

Paint Yourself Happy

For 10 million Americans, amateur painting takes the drabness out of life—and sometimes adds a lovely greenness to their pocketbooks, too!

By CURTIS MITCHELL

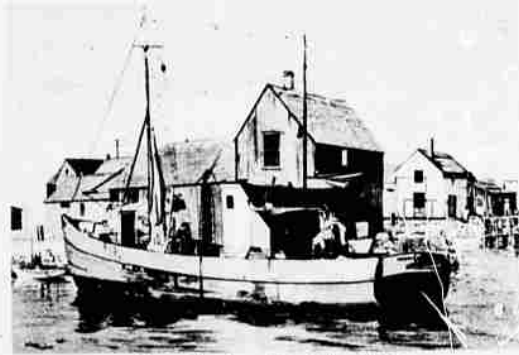


Robert E. Fiedler, Waltham, Mass.



Darrell Fritz, Lafayette, La.

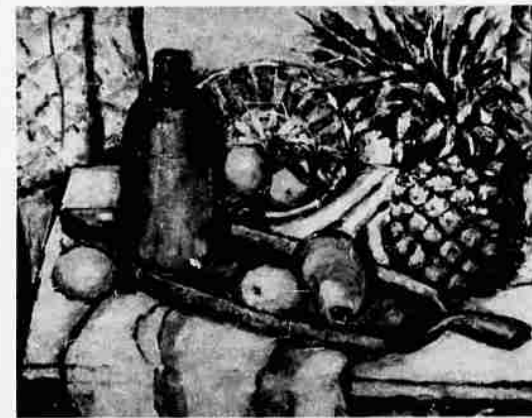
These paintings courtesy of the Famous Artists Schools.



Glen Fowler, Beverly, Mass.



William Lary, Mill Valley, Calif.



Mrs. Ralph K. Wittenburg, Reno, Nev.



Carlota Dodge, Stonington, Conn.

LOOK WHERE you will, the pursuit of painting by just plain folks is busting out all over.

In Ware, Mass., Mrs. Elizabeth Lincoln, mother of six, stands before the easel in her kitchen. She can still hear the tumult of departing pre-teens and see the breakfast dishes piled in her sink, but her face is radiant. She is painting her 100th amateur landscape.

A fragile wisp of a lady mails off a package to an art correspondence school. "Please hurry and send me your criticism of this painting," she says. "I'm anxious to finish your course, but I'm 94 years old and haven't much time."

A scrubwoman in Chicago limps stiffly through the doorway of an office building, homeward bound after a night of emptying wastebaskets and scrubbing floors. She writes to her art teacher: "Some might think that life hasn't been kind to me, but I don't complain. When I get home to my paints, I live in a world of beauty."

A recent Gallup poll estimates that amateur painters in the U.S. now number 10 million—one in every fifth family. The group includes Dinah Shore, Charlton Heston, Henry Fonda, and John Steinbeck, as well as a host of Americans not known outside their neighborhood.

Countless exhibits and competitions pop up everywhere from shopping centers to stately museums, and none lacks for exhibitors.

Art instruction is booming, too. Museums are conducting classes for housewives, senior citizens, and young Norman Rockwells. Two dozen univer-

sities are building modern studio palaces for their bulging fine-arts classes. And a handful of excellent correspondence schools have proved that painting-by-mail can be almost everybody's cup of tea. The largest of them already has shepherded 150,000 through its three-year course.

Even preschool moppets are painting—with fingers, with pipe cleaners, and with old felt hats. One class dunks Yo-Yos in paint buckets, spins away, and exhibits the results as "Young American Modern." Most popular with small fry, however, are soda straws and tempera. Predictably, their art work is unique—and messy.

The urge to paint seems to arouse man's community instinct. In Philadelphia, a club of bank employees recently traded exhibits with their opposite numbers in Tokyo. American church deacons traded with English vestrymen. Chemists and physicians have their own clubs, as do architects and musicians, lawyers and engineers.

In New England, 30 or so water-colorists queue up in their cars behind art teacher Edgar Whitney each summer while he roams the countryside in a station wagon jammed with paintboxes and campstools. By day, they hurry along back roads trying to get the sun exactly right on the Great Stone Face or to catch the flood tide at Passamaquoddy Bay. By night, they collapse at the nearest motel and recoup their zest for the morrow.

Not only does the public want to paint, but a huge and hungry segment of it wants to gaze at paintings. Museums everywhere are reporting greatly increased attendance.

Where will it all stop? Nobody knows. "Every-

one has something to say," declares a noted illustrator. "Everyone has a talent, and it can only come out through some means of expression. Painting is a means that comes easily to most persons."

Every walk of life is well represented among the art hobbyist—priests, tycoons, cowboys, teachers, soldiers, and stenographers who have taken up painting and become better for it. Files of art schools bulge with their letters.

A SEAMSTRESS entered two paintings in her town's art show and won first and second prizes. She says, "I've been pointed out and congratulated. It's nice to be a celebrity."

A fireman in a steel mill wrote: "I was just a little guy in a big mill. Drawing got me known. One day, they took me off the furnace and put me behind a desk. My life has sure changed for the better, but best of all, I've got a lot more confidence and faith in myself."

A 20-year-old convict, who paints exquisite hummingbirds, says, "All my life, I never had any interest in anything. Nothing got to me. But the warden put me in this prison sign shop where I'm working. That's how I discovered art. When I get out, maybe I can earn a living at it."

An 80-year-old woman lived alone in a hotel room. All her relatives and friends had died. She began to paint the scenes she saw through her window, then scenes she remembered from her girlhood. She wrote: "Now I have visitors at all hours—bellboys, maids, even guests. They all want to see my latest. Suddenly, I'm important."

Suddenly, I'm important. "This is the secret of what painting does for people," a psychologist says. "You begin in fear and trembling, painting like a mouse. Suddenly, you're important, and you paint like a tiger."

Many students, especially the younger ones, want a better job and a home on the right side of the tracks. Horatio Alger might have plotted their exciting stories.

John Buskette was a pipe fitter with a habit of sketching everything he saw. His obsession, and training, led him to a fine job in an art studio. Roger Gould was a milkman in Portland, Maine, but the glory of a spring sunrise persuaded him to buy a box of paints. This eventually led to his own agency, called the Drawing Board.

Miss Gail Chin, stitcher in a Boston garment loft, learned to draw pretty figures and got a job as a fashion artist. Tak Murakami was a 17-year-old Illinois farm boy who worked from sunup until 9 p.m. Like Lincoln, he discovered his career between the covers of books he read each night. At 18, he sold his first drawing. At 19, with a roll of samples and an extra shirt, he invaded Chicago and became an art-studio apprentice. His work appears today in national magazines.

Once in the bloodstream, oil and pigment act powerfully and sometimes unpredictably. Four years ago, Sam Dillon was a \$10,000-a-year school administrator in Woodsfield, Ohio. Then he answered an art-school ad; it seemed like an innocent diversion. For three years, instructors said of his work: "Cold, weak composition, muddy figures, heavy-handed." He painted on, getting

madder and madder at himself. Suddenly, he decided to devote full time to painting, to look it, and to make a career in it. He resigned his job and hung out a sign.

Today, Sam Dillon portraits hang all over Ohio. Service clubs clamor for his lectures. "I work harder than before, but my health is better," he says. "And best of all, I'm now my own man."

Retired people often snort: "Me paint? I've got no talent." For them there's the example of a great-grandmother, Mrs. Alice Hitchlach. She began to paint in her 75th year, completely unaware of the reservoir of talent within her. Three years later, to satisfy the curiosity of her neighbors, she moved all her paintings onto her front lawn for a one-day show. A passer-by asked, "How much for that one?" She replied, "Oh, I guess \$35." It was a deal.

WORD OF HER PICTURES spread. Not primitives, not blobs for people, but solid, American-style landscapes. Tourists began to stop at her little house in Milan, Ind. Strangers sent her photos and drawings. Some visitors even bought her wet canvases right off her easel. Now 84, she has sold more than 1,000 originals.

Although most amateurs don't paint for money, an astounding number of them find their easels turning into money trees. In upstate New York, a homemaker took her sketch pad to the laundromat. The 25-minute washing cycle was just right for sketching some of the other women. "It's good practice," she reports, "and you'd be amazed how many of the pictures I sell."

Another amateur wanted to try his hand at painting murals. He got permission to decorate the playrooms of some new houses in a real-estate development. When the homes with murals sold quickly, the builder recognized a good thing. Now that "amateur" paints a mural in every house—for pay.

Possibly the most improbable art transaction in history took place recently in Ohio. Mrs. Joanna Lee Hiehl, a housewife, kept on painting through her pregnancy. Her obstetrician watched her work during his house visits, liked what he saw, and said he wished he could afford such beautiful paintings for his office. Mrs. Hiehl made a deal: she would trade two beautiful oils for one beautiful baby, delivered in good order. Both parties report complete satisfaction with the exchange.

To the part-time painter, it's not the quality of the picture but the painting of it that is all-important. In his re-creation of a remembered experience or in his communication of an idea, he has achieved something quite apart from artistic merit.

Longfellow said, "Art is power." How true! It causes a nun, who is allowed only two phone calls a year, to use them to telephone her art instructor to talk about her paintings.

Or a widow, dying of cancer, to write: "Without painting, I could not endure the waiting."

Art heals the mind and deadens pain and banishes loneliness; but more than that, it gives to the artist the precious feeling that, for a little while at least, he is a person 10 feet tall.