

A Masterful Touch

Dianna Ponting clings to the handmade or homegrown for her still life subjects, which she depicts in hyper realism.

By Christine Proskow



Mandarins in Cello Packets (00x00)



30 Wooden Spools (00x00)

Canadian still life painter Dianna Ponting likes to describe pastel as the “chocolate” of the painting media. Her metaphor brings to mind pastel’s silken and rich qualities, its creamy consistency. Not only that, but like chocolate, pastels are simply irresistible. “I’ve painted in watercolor and continue to work in oil and acrylic, but pastel is my favorite medium,” she says. “I enjoy it the most because it’s direct, vibrant and fun to work with, but mainly there’s no color shift. What you see is what you get.”

The result of Ponting’s indulgence are realistic paintings in which textures, shadows and color gradations are all carefully delineated by the artist. Such details as the tiny stitches on a doily or the intricate decorative pattern found on a piece of china are faithfully reproduced on her surface. This attention to detail is what the artist relishes in the painting process and her application belies a masterful touch. “I love realism and the challenge of depicting textures,” she says. “I ask myself: How do I portray a rose? How do I paint a spool of thread? I savor those challenges that keep me going, section by section, throughout the painting.”

A sense of nostalgia weaves through much, though not all, of Ponting’s work. This appreciation for the past and its implied simplicity give these paintings a special warmth. Having grown up on the Canadian prairie, the artist absorbed the sights and sounds of her naturalistic environment. “It seems to be a part of my make-up,” she says. “I



Stitch in Time (00x00)

like period pieces and anything to do with history. When it comes to portraying jams and jellies or an antique lamp, again it goes back to that sense of the homemade or homegrown. Certain imagery reminds me of my grandmother.” For her paintings, Ponting gathers together objects—or props, as she likes to call them—that relate to each other. “I want to create a sense of continuity and to suggest perhaps a little bit of a story,” she says. “My choice of subject matter is directly related to my love of nostalgia. I spend a good deal of time in antique stores and thrift shops looking for just the right props to create a scenario.

“In the case of *Ribbon Rosettes* [see the demonstration in “A Delicate Dance of Color,” on page 00], my having come from a long line of dressmakers and making the rosettes myself just as my great grandmother did gives me a real sense of ‘connection’ to my past and to the painting. So it’s often not



Finnish Allsorts (00x00)

About the Artist



Dianna Ponting (www.ponting.com), of Fraser Valley, British Columbia, began her artistic career in 1981, working in commercial production of pen-and-ink drawings. Thirteen years later, she made the permanent shift into fine art. She's additionally painted in watercolor, and continues to paint in oil and acrylic, though she's best known for her

award-winning pastels that frequently feature a nod to the past and to her memories growing up on the Canadian Prairies. Ponting is a Premier Pastelist in the Pastel Society of Canada, a Master Pastelist in the Pastel Artists of Canada, a signature member of the Pastel Society of America and the Society of Canadian Artists, a Master's Circle member of the International Association of Pastel Societies and a senior signature member of the Federation of Canadian Artists (for which she served as president from 2006-2008). Her work may be found in Birthplace of BC Gallery (Fort Langley, British Columbia), Evalyn Dunne's Gallery (Westfield, NJ) and Diana Paul Galleries (Calgary, Alberta).



Allsorts of Colour (00x00)

just about seeking out props but working with heirlooms that have meaning.

"However, I have so many things that are just props. I'd like to do a show where I'd set one or two of these props below their matching painting," says the artist.

Sticking to Still Life

"Fun," "historical" and "beautiful" are all words that might reveal why Ponting chose to paint a particular subject. Another is "challenging." "I'm about as eclectic in my reasons for painting a subject as I am in what I paint," she says. "When I do a painting that's very complicated, as long as it has small areas of interest, I'll drag it out because I'm having so much fun." The challenges inherent in *Mandarins in Cello Packets* (on page 00), for instance, immediately drew the artist in. "I'd never seen mandarins packaged that way before," she says. "The cellophane, perforated edges of the packets and the writing all really appealed to me."

In addition to still life, Ponting, who currently makes her home and studio on a 30-acre farm in the beautiful Fraser Valley in British Columbia, has painted landscape, portraiture, figurative and animal subjects in the past 28 years that she's worked in pastel, the last eight years in earnest. "I don't like to be pigeonholed, because I have a variety of interests, though lately I've realized how much I like still life," she says. In part, she enjoys the kind of control that still life affords from the very outset of a painting. "When it comes to landscape, for instance, I have problems with the box and not being able to confine my subject the way I'd like," she says.



Egg Falls
(00x00)

“Pull quote Iquat in utet landre feugait lum no nsenit praesectetue feugueros aliquisi tat iuscin ullam, sum dunt laorperat vel ing ea conse del”

“Also, in British Columbia, the view is green on green on green. It’s difficult for me to see the colors I want to see in the landscape. With still life, I can create my subject however I want it to be. So if I want more blue in a picture, I can either add a blue object or I can place a sheet of Bounce [fabric softener] against my lamp to reflect blue light into the set up.”

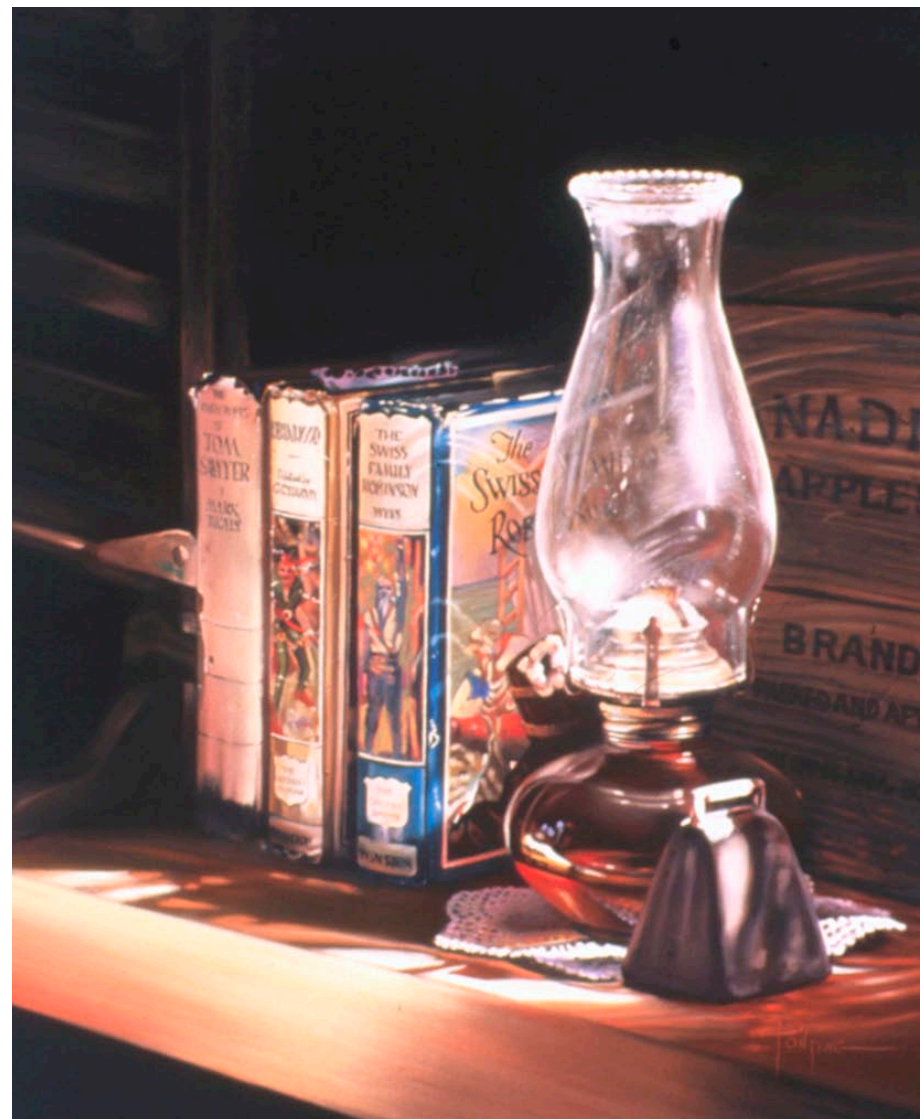
A Thirst for Color

Ponting is a self-taught artist whose trajectory into

fine art involved finding the confidence to pursue her own path. A talent for drawing emerged at a young age. “It was the one thing I could do well,” she says. But when she quit a mail order art course at age 15, much to the chagrin of her parents, who’d paid for the privilege, she slowly sidled away from art. It wasn’t until she was 30 years old and in need of a livelihood as a divorced mother of two children that she decided to try her artistic talent in the world of commercial art.

“A local fellow was doing pen and ink drawings, and I thought, ‘I can do that,’ ” she says. Before long, Ponting, who was working as a lifeguard and swimming instructor at the time, began selling prints of her pen-and-ink drawings of local heritage buildings. “I did brochures, fliers and cards, gaining the technical skills to draw accurate renditions of my subjects. That was my first real step into art,” she says. In a short time, she was making a steady profit off the prints, yet she increasingly felt the need to discover a more personal expression. “I was quite aware that I wasn’t selling art for art’s sake, but rather as memorabilia,” she says. Ponting waited until her children were on their own before making the leap into fine art, and pastels led the way. “I felt comfortable with their drawing aspect,” says the artist. Their pure, vivid hues also quenched her then palpable thirst for color.

Today, the artist’s color sense is carefully calibrated. In *30 Wooden Spools* (on page 00), we’re treated to a sumptuous display of rainbow hues that reads as slightly improved over life. By subtly intensifying the color element, Ponting achieves a heightened visual effect that’s still grounded in a realistic focus. And given the artist’s method of working individual sections to a point of finish before moving on, this acuity of color is especially relevant. “I very seldom



Time Travel (00x00)

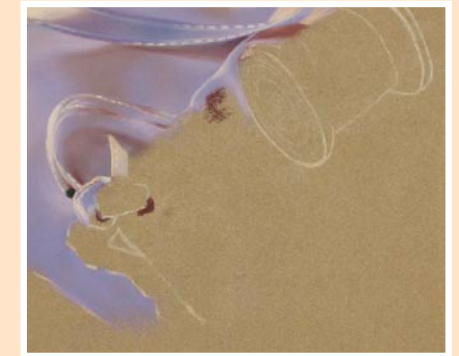
Demonstration: A Delicate Dance of Color by Dianna Ponting



Most of my resource photos are set up to make use of natural sunlight. I use one strong light source and, as often as not, additionally bounce either white or a specific color back onto the shadow side. However, this painting makes use of two light sources of almost equal strength:



the natural blue pre-dawn light to the left of the painting, and an incandescent light set low on the right-hand side of the table. My goal was to produce a painting where the blue-violet lighting works against that of the complementary yellow-peach, without either one

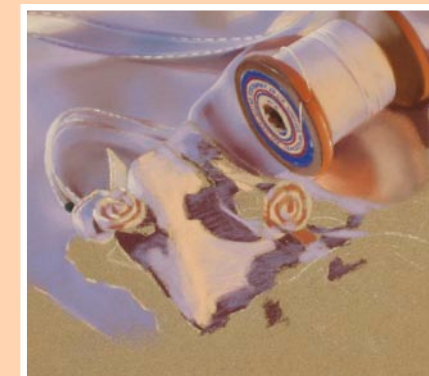


dominating the other. The linens furnish a clean, white dance floor upon which these colors can really tango, and the happy byproduct is that I get to use a range of my favorite mocha browns as a bridge.

Working on La Carte paper, I lay down the pastel in blocks of color, using lots of pigment and covering the area completely. I then blend and soften this section with my fingers. If the spot is very small, on occasion I will use a 0- to 2-cup round, soft color shaper.

Deciding the order of completion within a particular section is determined by how difficult or easy it will be to work that area. If an object or background is more difficult to complete compared to the adjacent segment, then I work on the more difficult area first, leaving the more easily accomplished areas surrounding it for later.

My only concern in regard to which quadrant to work first is keeping my completed area clean from falling dust



and out from under my hand. If I feel the need to make alterations later, I’ll use a mahl stick as a bridge.



I work in my final details with either CarboThello pastel pencils (if the right color is available) or with the corners of pastel sticks. I use a general white charcoal for all of my fine white areas and Pitt soft



charcoal pencil for all the small black ones. I often cover my blacks with a Terry Ludwig intense purple, blue or magenta to enliven them.

Although I can and do work more



loosely and without blending on occasion, it’s the detail that really brings me joy and has me returning to still life time and time again.

go back and change anything,” she says about her unique approach. “It entails learning about your colors and values. Rather than feeling your way around a piece, you have to know how a certain color will register and what value is needed in a given location so that it’ll look correct even when you get to the other side of the painting.”

Designing the Details

Due to the level of detail Ponting aims for in her work, she prefers to paint from photographic reference of her set up. “If you saw my dining room, you’d laugh because it’s piled with the props I use in my paintings,” she says. “I collect a lot of antiques; anything that I think might make a good painting. Then, when the sun pours through the dining room window, I’ll start to throw things onto a nearby table to photograph.”

She likes to mull over ideas for arrangements, but her setups are almost always composed spontaneously, in the moment. The eye-popping *Bright Lights* (page 00) came about in just this manner—although she had to work for the Swiss chard to grow from seed before she could photograph it. Values are also considered at this stage, and Ponting always strives to get the full tonal range in each of her paintings. “As a juror, what I see as award-winning paintings or show-stoppers are those that possess a high value contrast—that which gives them dimension and depth.”

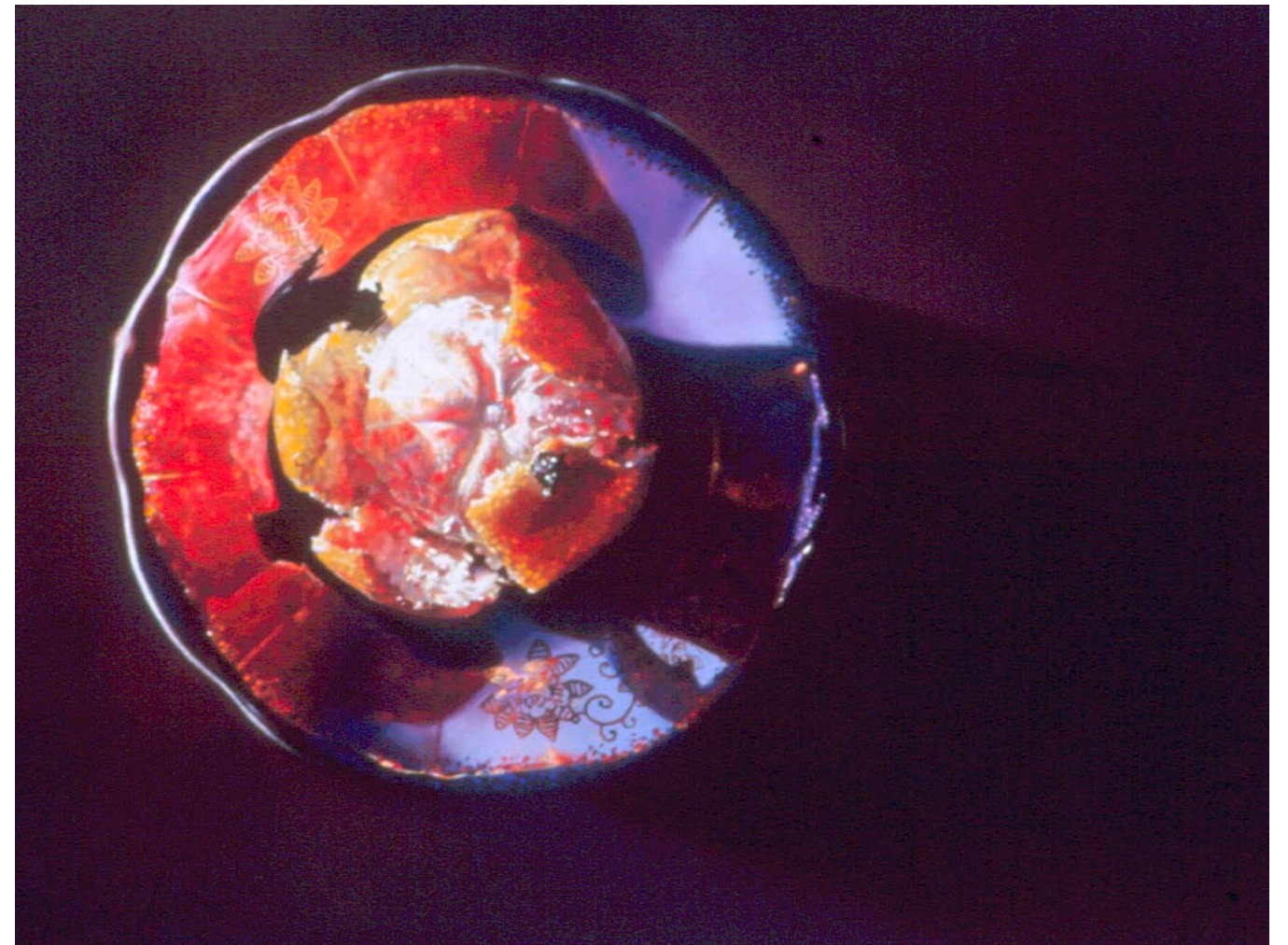
What may seem surprising about Ponting’s

technique is just how much blending she does. Just about every square inch of her paper is blended to some degree. “I have a range of small color shapers that are great if I go into a very tight area,” she says, “but I’m usually too lazy to get them. It’s easier for me to use my fingers, and I blend with them all the time. Sometimes it’s just a light touch.” On occasion, the side of a pastel pencil also does the trick. The artist paints with a variety of soft pastels: she favors Unison for their consistent texture from stick to stick; Terry Ludwig, which has the intense darks she needs for her backgrounds; and Holbein, “for its beautiful mocha grays,” she says. All of this unfolds on her paper of choice, Sennelier La Carte. Its superb tooth, according to Ponting, makes it more forgiving of experimentation and changes.

“I always paint from the top left and work my way down, finishing each section completely, almost like I’m unrolling a sheet of paper,” says the artist. In this manner, she’s able to keep the resting side of her (right) drawing hand from accidentally smearing already completed areas. “My approach doesn’t necessarily revolve around working from background to foreground, but from the hardest object to the easiest. If a section requires seven colors, I’ll choose to blend that first before I go onto an adjacent part that may need only two colors,” she says. Another means of keeping her surface clean comes in the form of her Mabef forward-tilting easel. “Pastel being what it is, unless



Bright Lights (00x00)




Orange Blossom (00x00)

you have a forward-tilting easel, the dust is going to run down your painting,” Ponting says. “I forward tilt the easel just enough to keep the particles from falling onto the paper below.” Two bright lights, which are flooded onto her surface, give the artist more than sufficient light to clearly see colors, values and to render details.

Ponting has received numerous honors and awards for her paintings. She’s additionally a highly-regarded workshop instructor, though stepping into that role proved, she says, to be another occasion for personal growth. “I never saw myself as a teacher,” she explains, “so for the first four or five years in my workshops, I’d tell everyone, ‘I’m not really an art teacher. I’m just here because you want to learn my techniques.’” That’s all changed now. The joy Ponting receives in interacting with others, passing along her knowledge and exploring new territory when she travels make it enormously worthwhile. As does her philosophy as an instruc-

tor—to give all that she can. “Anything my students want to learn from me, I’ll share,” she says. “I’ve seen people teach and I’ve heard other students say that they’re disappointed in teachers who will only teach so much of what they know; they kind of hold back. I give 100 percent. The focus in my class is usually still life because I find that’s the easiest subject for learning pastel. But my students can go off into whatever direction they like.”

The fact that Ponting’s own direction skyrocketed into something unexpected, and yet so wonderful, gives her pause. “I love painting. I feel guilty sometimes because I’m having so much fun. It’s a God-given talent,” she says. Yet, the artist’s own determination is certainly a factor in terms of where she is today. And Ponting seems to take that part in stride. 

Christine Proskow is an artist and writer living in Thousand Oaks, Calif.