Romantic & real

Nothing beats working from life, but "real" doesn't have to be dowdy. How do you give still lifes an air of elegant romance and theatrical pizzazz? By paying attention to the backdrop.

By Donald Clegg

My still lifes are obviously staged; the illusion is artful; the effect, elegant. In the tradition of still life painting, dating from the 16th century, the illusion is often that someone stumbled upon a tableau from real life—a banquet table or a butcher block, for example. I paint from life, but I arrange the elements artfully so that there's a repetition of pleasing shapes and colors that amount to a visual rhythm. In my paintings, the backdrop is not an afterthought. It's never an ordinary window or a wall but something, usually a fabric, that complements the lines and patterns created by the objects. In other words, I'm not coy about admitting that I arranged these objects as a set-up; they exist primarily so that I can paint them. There's no story or moral, but there's a mood.

If you're thinking about painting a still life, you may want to ask yourself some questions: is there a reason these elements—fruits and bowls and flowers, for instance, inhabit this space at this time? Am I celebrating the pleasures of domestic life? Am I mourning the inevitability of death and decay? Or am I painting simply because the elements are beautiful and they look good together? I prefer the last question, and my answer is Yes!

The Backdrop as Complement and Contrast

Sunflowers have been depicted so often they might be considered trite, but they're my favorite flowers! If I hadn't positioned the cloth in the upper left, the sunflowers would feel too centered. The green segment relates to the green of the leaves; the gold brocade—with a pattern I made up to complement the petals—provides a visual bridge to the sunflowers. The gold color is also a complement to the plums. Take away the backdrop cloths, and this is a relatively boring composition. The backdrop interacts with the set-up: it provides a visual context for the real flowers and fruits in Garden Medley #21 (watercolor on paper, 19 x 20).

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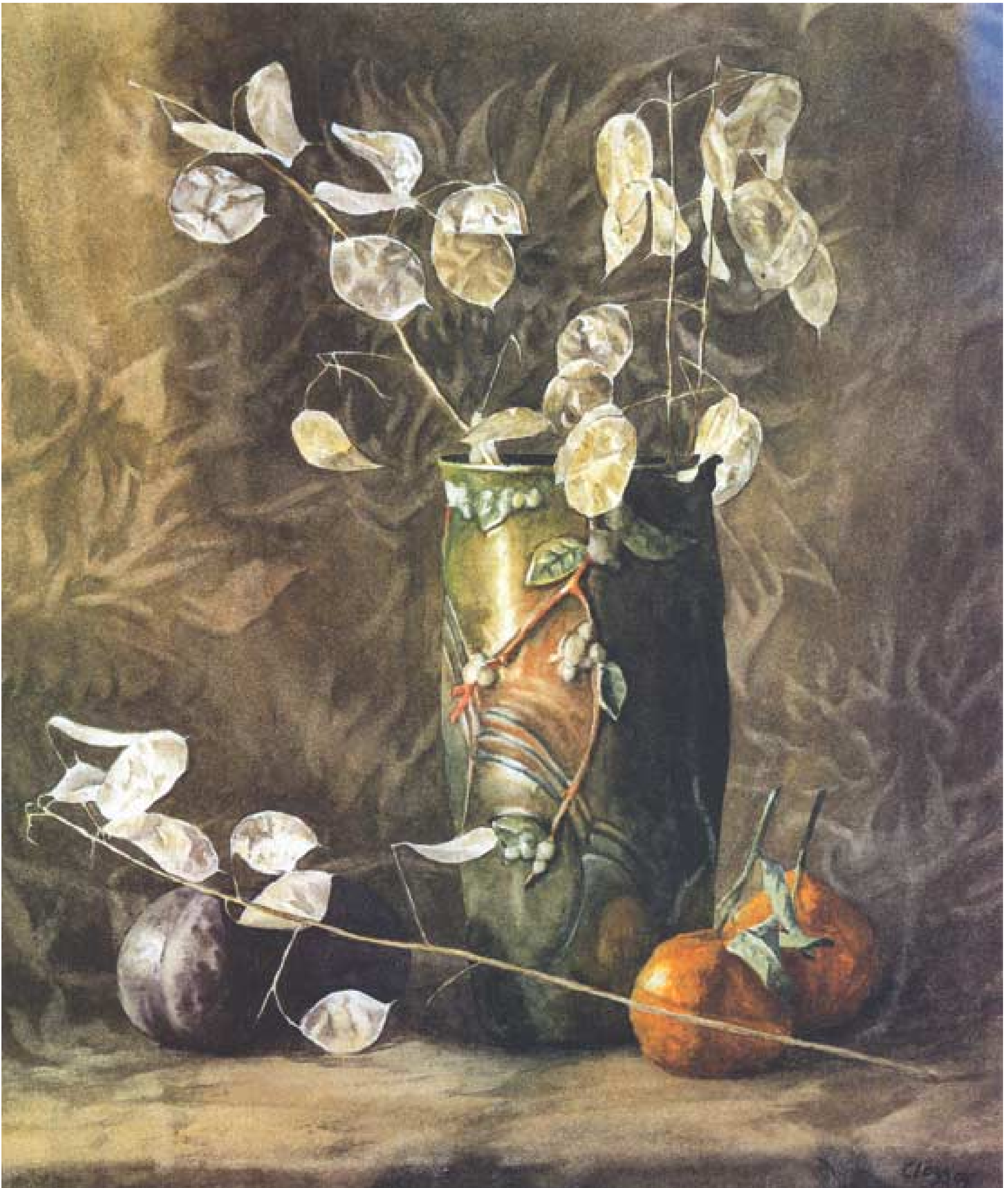


The Charge of the New

This Roseville vase actually has a funky flying saucer shaped flange around its lower third, along with two projecting handles. I'd never really considered painting it, but one day the light went on, as I imagined it without those appendages: a classical shape with a terrific glaze and fantastic pattern! This was one of those paintings that are a pure pleasure from start to finish. I'd never painted silver dollars before, and the cloth was a new one I was excited to paint. Essentially, everything was new to me, and I think my pure fascination with the entire ensemble inspired me in Roseville with Silver Dollars (watercolor on paper, 18 x 16).

To everything there is a season

My still lifes are a continuation of my previous work in landscapes. I've always been fascinated by the natural world and by light. There's a distinct quality to the light, just as there's a correspondingly different sensibility, in every season. I paint objects as they appear—in season and life-size. Objects—vases, teapots, etc., and elements like grapes or cherries—tend to recur, but the light differs according to the season. As I paint more and more pictures in series, each painting becomes a variation on a theme. Time and its nuances are part of the meaning of the work.

I love where my wife Kat and I live in Spokane, Washington, because there are four distinct seasons and the summer is long—a good growing season. I don't always paint flowers and fruits that I grow, but I certainly prefer to. Recently I started grape vines around a pergola so that in a few years I'll be able to paint grapes the way I'd like to—not from the supermarket but as they grow, with leaves, etc. I'm modeling my garden toward the subject matter I want to paint. Right now we have 18 beds of veggies and annuals, as well as numerous, large beds of perennials. The rose hips, buckeyes, and silver dollars that recur in my work come straight from my yard. My studio is filled with branches and other natural elements that I save.

Once I've arranged the elements of the still life, I feel a commitment to paint what is before me—not prettying or changing it. To do a full sheet transparent watercolor can take me five days; if the backdrop is complex, it can perhaps take seven of eight days. Time becomes a factor, because changes occur over time: the plums start to rot and the blossoms fall from the stem. I try to paint the items that will fade first, but sometimes I record some aspects of the prospect of decay. Following the seasons, growing my own flowers and fruits, and above all always working from life keep me honest. And the transitory nature of certain subjects—wild roses, for example, excites me for the brief period during which I can capture them.

The Colors of the Earth

The colors I favor, perhaps as an outgrowth of my landscape days, are earth colors: siennas, golds, subtle greens. I think an artist has to work with colors that he feels comfortable with; I once used as a backdrop a wild Hawaiian print whose hues were almost fluorescent. The painting was interesting, and it sold right away, but it wasn't me. I use only the most permanent colors from Holbein, Daniel Smith and Graham. I paint in transparent colors so that they look opaque and more opaque colors so that they're transparent. I occasionally use three opaque colors: Naples yellow, cerulean blue and nicked titantate yellow; the last especially changes the body of a wash and the way it lies.

In addition to those opaque colors, my palette usually contains about 20 transparent colors: nickel azo yellow, cadmium yellow, gamboges, permanent orange, yellow ochre, raw sienna, burnt sienna, Indian red, Mars violet, cadmium red light, cadmium red, quinacridone gold, quinacridone burnt orange, quinacridone red, quinacridone rose, quinacridone violet, quinacridone magenta (I love the intensity of quinacridone colors!), carbazole violet, cobalt blue, phthalo blue (I use this to mix greens). My kind of work demands kolinsky sable rounds (#4-12) and one and two inch flats for broader passages.

Elegance and Ardor

In Dutch still lifes from the 16th and 17th century, the emphasis is on abundance—the plenty of a prosperous, middle class life. The prosperity, however, has an edge, for the viewer often senses that a feast has been accidentally interrupted: the bread is broken, the lemon half-peeled, the wine spilled. In the 20th century, American artists like William Bailey have concentrated on the ascetic, formal beauty of humble objects arranged in sequence on a flat plane. Donald Clegg paints still lifes that are lush and lyrical, the objects are often elegant, and yet he considers himself a realist. The artist explains: "I like working with what's in front of me. My paintings have a staged feel, but the point of view is intimate. They originate from close observation of real (albeit beautiful) elements in real time."

—Maureen Bloomfield

The importance of the background

Many artists make a mistake in putting all the emphasis on the foreground. I pay at least as much attention to the backdrop as I do to the actual elements. It's exciting for me to shift my focus from the careful attention required to paint cherries or glass to a different challenge. To paint the background, I have to switch

gars and think abstractly. The background creates the context; it imbues the elements with an atmosphere. The cast shadow on a wall, the repetition of a pattern—every subtle element is crucial to the effect. For me, a good backdrop serves two functions: it's beautiful ad it relates visually to the subjects in the foreground. In a way, the landscape has never really left my work. I want my backgrounds to have the same kind of light, depth and visual appeal of a good landscape. It's not a huge stretch to see my backdrop cloths as a kind of patterned sky or vista of rolling hills. The light blazing through a vase is simply the sun brought indoors.

I'm faithful to the reality of the elements in the foreground, but for the background I allow myself a great deal of latitude. The background complements and it's also a supplement. The light reads from left to right, with the more intense light on the left. There's a related movement from warm to cool, which I exaggerate. When I work on a full sheet the changes involved in a 30-inch space don't seem that dramatic, so I observe what the light is like across a five-foot span and paint that. Warm and cool notes are everything in a good painting. Whether I have a simple cast shadow or a full cloth background, there's nearly always a subtle movement from warm to cool from left to right. I also love to emphasize the interplay between complementary warm/cool notes within the elements of the composition. For example, the Snowberry pattern Roseville vases we have in our collection exhibit a lovely change in glaze from red-orange (warm) to green (cool). Green stems and leaves are an obvious complement to an assortment of fruits and flowers. Remember that "warm" and "cool" are relational properties that are affected by surrounding hues. For example, green is cool compared to red but warmer than blue.

When I arrange the elements in the set-up, I think in terms of the composition: primary shapes and placement. For the backdrop, I think in terms of repetition—of patterns, motifs, folds. A fold in the backdrop might be like a high note in a symphony—the "ting!" of a triangle, a small but essential element that completes the work.

Controlling the Light and Paint

My studio has natural northern light supplied by skylight and windows. I have blinds over the skylights because the temperature of north light stays the same but the intensity doesn't. I'm always cranking the shade up and down. The northern light is sometimes too soft to provide drama, so I focus a supplemental light on my shelf. Light is a huge part of composing a picture. Sometimes I'll block the lamp to accentuate the cast shadows.

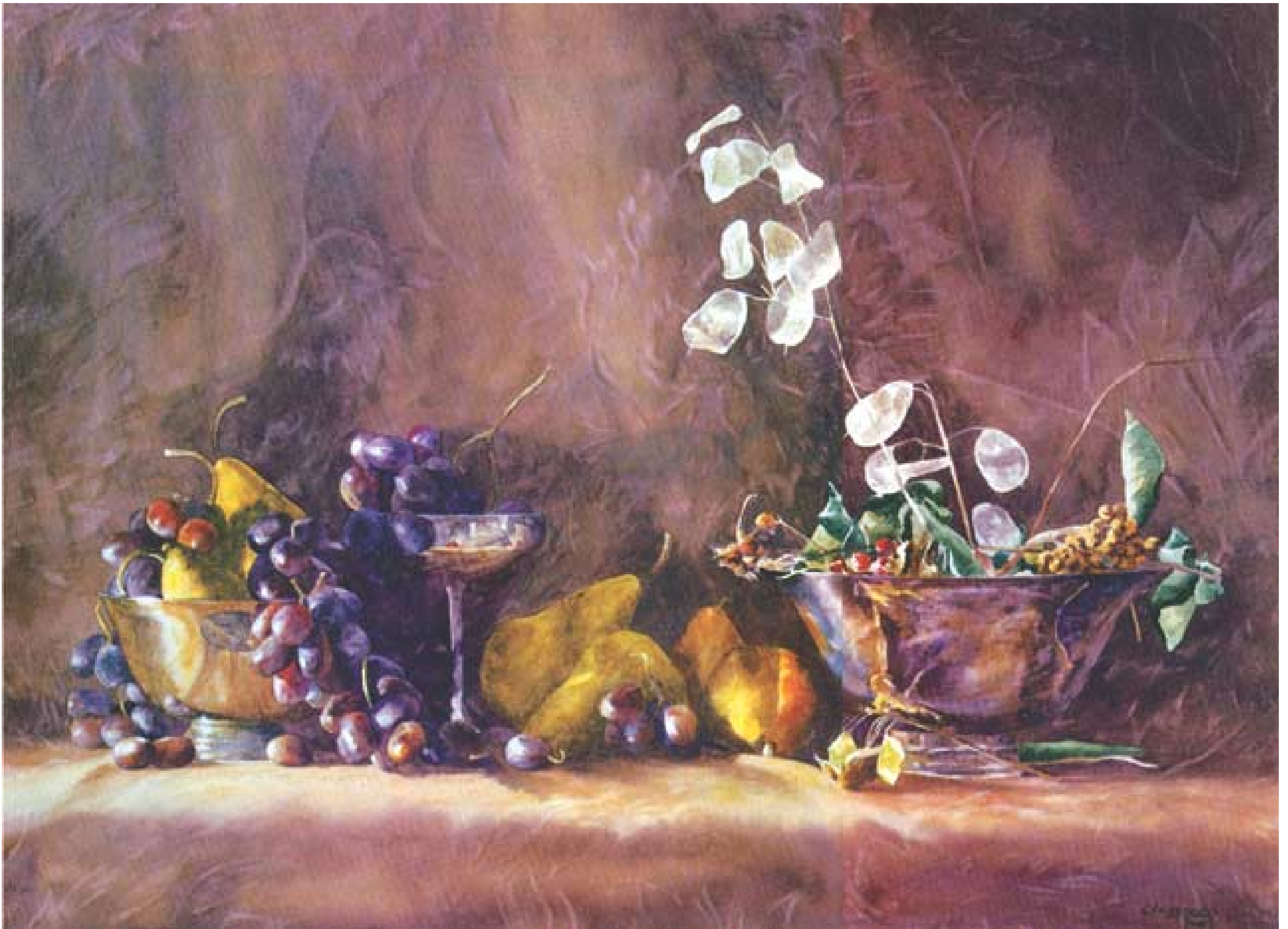
If you want real control and you're working wet-into-wet, you have to work flat. Sometimes I'll pick up the paper and move it to encourage the paint's running, but wild drips and runs aren't art of my aesthetic. I work on a 40 x 60-inch table that's slightly angled. I use cigar boxes to change the height at times—depending on how I want the paint to move or not move. I like Strathmore Aquarius paper, 80-lb. that's composed of both natural and synthetic fibers, because you don't have to stretch it. I just tape this paper down and start. I always work life-size. I'm an untricky painter. I don't use masks, because I hate the resulting edge quality.

I paint the foreground in traditional ways—wet-into-dry and wet-into-wet, but well-controlled in either case. The backgrounds I rarley paint directly; instead I glaze. Lots of glazing, maybe 10 layers, develop color and value modulations. The substratae give me a foundation. If it's a cloth backdrop I usually paint half of the background first, then begin developing the pattern by lifting—using a brush with clear water to "draw" the pattern, then using a clean paper towel laid on top and gently rubbed. I create depth by placing subtle accents around the edges. Gradually, a brocade appears. Once the background is well established, I eave it alone until I've completely finished the foreground elements. Since everything in a composition is interrelated, completing the foreground often suggests the need for further refinements to the background

Composition is Key

It sometimes takes me longer to arrange the elements of the set-up that it does to paint the painting. A good composition has movement—even in a till life, when all the objects are static. I always paint while standing, and with my board in front of me on the table. I'm about six feet away from the arrangement. From that distance, I see a collection of beautiful shapes, but not excessive detail. I'm not after photo-realism. I try, in the arrangement itself, to achieve a balance of shape, color and value before I even think about beginning my drawing. If it's not right no the shelf, it won't be in the painting. Once I've got the arrangement right, I do a pretty accurate drawing on the Strathmore Aquarius paper, to get the placement down.

Drawing symmetrical object—bowls, teapots, vases, etc., is as tough as drawing portraits, where you don't even have to worry about bilateral symmetry. I draw a vertical line halfway across those shapes (bowls, vases, etc.) in order to gauge how each side is match



The Long Winter

Wintertime compositions are generally less frenetically paced for me. I often paint dried twigs, berries, solver dollars, etc.—things that won't decay—along with a more restricted choice of fruits from the market. Over a period of time, one of my silver bowls filled up with leftover subject matter, flotsam, if you will. I liked the idea of pairing its random beauty with more traditional fare. The patterns and shadows on the backdrop interact with the objects in Still Life with Studio Flotsam (watercolor on paper, 22 x 30), so that there's a restless ambiguity between the fore, middle and backgrounds. Attention to the backdrop ensures that a still life compels the viewer's interest, even though the elements are static—fixed and still.

ing; sometimes I measure vertically, as well. If the sides are equal horizontally from the center and vertically from the bottom, the shape is symmetrically correct, at least.

Pencil lines don't fit with the illusion of naturalism, so I mostly erase them before beginning to paint, leaving just a trace as a guide. I use a very soft (4B) fine lead pencil for drawing, so it's easy to erase using a kneaded eraser. Increasingly, I paint many elements directly, perhaps only drawing a few shapes to make sure the scale and positioning are right. When I'm working well, I'm painting and drawing at the same time.

The backdrops are integral and have to be related—in visual terms—to the elements of the set-up. The fabric's decorative forms, its patterns and whorls, complement the lines and forms of the elements. I also arrange the fabric's folds; they further contribute to the visual rhythms. Every part of the composition relates to and is repeated by another part.

Nothing is accidental

My paintings look elegant because it is obvious the composition is contrived: these beautiful elements are arranged primarily because they are even more beautiful together. I'm not trying to duplicate everyday reality; I'm painting the real as realistically as I can—and the contradiction is that the real is ideal—not shabby or dowdy, but gorgeous. The painting then is purely a visual experience. The viewer is pleased that the elements are beautiful and beautifully arranged.

Donald Clegg Delivers a Pep-Talk

Prior to age 23 I'd never drawn, never painted, had no interest in art and had only been to a museum once or twice. I was heavy into math and science. I was managing a restaurant ad the owner's brother, Stan Miller, was a local artist I became friends with. Stan invited me to his class and started me with an "Is it horizontal, vertical, or something in between?" exercise. I was quickly attracted by the fact that this was a learnable skill, and Stan gave me strong fundamentals. I took his class a couple of times a week for the next two years.

You couldn't know less than what I knew! I had to learn everything. I had to struggle. Relentlessly cheerful and naively optimistic, I worked my way through the hundreds of paintings it took to acquire even a degree of skill. As Richard Schmid says, "Talent is what you're said to have after you acquire skill." Don't worry about not having it; just go about achieving it.

Perhaps you're just starting out and yet you love watercolor. Watercolor is so difficult a medium that the inexperienced painter may despair of ever achieving proficiency. While you're trying to figure it out, make sure your tools don't stand in the way of your success. You should use good paper and good brushes, whether sable or synthetic, and artists' grade paints. If you'd like to see how I organize and manages my palette, check out www.watercolor-magic.com/cleggpalette.html.

An Artist is part of the arrangement

One and off through 1997, the year I turned 40, I pondered what my self-portrait at that age might look like. This composition surfaced in an unusual manner. I had just finished two paintings still taped to their boards, and the pears on the mantle (where I set all this up) were ripening but still paintable. The cloth backdrop relates to the cloths in the finished paintings, as well as Leonardo's studies in drapery. Essentially, I see myself (as an artist) bridging the gap between the flat shapes associated with some aspects of Modernism and the real items that could represent Classicism in Self-Portrait at Forty (watercolor on paper, 16 x 24).

White Lilacs with Cherries: A Demonstration

1 *The set-up. This photo of the arrangement shows how differently the camera sees than I do. There's little here that would attract the painter in me, but the actual experience was, thankfully, quite different. My set-up approach is mundane: I tape the backdrop, position matboard to modify the light and shadow, and turn on a small lamp. In my mind's eye, however, something more elegant emerges.*

2 *To get the placement of the objects down, I drew with a soft (4B pencil on Strathmore paper. The vertical pencil line through the glass was an aid to drawing it symmetrically. After I'd blocked in the overall shape of each lilac's cluster; I painted the petals directly, with no preliminary drawing, using a small #4 round, wet into dry, without too much water. The leaves I painted wet-into-wet.*

3 *I begin the cherries by blocking in the basic color and value, painting wet-into-dry, followed by wet-into-wet. I softened some edges by touching them with a clean, slightly damp brush. Then I laid a clean paper towel on top and rubbed its surface lightly. To paint the glass I started with a wash to tone the paper. The lightest highlights would be the white of the paper. Using my clear water-brush-towel method again, I lifted the etched lines In the glass.*

4 *Some of the best painting you can do occurs not on the paper but between the ears. After a break, I reconsidered the maroon cloth. After laying a sheet of glass over the painting and using acrylics to paint a green background right on the glass, I decide to change fabrics. I knew a subdued green-gray would accent the cherries. Working wet-into-wet very carefully around the negative shapes of the outermost lilac petals, I started the background.*

5 I decide the light through the vase didn't suit the quieter mood I saw emerging, so I painted it out. I applied multiple washes, wet-into-wet and scrubbed firmly into the paper; they began to raise the nap of the paper a bit, which aids in creating the illusion of cloth. Painting around the negative shapes, I drew the pattern with my brush—using a #5 round for smaller areas and sometimes a #10. Small touches of paint to the edges of the pattern developed a brocade effect. Then I applied several glazes to adjust the temperatures.

6 I've waited to paint the vase until the background was completely finished (it took me about eight hours), since I knew it would be painted primarily wet-into-wet—in one shot, I hoped. I couldn't do this accurately without knowing the final color-value of the cloth! The stem of the glass was painted wet-into-dry with a couple of passes. Finally, I knocked off the shelf in one pass, wet-into-wet, with a few very light wet into dry strokes over the top mainly to provide purely abstract movement and visual interest.

So much depends on the backdrop

In White Lilacs with Cherries (watercolor on paper, 17 x 18) the color of the backdrop provides a neutral foil for the strong contrast of red and white. The subtle patterns on the cloth are visual echoes to the forms of the lilacs and the leaves. This is a painting I hated to part with.