

## Meet the Artist, Alice Struck

### My Journey in Art

My earliest memories as a child are of a happy life in an upper flat in Milwaukee. My two younger sisters and I had a playroom in an alcove near the upstairs porch, well stocked with paper, crayons, scissors and paste. We also had parents who read to us. I remember those years as a time filled with imagination, fantasy, and the power of creating from scratch. We invented games, storybooks, pictures and hundreds of new outfits for our paper dolls— enough to cover the floors of all of our bedrooms. When I started kindergarten, a big part of the bravado of being the oldest (and therefore, the leader) evaporated as I was discovered to have a significant hearing loss. Not hearing what was going on separated me from the other children and led to being treated differently by the teachers. Some of them treated me as if I could not understand anything, while others spoke in that high falsetto voice one uses with the very impaired.

But I had a secret skill. I could draw, even as a child. This became my ticket to belong, to be respected and also to provide the comfort to transcend loneliness, the way to mobilize great plans and create inner meaning, to fly over the chasm. Creating has been the magic talisman throughout my whole life. When I was seven, our family moved to Wauwatosa. I was also enrolled in Saturday classes at the Layton School of Art, which was on the shore of Lake Michigan. I rode alone on the rapid transit train, a scary but exciting trip downtown. The students sketched with charcoal on downtown city streets, painted still lifes in cluttered studios that smelled like turpentine and drew from nude models. I loved it. I was introduced to some of the pioneers of Wisconsin artists; Lawrence Rathack, Robert von Neumann, Dorothy Meredith and Earl Gessert.

I survived high school at Wauwatosa High School reading voraciously, entering the Scholastic Calendar Art Competitions, taking dancing and acrobatic classes. After graduation, I decided to go to college at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee instead of an art school, in order to earn a degree. My goal at 18 was to become a fashion illustrator and move to New York.

On the first day of classes at UW-M, our instructor, sculptor Ted Kraynik, gave an introduction to a life in art that I will never forget, and which was life changing. He spoke of the breadth of envisioning art in infinite ways, not just as drawing the latest fad on models in fashionable clothes. He said that we should value our life work in art as valuable as that of a doctor, scientist, lawyer or president. I still did not know what I was going to do with an education in art, but I no longer wanted to draw fashion models. The freedom of college life was wonderful; I became a social butterfly, joined a sorority, went to mixers with fraternity men, parties and other social events. I also loved all of my art courses in oil painting, sculpture, design, ceramics, and creative writing. I met and was “pinned” to a fraternity man. He graduated a year before I did. We got married and moved to Missouri where he served his ROTC requirement.

When we returned home, I wanted to finish my degree at UW-M. I decided to earn a degree in education so that I could get a job. However, the administrators decided that I could not teach because I could not hear well enough. I was not accepted into the School of Education, so I changed my major and graduated with a B. A. degree in Fine Art instead, thinking that I would be able to teach in a college or system that was not governed by public school rules. Instead, I became pregnant; we welcomed our daughter Linda into the family. I became a stay-at-home mom. We moved to flat in Milwaukee near Sherman Park, where our son Michael was born, then to a house in Mequon, where our son Andrew was born. My art changed along with my life. I no longer painted 6 by 8 foot abstract oil paintings in the attic, or nudes, or sculptures. But I did create. I painted portraits of my children, designed and sewed clothes

for my daughter and her dolls, began using pastels and watercolors. I gave away most of my artwork for gifts. I was an active Sunday School teacher, Cub Scout and Girl Scout leader and neighborhood organizer of children's activities.

One day, I decided to apply to the Cedarburg Artists Guild and was accepted. Then I was asked to have a booth at the Audubon Art Fair at the Schlitz Audubon Center. I had no display units, no inventory, no tent and no experience. But in two weeks, I was ready. My father built pegboard and wood panels (that weighed a ton and had to be transported on top of the car), and I scrounged up all the loose artwork I could find from my college days. The next year I became their Featured Artist. I also began entering other shows and fairs in Cedarburg, Wauwatosa and Madison. I was juried into in the Wisconsin Watercolor Society. I painted exclusively with watercolors then and my subjects were nature-oriented because of the Audubon Nature Art Fair criteria. As the years passed, I gradually moved into the professional arena, winning awards, corporate patrons, entering competitions and learning the marketing that artists today need to do. Working artists are familiar with the fast pace of changes in the last decade, from leather portfolios to digital portfolios and websites, from photos to slides to online images, from carrying paintings to a gallery to using Zapplication or Cafe' platforms.

In the midst of this, I became divorced and had to figure out how to survive as a single parent. I stayed in the home we had lived in for 25 years and took several full time jobs, planning to build up my art career into a sustaining income. The reality of my new situation produced two main forces that shaped the next 25 years: First, I grew to resent the pressure to create on demand at a pace that left no time to develop paintings to a satisfactory conclusion; Second, I became aware of a social need to help others. On a Sunday morning, I opened the Milwaukee Journal to a front page article about a new graduate art therapy program at Mount Mary College. Within a few days, I lined up my undergraduate transcripts, references, portfolio, letter of application and entrance fee. I was accepted into the first group of the program. I learned a new vocabulary, a new way to use art, and developed close relationships with people who were much younger than I was. I job hunted for internships. I gave away most of my art supplies and matboard, thinking I needed to focus on my new career. I re-invented myself. In three years I graduated with a Masters degree in Art Therapy, went on to teach several adjunct courses at Marian College in Fond du Lac and Mount Mary, served as president of the Wisconsin Art Therapy Association, became Board Certified, and began a full time job in a health care center as an art therapist.

But I missed creating my own artwork in the professional world. As an art therapist, I accept and help other people to create according to their needs. But as an artist, I can create according to my needs, choose my own themes and techniques. I began entering art shows again, selling paintings and teaching painting at the Cedarburg Cultural Center. My personal work helps me guide clients in their first hand experience, since I can only lead where I go myself. I have been both an art therapist and an artist for 31 years.

### **Why I Chose Watercolor As my Favored Medium**

Although I majored in oil painting at UW-M, I switched mediums when I went public as an artist; first, to keep toxic chemicals away from my young children, then to establish a body of work that is coherent, consistent and shows discipline towards a personal style. I enjoy all media, but watercolor is my professional medium. It is an eloquent metaphor for life: I cannot have complete control of everything. I set the stage, but then must honor the nature of the medium as it runs, drips, feathers, crawls, granulates and explodes into life. Watercolors are spontaneous, transparent and uncontrived. And like life, watercolor produces events I cannot control. Submission in the face of conflict often leads me to greater understanding, compassion and a trust in the work that is not gained in any other way.

### **Choosing Subjects and Maintaining Motivation**

My subjects come from my first hand experience, from seeing, feeling and being present. I paint my everyday surroundings, scenes throughout Ozaukee County, urban landscapes, scenes from trips and family vacations in Door County. I also enjoy portrait painting. During the pandemic quarantine, I was forced to visit residents in their rooms one by one, and discovered the joy of making portraits which captured their personalities. Although these are not for sale, the mutual satisfaction we gained from being in such a respectful, intimate relationship that honored both their lives and my skills was truly gratifying. Motivation is the direct result of the artists' thoughts, feelings, unresolved problems, curiosity and gratitude, which comes from within, not from the outside in. I also believe that the way we express ourselves is in an unconsciously encrypted format. It isn't an obvious object, or style, it may contain something of the outer world, but also elements of individual memories or feelings that cannot be put into words. This heuristic validation, the painting telling me something important, beautiful, interesting or meaningful, is my motivation for the next painting. I hope that viewers of my artwork come away from it with an emotional connection, not only from the recognition of a place portrayed but of the beauty of the fluidity and uncontrived spontaneity of the watercolors.