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Art Works
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Artist profile

Lynn Boggess: Painting the natural way

By Maryann Franklin

Lynn Boggess's paintings are landscapes, often large, and very unusual. There is very little sky in them, as a rule, because they focus on the foreground, the natural world at your feet. You feel as if you could step into his paintings, and thereby into that natural world.

For me, one of the joys of living in West Virginia is the opportunity to experience nature and wilderness on such vast scale so intimately. But each of us experiences it, "sees" it, in our own way. It's nearly impossible to get someone to see through your eyes. Lynn Boggess can do this. He has found a way to share his experience of nature with us. He has found a way to let us look through his eyes.

Boggess began his artistic career early. He grew up on a farm near Parkersburg. "I loved nature," he said. "I liked hunting, fishing, hiking." Those were his roots.

He got his first real introduction to the world of art in a school art class, and did his first painting in sixth grade. By ninth grade, he had done 15 major landscapes. At the time, he worked with acrylic paints. "That's when I became an artist," he said, "in high school."

Boggess matured as a studio painter while in college at Fairmont State, where he now teaches. "I teach with some of the same professors who taught me," he said. "I teach studio drawing and painting. I've taught a lot of different things."

In those days, his work became more contemporary and moved toward the abstract. In graduate school, at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, he became more progressive, elitist, still abstract. "I worked through a number of styles since then," he said. "It was just recently, in about 2000, that I went back to nature — back to my roots. I started all over from scratch. By this time, my traditional landscapes had begun to feel bracketed, settled, worn

out, dry. I didn't want to allow myself to get caught up in the middle of something that wasn't true. I wanted to approach my painting from a different angle, so it could become new again."

Boggess began the journey back to his artistic roots by choosing to paint in the out-of-doors — by really going back to nature. He is one of the few landscape artists these days who works outside almost exclusively. "The most basic thing in art is nature," he said. "It is the source of all form."

Boggess describes his current style as "high realism." "Fine art should be personal, not just communication. It should be about experience," Boggess said. "And what the artist produces correlates directly to what was going on with him while he produced it."

Besides painting outdoors, Boggess has accentuated realism by adding a tactile element to his work. This he does by using thick Windsor-Newton oil paints, with no mediums and no drying agents, and applying them raw, right out of the tube, mixing colors on the canvas as he paints.

Boggess never touches a paint brush. This artist's tools consist of trowels in various sizes. The idea of using trowels came to Boggess one day while he was fixing his roof. After trying the trowel method for a few minutes, he was hooked, and knew he had found the breakthrough he was seeking.

Creating art exclusively in the out-of-doors, during all seasons, is definitely a challenge. Many of his works are snow scenes. "Obviously, winter is the most difficult season to paint because I have to face the challenge of the cold temperatures," he noted. One of his biggest problems has been "freezing toes," which limits the amount of time he can work in the cold without a break.

"When you paint on location, there are a whole lot of things to get together" and transport — not to mention camping gear, if the painting is large enough that it will take more than a day to complete. Boggess has used his carpentry skills to construct a scaffold as an easel, a specially designed wooden box that will allow him to move the painting while it's still wet, and a trailer designed specifically to transport the paintings. "There are a lot of good reasons to stay in the studio," he said. "There's only one to go out — the experience."

That last statement speaks volumes about his attitude toward his art in general. Boggess doesn't know of any one else who has his unique style. "High realism is what sets me apart from other artists. I don't live in an abstract world. Expressionism is the hallmark of modern painting. Light and shadow come into play in responding to what you're looking at. Light is the main issue, then space, color, texture.

"Some say my style is vague, impressionistic. I

Boggess shares his painting style and techniques with students from Fairmont State College.



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rational. "Authenticity comes about with immediacy," he said. "It comes from the subconscious, which has access to integrity. Later, when I add the detail, I work slowly and methodically."

On the second day he'll complete the painting, and on the third he'll do touch-ups and refinements. Yet some of his large paintings can essentially be completed in one day's time. As with any outdoor activity, weather is always an issue. "It's actually better for me when there's a slight overcast, because the light is more consistent," said Boggess. "I need controlled light so I'm not painting a different painting every two hours."

"No one gets into the arts to teach it," said Boggess. And he's no exception. "Teaching is satisfying. It's a job, but you don't need a passion for academia. Academia is a circle that feeds on itself. It's not going anywhere."

"Painting is fun, not work," he continued. "It's pure delight!" For now, teaching pays the bills and art supplements his income. His five-year plan is to make art his means of earning a living. He feels that if things keep progressing as they have been, he may be able to do that.

His first steps in marketing were the hardest, Boggess said. When he submitted his work to Marilyn Cooper of Cooper Gallery in Lewisburg, he was afraid she wouldn't like it and that it wouldn't sell. Instead, his work sells very well, and Cooper has even helped him get into other galleries. "I've sold dozens of paintings I didn't think people would relate to or understand."

He still finds it difficult to price his paintings. "Painting is not a blue collar mentality. You can't just price according to size or how long it takes to do a painting. You need to consider the hours spent on paintings before, trying to get the technique right. And when a person gets established, some works are deemed to be better than others."

Boggess expects to continue to grow as an artist within the niche he has found for himself. He explained that when he's working on a painting, and steps down just a few feet, there's a new painting . . . and another . . . and another. "I may never go dry," he said. "The intensity of my work has increased over the last three years. I have more passion, more confidence, more contrast now than ever." I guess that comes with experience.

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"Freezing toes" is the biggest drawback of painting outdoors in winter.



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paint how it feels — the experience of it, not just what it looks like. I try to summarize the essence of the thing. I want the emotional quality, plus the definition of form. Passion is the essence of art. The marriage is a controlled passion, with response to what I'm seeking."

Boggess begins by choosing the composition for his painting and selecting the size. (The paintings range from 13 by 15 inches to a whopping 68 by 80 inches.) He must reorient himself in each season, beginning with small paintings and working his way up to the largest, then going back down in size.

"Each season has a different color and light all its own," he said, "as does each locale and elevation."

He uses only six paint colors — two blues, two reds and two yellows — plus black and white. All other colors are mixed right on the canvas. The largest canvases take several days to complete, and must be painted from a modified scaffold Boggess builds on site for each painting. It takes almost a day just to set up and get the base coat and outline done.

Boggess begins with the background and works to the middle, and finally the foreground, then reverses the order, adding detail as he goes. He speeds through the beginning process, trying to bypass the