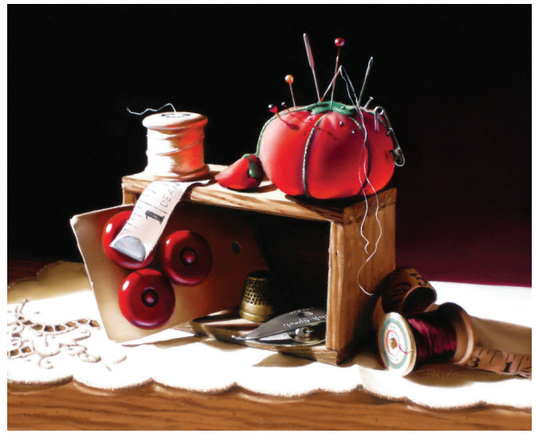
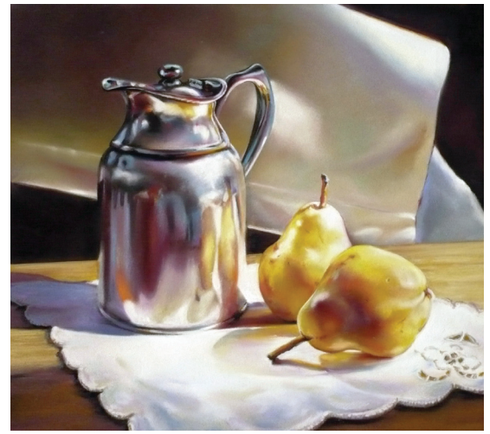
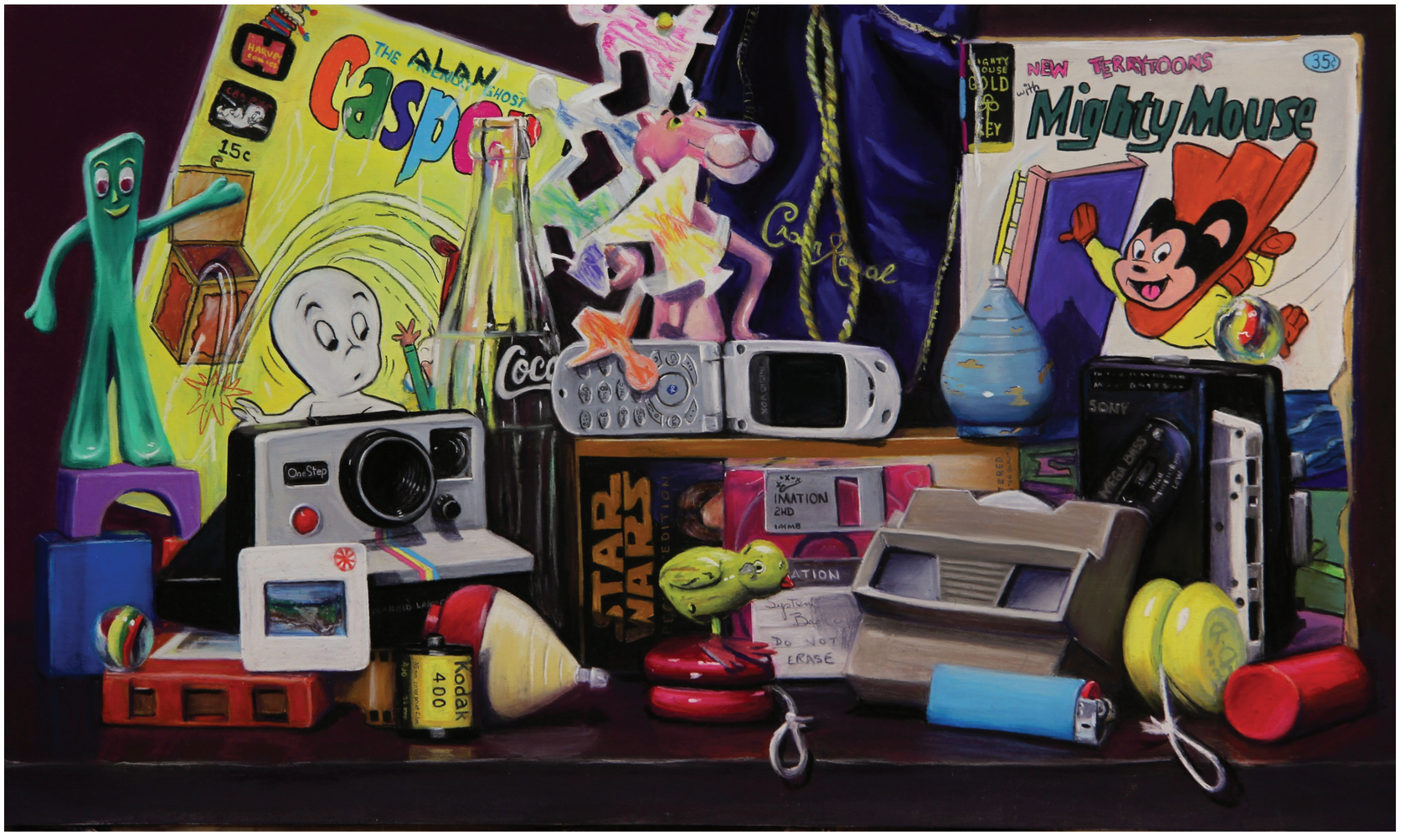
There's Still "Life" In Still Life

Three Canadian still life masters prove the genre is ever evolving to meet new needs, cultures and challenges.

BY RUTH RODGERS







WHAT'S THE APPEAL OF STILL LIFE PAINTING? The painting of inanimate objects dates back thousands of years. Egyptians made offerings to the gods with tomb paintings of food. Roman mosaics in the ruins of Pompeii included objects rendered with some sophistication. And by the 1500s, the discovery of perspective and the increased availability of pigments enabled painters to depict objects in a manner that appeared dimensional, while still life painters in Northern Europe celebrated the burgeoning awareness of the natural world with extravagant arrangements of flowers and fruit.

Seventeeth-century vanitas paintings illustrate the Bible's admonition not to overvalue earthly riches (Ecclesiastes 1:2), reminding viewers of life's brevity through the use of timepieces, skulls, blown-out candles and decaying fruit. In contrast, the Impressionists expressed appreciation for the abundance of life. Who could misread the joy communicated by Van Gogh, Renoir and Monet with their radiant flowers?

Many iconic artists developed their artistic styles through the painting of still life subjects. Cézanne's bowls of fruit reveal his perspective, color and brush-handling explorations; Picasso's still life works chronicle his progression from realism through cubism to abstraction.

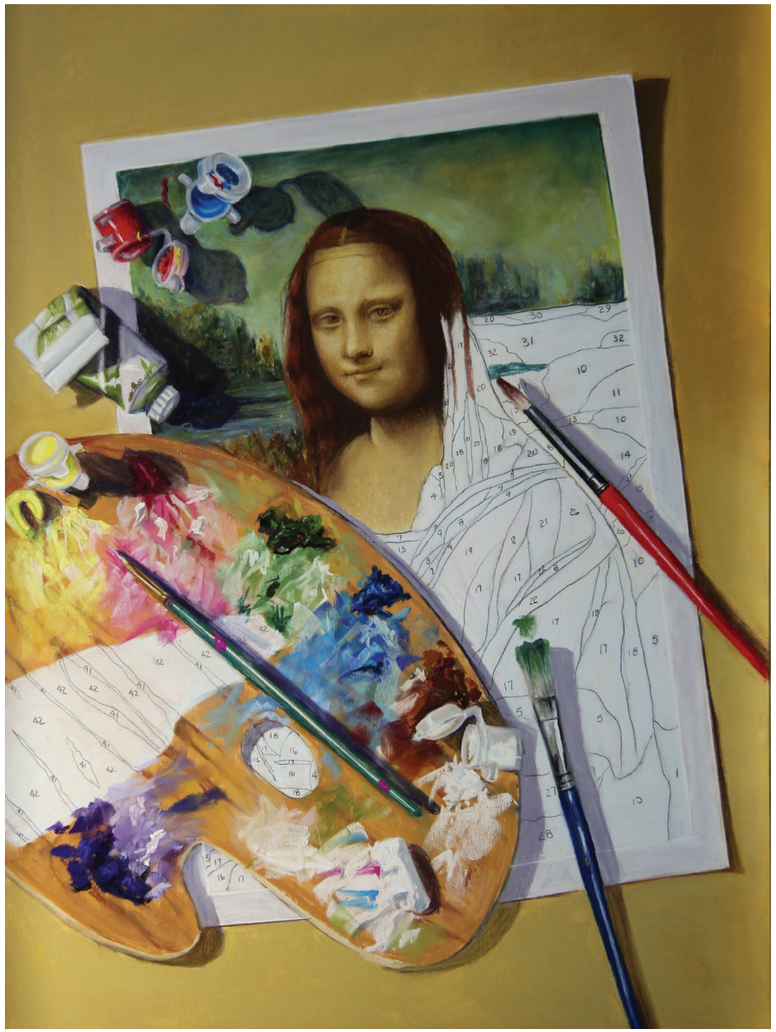
Artists continue to paint still life objects as a way to stretch their skills. In the following pages, we explore the work of three contemporary Canadian master painters, examining why they find the genre so satisfying.

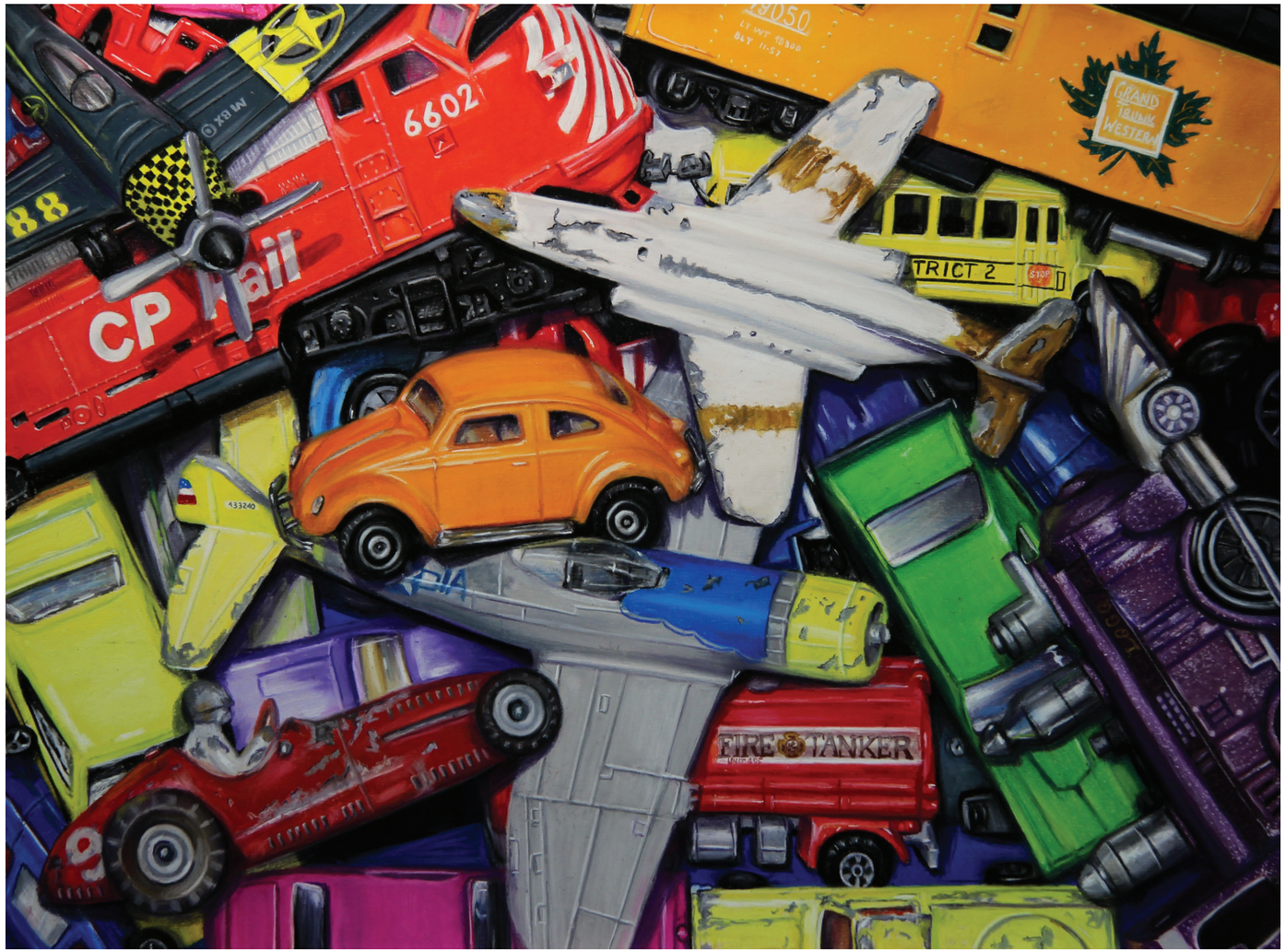
Clockwise:

Sewing Box in Reds (11x13½) by Dianna Ponting

Sterling Pears (12x12) by Roberta Combs

Blast From the Past (14x24) by Kathy Hildebrandt





The Making of Mona (24x18)

Planes, Trains and Automobiles (right; 18x24)

Kathy Hildebrandt

Kathy Hildebrandt, of Calgary, Alberta, evokes smiles of nostalgia with her still life compositions of familiar childhood objects. Vintage games, toys and even food packages are rendered meticulously in a contemporary, realistic style.

Perhaps it's Hildebrandt's former career as a certified management accountant that gives her the patience and perseverance to render such detailed objects in all their retro glory. She began almost 20 years ago as an oil landscape painter, but this self-taught artist really hit her stride when she began working in pastel. She loves the medium's vibrancy, immediacy and ability to render a wide variety of textures.

Hildebrandt begins the creative process with a title, often a pun, and has generated about 500 potential painting titles. Once she's chosen a title, she collects inspiration in a range of textures and shapes—anything from magazine covers to old master paintings. Applying the principle of "variety with repetition," she arranges the objects in overall lighting (rather than strong, directional lighting). She creates a multitude of heights and depths by overlapping objects, and then takes photos. She continues to add, subtract or move items until she's got a winning composition.

Some of Hildebrandt's best-known works take a bird's-eye view, which makes establishing depth and focal points especially challenging, but also helps the artist create a trompe l'oeil effect. At first glance, her 2017 International Association of Pastel Societies Master Circle award-winning piece, *The Making of Mona* (opposite), appears to depict a palette and brushes resting on a half-finished paint-by-number of the *Mona Lisa*. But wait—even the palette has an unfinished section marked out by tiny numbers. The artist has played with our perceptions by creating a painting of a painting about painting a painting. Such visual jokes delight Hildebrandt and no doubt serve as motivation during the long creative process; each work takes her about 100 hours to complete.

Hildebrandt focuses on creating realistic surfaces and edges in her work. To ensure accuracy, she draws her final composition on tracing paper and then transfers it to a painting surface, often UART 800. Sometimes she uses watercolor or dissolved pastel for a solid underpainting that eliminates the tiny white background specks she hates seeing in a finished work. Her level of fine detail dictates the use of sharp pastel pencils, but for larger sections, she likes Holbein pastels for their soft but firm texture and crisp edges. She uses softer pastels as a first layer occasionally and then fills in detail with pencils. The finished works are framed without mats, often directly against the glass.

"If you can paint still life," Hildebrandt says, "you can paint anything."

Kathy Hildebrandt (kathyhildebrandt.com) is an award-winning artist who specializes in contemporary realism.

6 TIPS FOR ARRANGING STILL LIFES

BY KATHY HILDEBRANDT

1. Don't set up everything on one dimensional plane. Include objects of different sizes with larger items toward the back to create depth. Or, place items on top of one another to vary heights. Overlap things.

2. Use smaller objects to create balance where needed.

3. Use Blu-tack, string, double-sided tape or paper clips to keep objects in place.

4. Watch out for awkward negative shapes between objects.

5. Use color, value or similar objects to lead the viewer's eye through a composition.

6. Symmetrical shapes, like bottles, need to be symmetrical. If you're having issues getting them right, hide one side behind another object.

Roberta Combs

Roberta Combs, of British Columbia, Canada, loves to haunt thrift stores for great still life items, but she admits that she's not above "shamelessly confiscating" objects that catch her eye in friends' homes. Like a magpie, Combs is attracted to shiny objects, especially glass and metal. While she also excels in painting cityscapes and portraits, the artist keeps coming back to still life compositions because she still finds them challenging. She notes that when drawing man-made items, "close" isn't good enough; still life painting motivates her to push her skills. She paints still life in watercolor, too, but prefers pastel for its luscious color and ability to blend seamlessly. Combs was hooked on pastel the moment she tried it, and still finds it effective and just plain fun.

Whether she chooses a favorite object or newly found objects, photographing her setup is step one. She places the objects outside and photographs the setup from many angles, seeking the patterns of light that will guide the viewer's eye through the composition. She's especially looking for a wide value range to give her paintings drama and snap. Once an image is chosen, thumbnail sketches help her nail down the value plan and determine the best scale for the work.

To ensure the drawing is accurate, Combs renders the composition on paper before transferring it to her favorite Sennelier La Carte support. This allows her to make changes once she sees the composition full size, and provides choice for final placement when transferring on the support. Combs loves Sennelier's textured card for its layering capabilities and because she can blend with her fingers for hours, day after day. "This means that when I'm sipping wine in the evening," Combs says, "I'm not suffering from sore fingers!" Because the vegetable-based grit surface is dissolved by fluid, Combs forgoes an underpainting, choosing instead a colored ground to provide a base tone.

Although she's loyal to one kind of support, Combs is more egalitarian when it comes to her pastels: Holbein, Sennelier, Unison, Ludwig, Townsend—she likes to "give all of them a turn." She's open to experimentation, too, and notes that the recently introduced Richeson soft pastels are new favorites. Of course, her level of detail makes the use of a variety of sharp pastel pencils a must, as well.

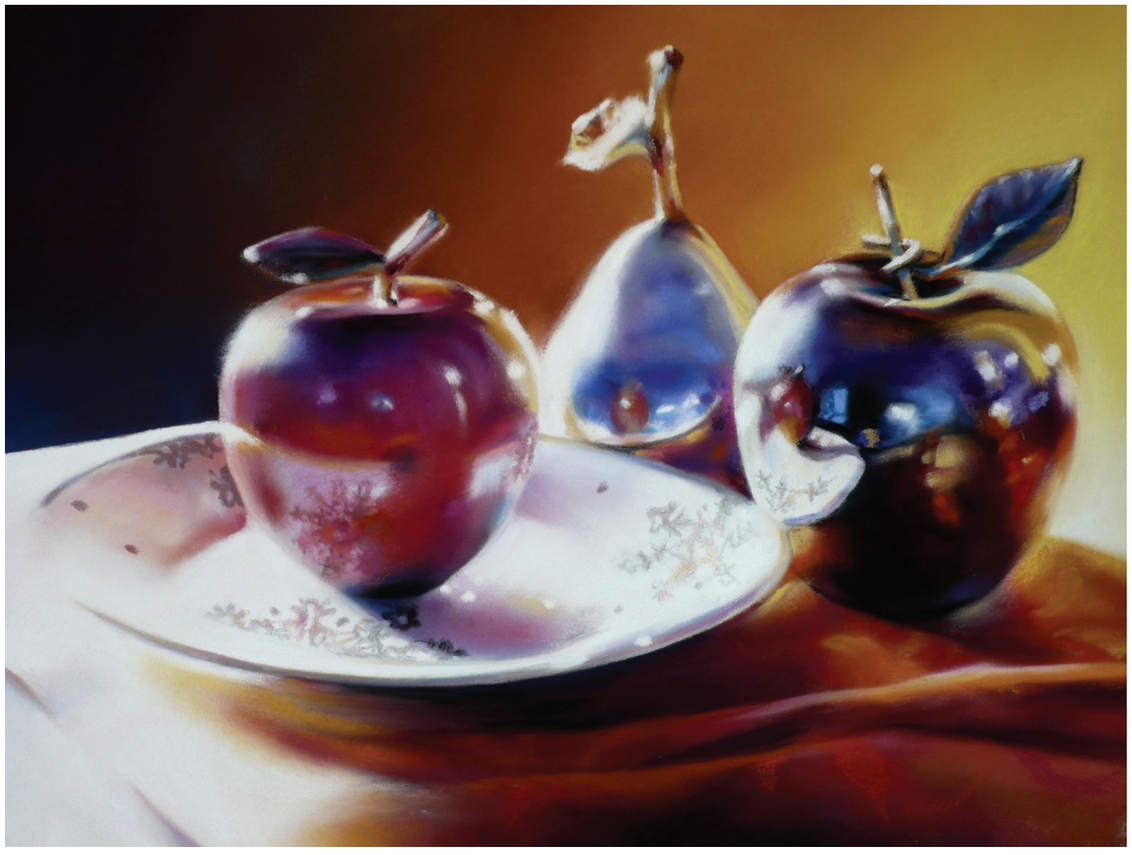
Like many of today's pastel painters, Combs frames her finished works as often without a mat as with; for her, it depends on the individual piece; however, she emphasizes that "how you frame a painting says volumes about how you, the artist, value your work." She adds, "Don't skimp!"

Combs agrees with other still life painters that this is an ever-challenging genre, and encourages beginners not to get discouraged. Remember, she says, to paint as often as you can: "Every hour you paint elevates your level of skill and takes you closer to your artistic goals. Push yourself to achieve a little more with each painting."

Roberta Combs (robertacombs.ca) is the only Canadian to hold the distinction of Master Pastelist in the Pastel Society of America.

One Perfect Pear (opposite; 12x10)

Fifteen Minutes of Fame (11x12)



5 TIPS FOR PAINTING GLASS AND METAL

BY ROBERTA COMBS

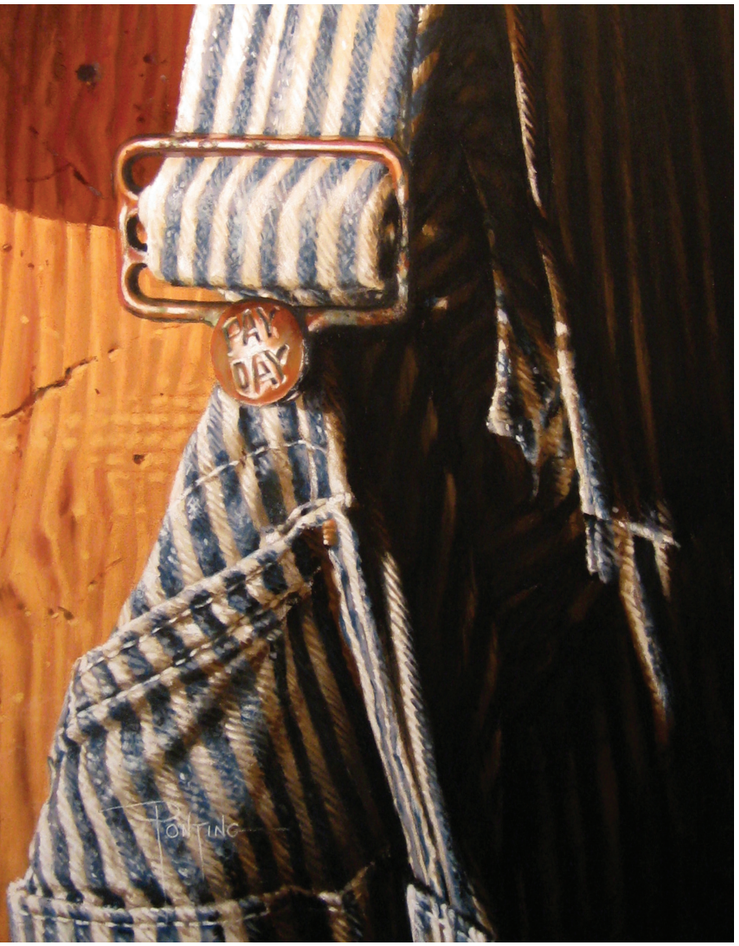
1. Glass and metal items must be painted with perfect symmetry. Turn your painting so you're looking along the central axis of the object, and check for symmetry.

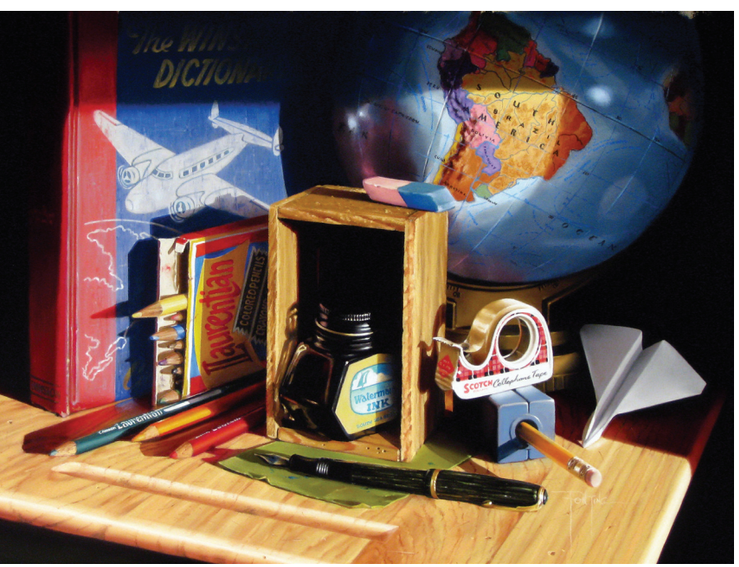
2. Glass items absorb and reflect light. Glass itself can have a variety of tones—from blue to green to brown. Note how this affects the color of the reflections and of objects seen through the glass.

3. Shadows give weight and direction to your composition, and glass objects will cast color into them.

4. Reflections on metal can generate abstract designs, often influenced by the colors of nearby surfaces. These details offset the realistic properties of the painting, so pay careful attention to them.

5. Take your time and paint the shapes and colors you see instead of what you think they should be. Viewing your painting upside down or in a mirror can help you spot inaccuracies. Step back frequently to see if the "illusion" is working.





Dianna Ponting

It's no surprise that both Hildebrandt and Combs studied with Dianna Ponting early in their careers. Ponting is one of Canada's most revered teachers of pastel despite her reserved personality. She's earned many awards for her works of startling realism.

A happy traditionalist, Ponting maintains that she's most comfortable staying "inside the box" rather than striving for "brave new worlds." Indeed, she did a whole series of old-time school objects set up in and around actual wooden boxes. Her favorite objects are antiques that celebrate bygone times. She admits that these subjects have become a "hard sell," because the folks who most appreciate them are downsizing, but Ponting continues to paint them "for love, if not for money." She's keen to render almost anything that challenges her: a plump pincushion, a pair of cotton ticking overalls, or the matte finish of an eggshell in a swirl of satin fabric.

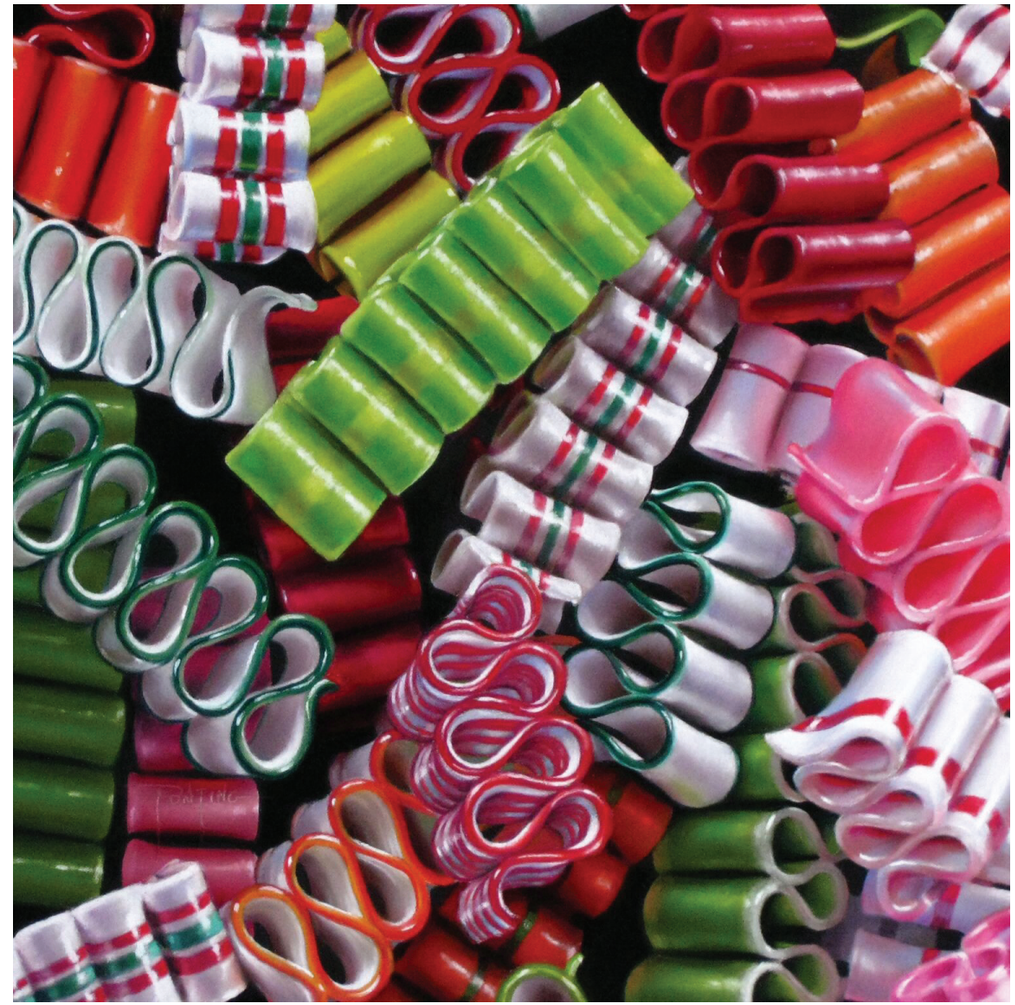
Ponting adores the stability of pastel, where "what you lay down is what you get," and the fact that she can paint successfully with minimal tools. The small size of still life objects suits her preference for full control over her painting, particularly the lighting. Ponting uses natural and artificial lighting in her setups, employing a turntable to spin the arrangement to assess the possibilities. A single low-angle sidelight often emphasizes the flow of illumination. Over the years, Ponting has collected a variety of backdrop and "floor" options, from luscious velvet draperies to tiled boards, which add a rich layered narrative to her work.

Although she does paint from life at times, Ponting's more-developed works are created from photographs. She'll sometimes use Photoshop in grayscale mode in the value planning stage of her process. Once her drawing of the final composition is complete, she transfers it to her preferred light gray or buff Sennelier La Carte support, and then applies pastel, starting in the top left corner. She completes each section as she moves down and to the right, a process she likens to the "unrolling of a canvas."

Pay Day
(above; 10x8)

Secondary Box
(at left; 22x16)

Sweet Ribbons
(opposite; 10½x10½)



Ponting uses medium to hard pastels to achieve her crisp edges and tight details, though she'll reach for a softer pastel if she needs the color. She makes extensive use of pastel pencils, especially CarbOthello, as well as General's pencils in white and Pitt charcoal pencils in soft.

Ponting still loves traditional framing with mats—the more the better. She prefers at least three layers of mat, often including an elegant linen liner. This approach, combined with her penchant for antique objects, gives her finished works an old-world, timeless quality appreciated by her collectors.

Ponting recommends that beginning painters seek out an instructor whose work they love, but suggests they also study with several others to round out their skills—and then with a final instructor whose work is totally different from their own. She admonishes: "If you pigeonhole yourself too early, you may never find that genre or style that brings you the kind of joy I find in still life."

Dianna Ponting (ponting.ca) is well known for traveling the world teaching pastel, but at the age of 70, she's ready to pack away her passport and settle back down in her own studio. She began as a pastel portrait artist and has worked in various media and painted untold subject matter over the years, but has always returned to her favorite: still life. Celebrating her 38th year as a professional artist, Ponting is still experimenting.

RUTH RODGERS (ruthrodgers.com) recently stepped down after a long stint as president of Pastel Artist Canada.

5 TIPS FOR PAINTING FABRIC

BY DIANNA PONTING

1. Satin has a life of its own. You don't have to manipulate it much to get wonderful hills and valleys. A minimum number of value changes produces a very realistic effect, making it surprisingly easy to paint with just a few pastels.

2. Try coordinating fabric color with objects of a similar hue but with a different texture. For example, paint eggs placed on ivory satin.

3. Use a cardboard box to create a drapery wall. Cut a few slits in the top and in various places, and poke the fabric into them to form swoops or falls.

4. Adjusting the angle or intensity of the lighting can make mountains out of molehills or vice versa.

5. Striped or dotted fabric intermingled with folds and shadows makes for an especially exciting challenge. Cutting vellum masks to lay down between intersections can make it easier to handle a four-way junction where dark and light, plus a change in color, occur.