

MAKING GOOD PAINTINGS EVEN BETTER

by M. Stephen Doherty



Above: Sondra Freckelton and Jack Beal.

For the first time, Sondra Freckelton invited artists to work with her on her farm in upstate New York. They were able to enjoy the extensive gardens, the waterfall, and the company of other serious artists.

These artists were already creating "good" paintings. At Sondra Freckelton's recent workshops, they learned how to paint even better, more dynamic watercolors.



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Cut Flowers and Chenille, by Sondra Freckelton, 1988, watercolor, 34 x 44 1/2. Courtesy Robert Schoelkopf Gallery, New York, New York.

After just one day of participating in Sondra Freckelton's workshop on her farm in upstate New York, Virginia artist Ginny Baier described her feelings by relating what she had told her husband on the

phone that morning: "I told him I felt as if I had been studying a foreign language by listening to tapes and reading books and now, for the first time, I was actually in the country where the language was spoken."

Baier's analogy summed up the feelings of all 40

artists who participated in the two sessions that took place on the one-time dairy farm where Freckelton lives with her husband, the artist Jack Beal, and their dog, Scooter. During the week-long sessions, which were held in the barn studio and throughout the extensive

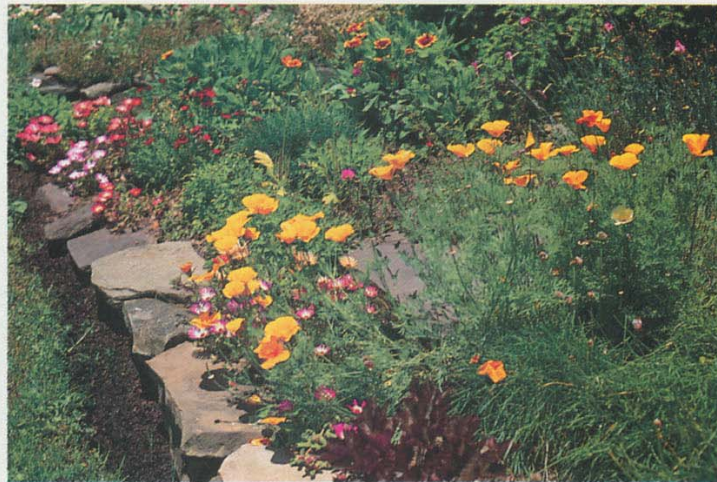
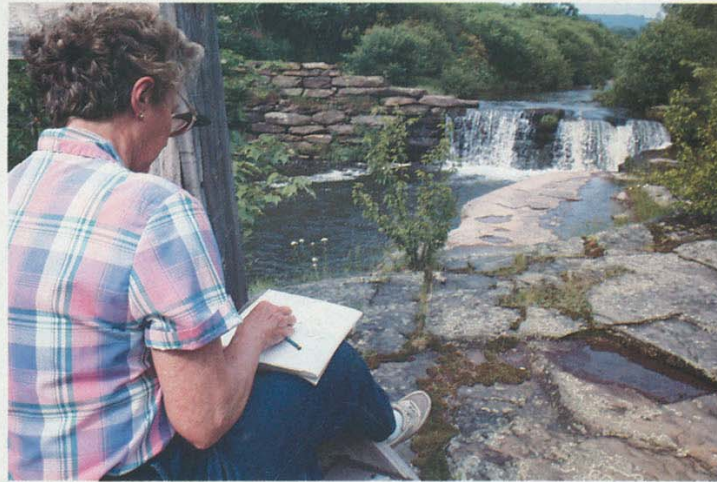
gardens on the farm, the artists felt privileged to be among the first groups ever invited to a Freckelton workshop, but they also recognized that they were enjoying a rare opportunity to work intensively on their paintings with the help of both a distinguished artist and a group of talented peers.

As the artists showed slides of their paintings on the first day of each workshop, they identified the problem that most artists face after they have learned the basics of watercolor: they want to get better, but they don't know how. Friends and relatives tell them they are "good enough"; workshop instructors demonstrate only their own particular approaches; and books just don't explain how to apply the information to the reader's own situation.

Freckelton addressed this common need by offering lectures and demonstrations; assigning exercises; and critiquing individual paintings. Each of these activities helped the participants gain a better understanding of the materials they were using and also helped them clarify their own intentions as artists. By the end of the week, the artists were amazed at the progress they had made and the insights they were bringing to their work.

Freckelton continually reminded her workshop students to have a clear idea of what they wanted to express in each new painting, and to develop the skills necessary to make a convincing presentation. She has advanced that simple message in lectures, demonstrations, and a book entitled *Dynamic Still Lifes in Watercolor* (Watson-Guptill Publications). It is the principle that guides her own painting activities and has established her as one of the most important American realists working in the watercolor medium today.

In this article, the workshop artists describe the activities and discussions that were most helpful to them as they learned how to make better watercolors.

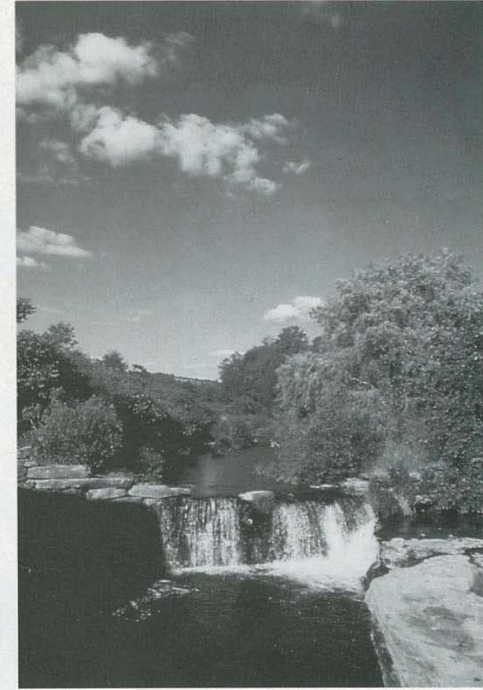
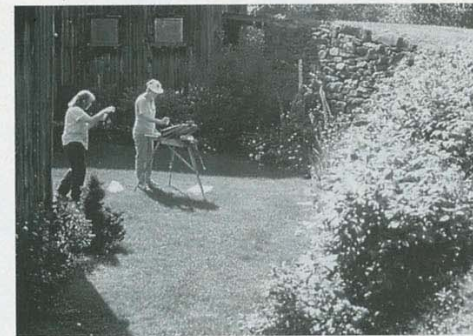


Top: Harriet Chipley making a drawing of the waterfall.

Above: A photograph of one of the flower gardens.

Opposite page, clockwise from the upper left: Artist Ginny Baier at work near a stream. The waterfall that once served a mill.

A painting by Ellen Wineberg, in progress. Ellen Wineberg at work on the painting. Freckelton giving advice to artist Molly Sherwood.



MONICA ACEE

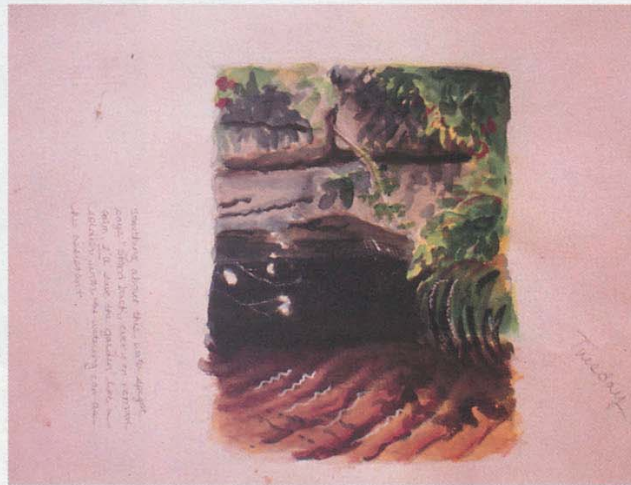


"Our daily assignment was to write a 'postcard' about the subject we were about to paint so that we would choose the essential points and clarify them."

Monica Acee made significant progress during the workshop, and felt that one of the most valuable activities was the daily assignment of writing a "postcard" about her intentions in creating the next painting. After each morning's group meeting, she would walk through the gardens and around the waterfall, looking for a subject she wanted to paint. Once she had determined that subject, she wrote a brief statement about why she found it interesting and what she wanted someone else to know about it. That statement served as her guide in determining what objects should be included in the picture, how they should be composed, and what colors should be used to present them.

The point of this postcard exercise was to get the artists in the group to establish a clear objective for each new painting, and then focus every part of the painting process on realizing that objective.

As Freckelton explained the reasons



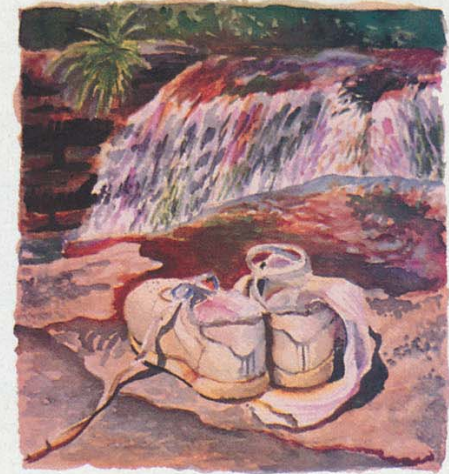
for the assignment, she seemed to be expressing her philosophy of life—not just her approach to watercolor painting. As she outlined the steps the workshop students could take to become better artists, it became clear that she believes an artist must be organized and directed about almost anything he or she attempts. She talked about planning a painting the way one organizes a trip, a meal, or a garden. Preliminary sketches were called "road maps," or "menus"; and the cause-and-

effect relationship between those sketches and the quality of the finished pictures was the same as the relationship between spring planting and a bountiful fall harvest. In other words, the quality of art—and life—is improved with planning, knowledge, and control.

Because the workshop participants were spending their days at Freckelton's home, surrounded by the extensive vegetable and flower gardens, the pounding waterfall, and the gentle

stream, the students could easily see that Freckelton painted the world in which she lived. Once again, the connection between one's life and art became quite obvious.

Now, several months after the workshop, Acee feels she is still benefiting from the experience of the workshop. "I can consciously make all my paintings my best," she says. "I no longer need the postcards to make me aware of what I want my viewer to feel and know about my subject."



These are the daily "postcard" paintings Monica Acee made during a five-day period of the workshop. They were done on a small watercolor block and measure approximately 6" x 9".





Ellen Fountain did all of her painting exercises on one large watercolor block.

All of the nearly 300 artists who applied for Freckelton's workshop sent letters explaining what they hoped to gain from the experience. The selection of the 40 workshop participants was based on those responses and the slides of their artwork.

In her letter, Arizona artist Ellen Fountain indicated that she hoped to gain specific information about working on a large scale with fluid mixtures of watercolor paint, and she wanted help in determining what direction her work might take in the future.

"Occasionally, it's good to shake up one's world a little," Fountain says. "I decided that I would not do any of the normal things I do when painting. I just wanted to paint in response to what I saw and felt during the week. That experience, the stimulating conversations, and Sondra's lectures were tremendously valuable."

For Ellen Fountain and Jeanne Lindsay, whose photographs and artworks appear on these pages, another exercise that proved valuable involved the cre-

ELLEN FOUNTAIN



"I loved having time away from my normal routine to talk to other artists and share experiences."

JEANNE LINDSAY



"Good painting is really an extension of the artist's life, and we certainly saw that Sondra's paintings come right out of her experiences and her environment."

ation of images of peace and war (or chaos), using value and hue, then line, and finally color. As can be seen from the collage of images on Fountain's watercolor block, she made small abstract shapes in the upper-left-hand corner of her paper. Lindsay, on the other hand, created two realistic depictions of a peach.

Morning presentations on materials and techniques took place in the studio. During one session, Freckelton talked about the characteristics of certain pigments, the performance of different brushes, and the physical properties of watercolor papers. This information was based on her own tests of materials, the literature she had read, and her 20 years of experience with watercolor.

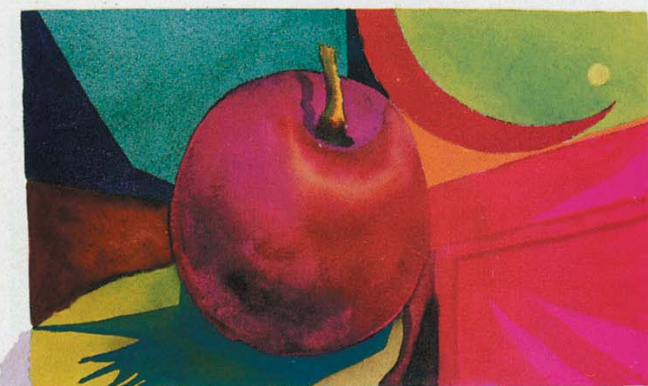
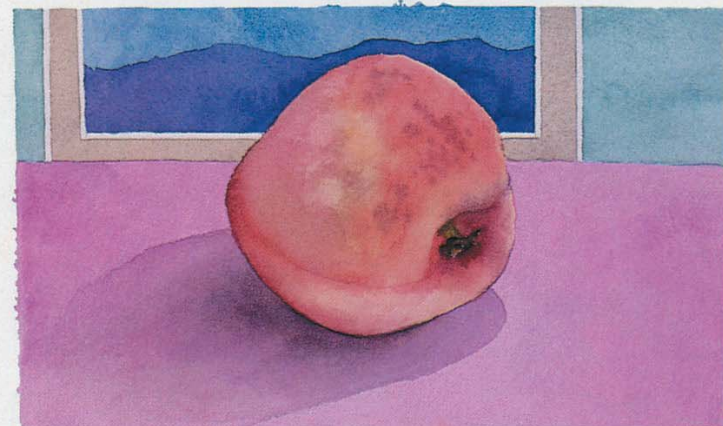
Freckelton then discussed the characteristics of pigments and showed the color charts she had made, using almost every paint on the market. Each stripe on the chart demonstrated how a paint would perform full-strength or thinned with water. She pointed to several stripes of cadmium red and showed how each manufacturer's paint was slightly different. She then held up the chart outlining how certain earth colors become grainy when diluted with water.

Freckelton urged the students to invest in good-quality kolinsky sable brushes. She explained that the hairs of those brushes are superior to all others because of their ability to hold paint and then release it evenly when

pressed against the paper.

For many of the workshop participants, the discussion of papers was perhaps the most enlightening. Freckelton said that, if colors are thoroughly suspended in water, applied in strong solutions, and properly layered over one another, the resulting paintings will appear more luminous, since the pigment is more apt to settle into the lower recesses of the textured paper, leaving less paint on the upper portions where the light will penetrate.

Throughout the discussion of materials, Freckelton emphasized that the choices artists make should be guided by their ultimate intentions—not by habits, rules, or gimmicks. "Know what you can do with different papers, paints, and brushes and choose the combination of those materials that will help you realize your objective," Freckelton said. "Don't do something just because you've always done it that way."



Jeanne Lindsay's exercises in painting the themes of peace and war.



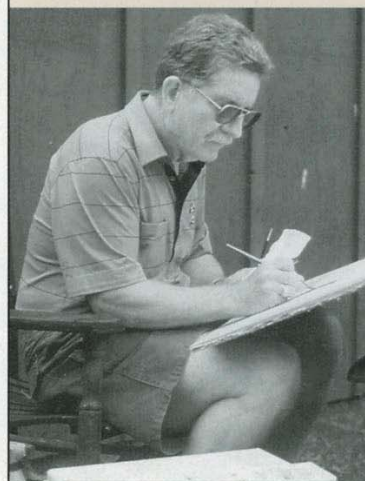
Cross Highway Barns, by Don Theodore, 1990, watercolor, 11 x 14. Collection the artist.

One of the most helpful demonstrations showed how Freckelton uses drawings to resolve her compositions and establish an outline of the image on the watercolor paper. Even for the most experienced watercolorists, this proved to be an extremely valuable lesson, for it showed how advance planning and thoughtful control of the medium allowed an artist greater freedom and the ability to create better paintings.

To their surprise, the artists learned that Freckelton does not execute a completely detailed pencil drawing on her paper before she begins to paint. Most of the students had assumed that the only way to execute large-scale, highly detailed paintings, such as those that Freckelton paints, would be to map out every part of the picture before putting brush to paper.

Freckelton does use compositional studies, Polaroid photographs, the objects themselves, and oil sketches to guide her brushstrokes; and she does

DON THEODORE



"I have changed the way I begin a painting now that I see the value of an initial drawing."

draw general outlines of her still-life subjects before painting them. But the subtleties of the colors, shapes, and edges are recorded once and for all by her kolinsky sable brush, not by a pencil.

"For most of my career, I've been fighting the notion that watercolors are colored drawings," Freckelton told her students. "So it's important for me to paint my subject while I am observing it, not after I've laid down some tight pencil drawing. All the pencil sketch should tell me is where the object should appear on the page; then I will create a likeness of it on the paper, using my brush."

The initial compositional sketches are often drawn on yellow lined paper with a graphite pencil in order to establish the placement of shapes and the overall format of the painting. "Just because most watercolor paper is sold in sheets that are 22" x 30" doesn't mean that's the best format for your picture," Freckelton stated. "It's better to decide independently what is the best shape and size for that particular subject, and then cut the paper to that size."

Because Freckelton wants a dynamic relationship between the shapes and patterns in her paintings, she will add or subtract elements from a still-life arrangement, sketch out the movement of space through the picture, and finally arrive at a sketch that outlines the final composition. At that point, she is ready to begin drawing the outlines of the objects on the watercolor paper, confining her attention to those that will be painted first. "I draw the objects just before I am going to paint them, not any time sooner than that," she said. "That way, I can relate each new element to those already established, and paint it with the same degree of attention. I'm not just painting in between the pencil lines. I'm actually creating the painting as I work."

A student in the workshop who was amazed by this approach asked Freckelton to explain how she deals with the background of the pictures since it obviously couldn't be established until the still life was completed. She said that, in most cases, she does have to leave the background unpainted until key elements in the still life are established. If that becomes a significant problem, however, she will carefully draw in the outlines of unpainted shapes and lay a background wash on the paper.

MARGARET GRAHAM KRANKING



"Sondra's advice on establishing stronger work habits and using only quality materials was very helpful."



Above: *Summer Garden, Catskills*, by Margaret Graham Kranking, 1990, watercolor, 22 x 30. Collection the artist.

Left: A photograph of the watering can and rock wall which Kranking used as her subject.

MARY ARO



"Sondra achieves the highest quality in her watercolors by setting difficult tasks for herself and striving for monumentality."

A number of the participants in Freckelton's workshop are themselves active as teachers and exhibiting artists. Mary Aro and Mary Alice Wimmer, for example, both teach in the Midwest; and Beth Steinkellner has been very successful selling her paintings in the Chicago area. For these artists, the opportunity to share information and offer each other support was the most important aspect of the workshop.

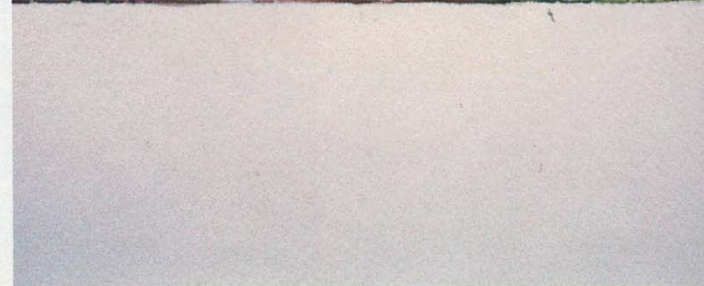
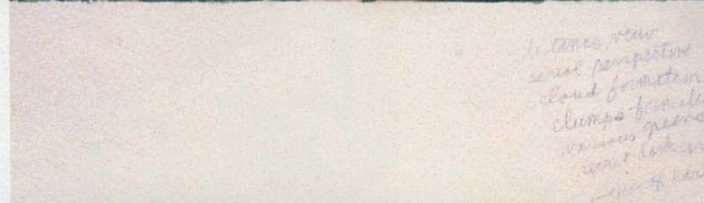
Ginny Baier of Leesburg, Virginia, is a writer, so it is easier for her to put the experience of the workshop into words. Her statements summarize the feelings of all the participants: "I had never before received a critique of my watercolor paintings, although I sell and have been in numerous national shows. Sondra identified what I would call my major stumbling blocks toward painting flawless pictures—that is, pictures that are carried through from beginning to end with equal attention being paid to each step.

Studies of the Freckelton farm by Mary Aro.

"In particular, Sondra's discussion of the importance of a beautiful paint surface was revealing. 'It's clear,' she said when looking at one of my paintings, 'that you give a lot of thought to your composition. I like your ideas and the things you do in your compositions, but you give less thought to the drawing and painting process itself and that diminishes an otherwise sound composition.' She went on to explain that the paint surface is like the frosting on the cake. It invites the viewer to partake of the painting by creating a beautiful

environment. She touched on something that I also believe deeply—that it is through beauty that we communicate artistic ideas."

Harriet Chipley, whose painting is reproduced here, is also able to express some of the insights others gained during the workshop: "I think the most important lesson I carry with me from that workshop is Sondra's exhortation that I must find the thing that interests me most about whatever I have chosen to paint and then go for it—exaggerate, reinforce, amplify, insist upon that



WATERCOLOR '91



Honors Course #8, by Harriet Chipley, 1990, watercolor, 22 x 30. Private collection.

thing. Whatever it was that attracted me in the first place, I must communicate that idea with passion, and make the most of it."

The participants benefited not only from the technical knowledge imparted during the workshop, but also from the intensity of their efforts, Freckelton's words of criticism and support, and the bonds of friendship that were established during the workshop. As Iowa artist Brenda Turner said afterward, "I got up each morning and began discussing composition at the breakfast table; reviewed galleries along the ten-minute drive to the farm; argued over watercolor paper preferences till noon; eavesdropped on noontime conversations concerning watercolor societies, pro or con; hung over all the artists' shoulders while they painted; occasionally painted, too; wrapped up the afternoon with a garden party; and ate my way through art and dinner, all the time making friends. Sometime around 10:00 p.m., I finally went to bed where everything said during the day was replayed in my head. Good karma."

HARRIET CHIPLEY



"I was moved by her eloquent tribute to the nurturing, well-made things in our lives—the things that she loves and paints."

Left to right: Mary Alice Wimmer, Jean Grastorf, and Harriet Chipley.

WATERCOLOR '91



Sun Worshippers, by Tim Wilson, 1990, watercolor, 26 x 38. Collection the artist.

Another revelation that changed the way each of the workshop participants approached watercolor was Freckelton's demonstration of how to paint in a very direct manner, manipulating the wet paint as little as possible and layering colors rather than mixing them on the palette. "I liked her succinct advice to 'get in and get out,'" says Missouri artist Frieda Logan. "I saw that she uses strong colors for her initial washes, lifting highlights from the wet paint, and using a variety of color combinations. The results were completely convincing."

In her lectures, Freckelton stated that mixing watercolors requires an approach totally different from that used with other painting media. "In oil painting, you darken a green by mixing it with its complement, red. But if you tried that with watercolor, you would get a dull, muddy green. To achieve the vibrancy and luminosity that is the hallmark of watercolor, you should first paint the layers of green, let them dry, and then superimpose the red."

Freckelton talked extensively about the characteristics of certain pigments,

TIM WILSON



"As a result of the workshop, I now try to maintain a constant awareness of the concepts of clarity, brilliance, luminosity, and exciting compositional movement."

MARY K. HELSAPLE



"I learned that significant art starts at a very personal level. It requires a 'centeredness' and a tender balance of the outside elements that often take a toll on our artistic energy."

advising the students to avoid certain "thugs" that soak into the fibers of the paper and remain permanent, killing the luminosity of the medium. She recommended that some sedimentary colors be distilled before using them; and she demonstrated how to use different combinations of colors to make greens and browns so that landscape paintings, which often require an extensive use of those colors, don't become monotonous.

After returning to her Colorado studio, Mary K. Helsaple began putting this new information to work on the painting reproduced here: "In the initial stages of this painting, I started with layering in the shadows, as Sondra suggested. I washed in cadmium

yellow for sunlight, and cadmium red for depth in the flowers. I used a magenta blue as an under-wash for the brown twisting vine on the right. In following this preliminary procedure, I found that I relied more on my initial value sketch. In the past, I used this as a reference toward the end of the painting process. By reversing the procedure, I was able to solve my problems."

Tim Wilson has also changed his approach to watercolor because of what he learned at the workshop. "I would often lose my place when working on a piece because of the complex architecture of my drawing," he says. "Now, using Sondra's approach, I can handle those kinds of complicated pictures with no problem."



Above: *Cutting Edge*, by Mary K. Helsaple, 1990, watercolor, 30 x 22. Collection the artist.

Top: An early stage in the development of *Cutting Edge*, showing the layers of color being applied separately.

During one afternoon session, Freckelton's husband, artist Jack Beal, gave the group a lecture on composition. This was a highly condensed version of a series of lectures Beal often gives to groups of art students, and it was intended to help the participants build a more dynamic space within their pictures. Beal introduced the artists to the idea of leading the viewer into a painting by having a strong diagonal line of entry beginning at or near the bottom. Furthermore, he pointed out that the space below the real or implied horizon can be thought of as the lower half of a clam shell which is going away from the viewer, while the space above the horizon can be thought of as the top half of that shell which moves toward the viewer.

These concepts had a forceful impact on Martina Stephens, an artist who had traveled from the Middle East to attend the workshop: "During the last ten years, I have been living with my family in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, and I have been forced to be largely self-taught as an artist. The simple techniques that Jack showed us on

MARTINA STEPHENS



"Jack Beal's lecture on design and the use of space within a picture has helped me solve some of my compositional problems."

guiding the eye around a composition made perfect sense to me. The more I thought about this method, the more I felt it could help solve my compositional problems."

Mary Alice Wimmer, who teaches art at the University of Wisconsin, also found that the discussions of composition were particularly helpful to her. "Probably the number one change in



As Time Goes By, by Martina Stephens, 1990, watercolor, 18 x 24. Collection the artist.



The Good Life, by Mary Alice Wimmer, 1990, watercolor, 40 x 60. Collection the artist.

my work is in the area of structure," she says. "Until this workshop, I tended to view my still-life setups from a fairly static, non-angular, almost landscape point of view. The spatial structure was like that of a landscape painting: foreground, middle ground, background, with the objects resting mostly in the middle ground. Now I have shifted and want to put more emphasis on the objects and build a more dynamic space within the paintings."

Adrienne Markel of Circleville, New York, remembers a visit to Beal's studio as one of the highlights of the week: "He said that we should remember 'nothing is more important than babies and breakfast,' meaning that our paintings should be concerned with basic human needs—that is, paintings should be about life, and should express a reverence and a respect for life."

"I came away with a renewed sense of the importance of art and the beauty of life directed toward perfecting one's abilities," says K. Rice Hunter in addressing the same issue. "I also gained new hope for my own work. As Sondra emphasized, she teaches principles of art—not an easy method or magic formula." ■

MARY ALICE WIMMER



"In my new painting, the space has become more dynamic because of the use of diagonal shadows and an oval shape for the still-life setting."

Sondra Freckelton will be offering four watercolor workshops again this summer: two intermediate programs (June 2-8, and August 4-10); and two advanced workshops (June 16-22, and August 18-24). Jack Beal will be conducting two workshops in composition and drawing (June 9-15, August 11-17). Artists interested in participating should send six to 12 slides of their artwork and a statement giving their age, level of experience, attitudes about painting, and expectations for the workshop. Those who have basic skills and are highly motivated will be considered, and 20 artists will be invited to join each of the workshops. For further information, write to Freckelton/Beal, Dept. W91, 83A Delhi Stage HC64, Oneonta, NY 13820.

Sondra Freckelton is represented by the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery in New York City, and recently exhibited her watercolors with the Louis Newman Galleries of Beverly Hills, California. The artist publishes original screen prints through Stewart & Stewart, 5571 Wing Lake Road, Birmingham, MI 48010.