature Status in the National Watercolor Society and, in 1988, also earned her Signature Status in the Southwestern Watercolor Society.

She is exclusively represented by Whistle Pik Galleries in Fredericksburg, Texas. $\mathbb{N}$

## About John Geraghty

John Geraghty, Trustee and Special Advisor to the Autry National Center's Masters of the American West Fine Art Exhibition and Sale, shares his insights on the Western art scene. Both he and
 wife Saralynn are afflicted with the incurable passion of collecting Western art.

