

Painting Reflective Surfaces

Week 3: Mirrored Images

Why Use Mirrors in Still Life?

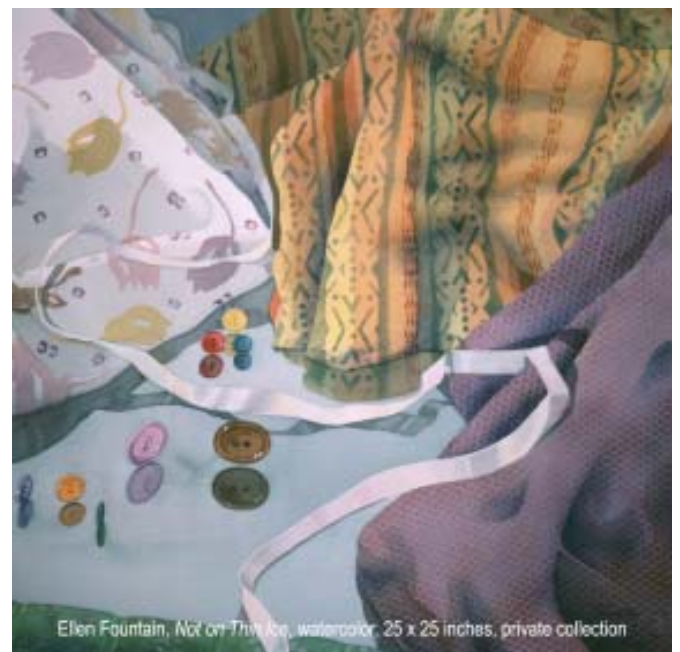
There is a long history in art involving the use of mirrors in paintings. They have been used variously as symbols of self-knowledge, truth, sight or insight, pride, vanity, lust, magic and illusion. But even if you aren't interested in the symbolism, a painting with a mirrored reflection of your objects is just plain fun to do! You picked your objects for *some* reason, and by adding a mirror, you get to double their impact.

You may also choose to angle the mirror so that instead of reflecting just your objects, it will pick up an image (maybe even YOU) from another part of the room (see photo above right).

What's in a mirrored reflection?

As in painting glass and metals, remember to look carefully at the shapes you see in the mirror. Because the mirror is flat, you will not have the distortion of the reflected shapes that you would get in an object made of glass or metal, and generally speaking, you will have somewhat less color/value distortion as well.

Again, though, this is a case where you may want to lessen the saturation of your colors in the mirror reflections, and decrease the amount of contrast between shapes, just to make it "read" as a mirror reflection and not just another painted image. The creation of a good painting always takes precedence over every other consideration.



Ellen Fountain, *Not on Thin Ice*, watercolor, 25 x 25 inches, private collection

In the painting above, I used a mirror to represent a frozen pond, with "skaters" (buttons) zooming around on the surface of the "ice". I darkened the value and lowered the intensity of the button reflections in the mirror deliberately. The reflection of the ceiling is a bluish-white rather than the warmer white it actually was.



Left: Beginning to See what He Saw, watercolor, 22 x 15" watercolor on paper, by Ellen Fountain.

This painting is one of my Appropriation Series pieces, where I pay homage to artists whose work has inspired or influenced me. These paintings all begin with a still life setup that includes a book open to a reproduction of a painting by the artist I am "appropriating" from — in this case, Picasso. His painting, "Girl Before a Mirror" was the inspiration and set the question: What do we see when we look in a mirror? Just a reflection of our outer appearance, or do we see ourselves as we THINK we are or would like to be? I'll probably do another version of this painting because the possibilities are many for what the mirror can reflect back, and because I'd show a little more of the Picasso image next time. I used a small hand mirror in my still life setup. The other side is a magnifying mirror, and using that side might make an interesting painting too. Obviously, I substituted the black penguin's reflection in the mirror with another penguin from my collection, but kept the reflections of the fabrics that the mirror was showing.



Nancy Hagin is one of several contemporary artists whose work focuses on still life. In Nancy's work, you will often see the same objects over and over again, placed in different settings, with different backgrounds. These objects are either special to the artist, or she simply likes their forms.

In *Three Red Cloths* (top, left) and *Optimo* (below, right), the same enameled pitcher and ceramic vase appear, but in the top one, the white vase takes on a copper hue- it's probably an exaggeration of the reflected color from the red cloths, or she may simply have felt this color would work better than white. The pitcher also is a different color of white in each painting.



Note how her placement of the fabrics and mirror provide geometric forms to play off against the curvilinear shapes of the vase and pitchers, and the organic shapes of the flowers.



Top:
Three Red Cloths, limited edition serigraph, 28.5 x 38 inches

Above: *Blue Agate*, limited edition serigraph, 38.5 x 29 inches

Right: *Optimo*, limited edition serigraph, 28 x 28 inches

All by Nancy Hagin, a contemporary artist who works in watercolor, serigraphy (silkscreen) and oil.

Other references on mirrors in art to check out:
The Symbolism of Mirrors in Art from Ancient Times to the Present, Hope B. Werness, Edwin Mellen Press, 1999

www.mirrorproject.com - people posting their own reflections in a variety of surfaces besides mirrors.



4 No Trump, I'm Aski'n for Aces, serigraph, 39 x 29.5 inches, 1986, by P.S. Gordon

In class:

Set up a simple still life (one or two objects plus your mirror). Either place the mirror flat, or prop it up at an angle.

Do a quick outline drawing of your still life - you can either do this in your sketchbook if you'd like to try more than one arrangement, or directly on your watercolor paper. Crop your image tightly and pay attention to the negative shapes of the background. Run some parts of the composition off the edges of your paper so that the background doesn't completely surround and isolate the objects.

Paint your object, working from light to dark. Include the background and foreground. Make any changes to value, intensity and contrast in the mirror reflections that you need to in order to make the painting work.

Out of class:

Set up and paint a still life with a mirror placed so you can see your own reflection in it as well as your still life objects. Choose objects that are symbolic of who you are or how you see yourself. (In other words, if objects could be a portrait of you, what would those objects be?)



Self Portrait with Roses, oil, 14x18 inches, by Helen Oh

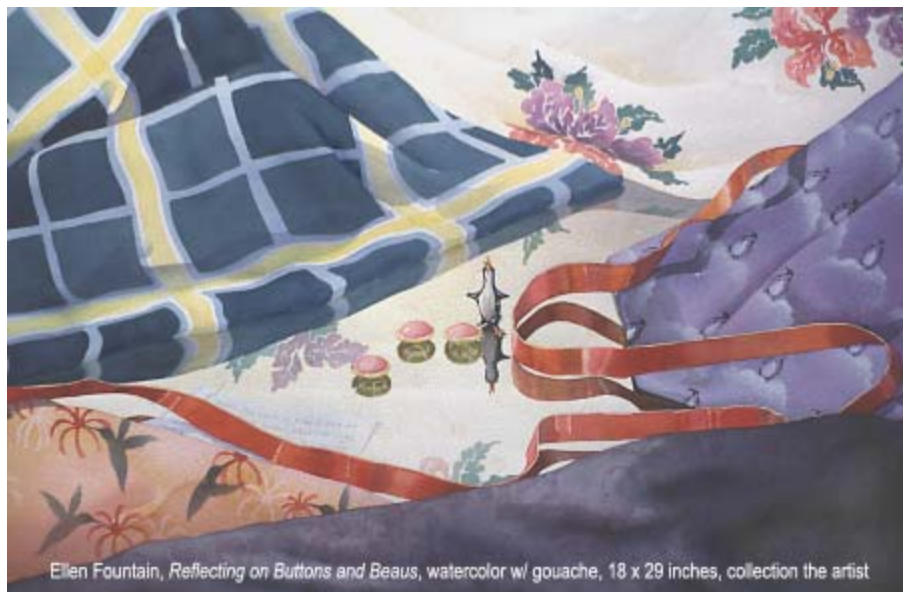


When objects are placed on a mirror, in the reflection, we see more of the UNDERSIDE of the objects - here, for example, we can see under the chins of the penguins.

TIP

Place your mirror flat on a table and build your still life on and around it to focus attention on the objects themselves.

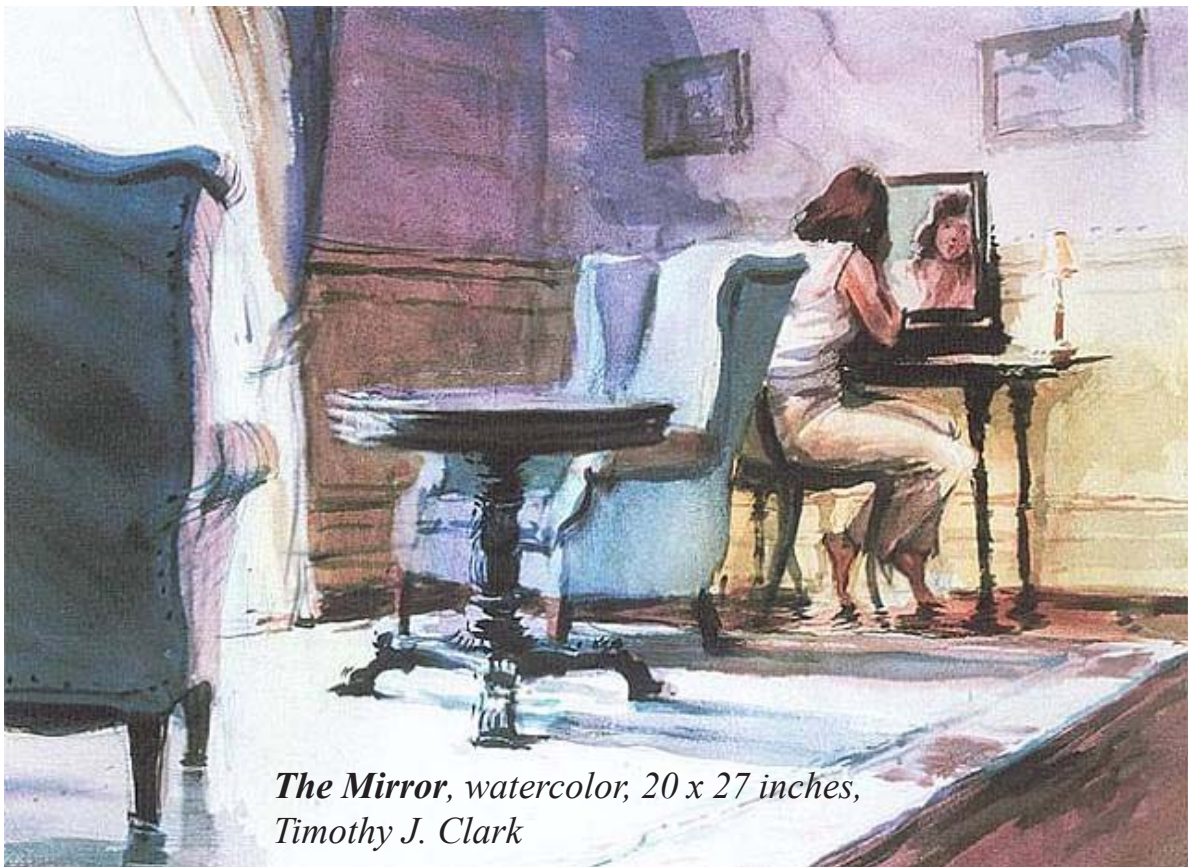
If you want to capture more of the surrounding environment than you can frame in front of you, then place your mirror at a right angle (or nearly so) to capture what is behind or to the sides of you.



Ellen Fountain, Reflecting on Buttons and Beaus, watercolor w/ gouache, 18 x 29 inches, collection the artist



White Lilies with Three Part Mirror, Linda Cromer, watercolor 2002, 22x30



*The Mirror, watercolor, 20 x 27 inches,
Timothy J. Clark*

David Schulman, Model in the Studio, wc, 10 x 7 inches





Above: Checked Quilt, limited edition serigraph, 27,5 x 31 inches, Nancy Hagin
Below: The Chocolate Box, watercolor, 40 x 51 inches, 1996, Nancy Hagin





Above: *The Guest Room*, limited edition serigraph, 30x 39 inches, Nancy Hagin
 Below, left: *Country Lace*, limited edition serigraph, 33x 23 inches, Nancy Hagin

Below, right: *Self Portrait with Paul and Vincent*, watercolor; 29 x 21 inches by Davida Schulman. Davida uses the mirror to take an unflinching look at herself, often referencing historical art. See more of her work at: www.davida-art.com/watercolor_self.htm

