

# AMERICAN ARTIST®

www.myamericanartist.com

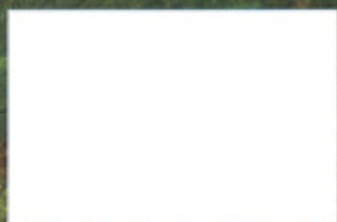
NOVEMBER 2005

Painting in the  
Digital Age

Sight-Size Drawing

WATCH  
**10 EXPERTS**  
PAINT IN  
**Normandy**

COVER:  
Pasture Road (detail)  
by Ross Merrill



## Laurin McCracken

Looking at Laurin McCracken's watercolors, it's hard to believe that he's been painting for a scant five years. Yet this Memphis-based artist took his first watercolor class in December of 1999 with Gwen Bragg at The Art League School, in Alexandria, Virginia. Photography quickly became incorporated into his creative process. "I could only paint evenings and weekends, and by the time I'd get into a still life of, say, fruit, the apples would be rotten," he says. "It became even more of a problem when I began painting flowers." He switched to digital about a year and a half ago, because, as he puts it, "With digital, I didn't have to wait three days to have the film processed only to discover I didn't have the image I needed."

He uses digital imagery to document and promote his paintings, as well as to create them, and owns three digital cameras, two of which—an Olympus 4000 and a Canon EOS—he uses in his work. "The Olympus is about four megapixels and the Canon, which also has interchangeable lenses, is about eight megapixels," he says. He uses the cameras interchangeably to photograph his still-life setups. "For the detail in crystal and silver, I usually need the Canon because it registers that much more information," he says. "The problem is it also takes much longer to bring an image up on screen and print it with the Canon, so if I can get it on the Olympus, I prefer to."

It's not unusual for McCracken to spend three or four hours—or even an entire day—simply photographing the setup. "I'll rearrange the items, changing out silver or crystal until I have what I want, then I tweak everything just a little bit more—turning a flower, adjusting a fan, the lighting, or the camera angle," he says. He also likes to zoom in on details. "It alters the perspective—which I sometimes like and will use in my painting—but even if I don't, the close-ups are great for later reference," the artist explains. When he's finally satisfied, he'll take several more photographs to be sure he has just the image he needs.

McCracken, who is also a published photographer, considers a tripod a necessity. "It makes the final photos remarkably clearer, and if it's easy to adjust, it's even better. Sometimes a simple adjustment of up or down a half an inch will make the difference between a terrific image and one that's just OK," he says. He also advocates using a midrange focal length. "The eye normally sees at what is referred to as a short telephoto length," he explains. "That's

why the 105mm lens is the preferred portrait lens in 35mm photography. It makes people look like we normally see them."

He uses the final image in two ways: as both a reference while painting and as a drawing tool. For the latter, he converts the image to a 35mm slide that he projects and traces directly onto the paper—a process that can take several hours. "While I'm drawing, I'll make changes—I may make something larger or smaller, eliminate something, change the perspective slightly," he says. "The goal here is to use photography as a tool to get better paintings."

He begins his paintings with very light washes. "Just to seal the paper, so, as the English say, there are no 'holidays,' or tiny white spots in the background," he says. Then he lays down what he terms a "very thick soup" of color to get the deep dark background he favors. Next, using a print of the still life as a reference, and sometimes other images for the details, he builds the rest of the painting slowly. "In painting silver or crystal, you're building up each layer inch by inch," McCracken says.

He prints out his reference photos on an Epson 1280 printer. "I did a lot of research and it's pretty much the workhorse of the industry," he says. He also likes the Epson because of the wide range of paper sizes and finishes that are available with it—beneficial features to have when creating brochures or other printed promotions. "Each printer company makes a specially coated paper for their printers and the Epson makes a heavyweight matte that prints on both sides," McCracken says. "I don't do that. But I like to have that nice white matte paper on the reverse side of the print, so that it faces the next print."

He is as careful in documenting his work as he is in photographing his setups. Again, he uses a tripod that he sets up about four feet away from the painting, which must be absolutely vertical to the floor. "It looks simple, but it's very precise," he says. "The key is to center the lens on the center of the painting." He keeps lighting simple too, using the flash on the camera. He's gotten adept at eliminating glare from the flash while shooting, but he's also become skilled at getting rid of it if need be. "I use one of the forms of Photoshop Lite that came with one of my printers or my camera," he says. "I can't take things apart in layers as you can in full Photoshop, but that's OK because I want to do as little manipulation as possible." And, of course, he knows instantly when he doesn't have the "perfect image" and can correct it immediately.



### Setting Up Summer Rose

Digital photography lends itself well to watercolorist Laurin McCracken's painting process, which often centers on crystal and silver objects. His Canon EOS camera ably captures the many small details crucial to depicting his intricate still lifes. At the top left is McCracken's reference photo for *Summer Rose*. The artist's background painting is shown above, and his use of a close-up photo for details is illustrated by the picture shown at left. The artist is extremely careful in how he photographs his setup, arranging the elements and varying his perspective until he finds the perfect shot. That way, he needs to modify his drawing—and resulting painting—very little. Below is the result.

THE COMPLETED PAINTING:

### Summer Rose

by Laurin McCracken,  
2005, watercolor,  
14 x 20. Collection  
Brenda Mattson.



By photographing his work carefully, McCracken can use his digital files to update his website, [www.lauringallery.com](http://www.lauringallery.com), and to send his work out to galleries and art consultants. "Consultants deal primarily with corporate clients and they typically use PowerPoint presentations in a conference room, so they want digital images," he says. "I can just put my latest paintings on a CD and send them out for review." He also finds it helpful in entering juried shows; he simply has his JPEG files converted to 35mm slides. "Juried shows have all these instructions for submitting work—no glare on the painting, don't include the frame, and so on—and it's so much easier to do all of this in a computer," he says. "I've got to believe that at least part of the reason that I got into 15 of the 18 shows I submitted to last year was because I had perfect images of my paintings."

Although watercolor may be new for McCracken, marketing is something that is virtually second nature. He holds a B.A. in architecture from Rice University, in Houston, and an M.A. in architecture and urban planning

**"While I'm drawing, I'll make changes—I may make something larger or smaller, eliminate something, change the perspective slightly. The goal here is to use photography as a tool to get better paintings."**

**—Laurin McCracken**

from Princeton, but he has spent most of his career marketing the services of architectural firms. "I haven't sat down at a drawing board in 27 years," says the artist. His career has taken him all over the world, an experience that has shaped him as a painter. "I've been to all the great capitals of Europe, and I've had the privilege of seeing lots of great paintings," he says.

McCracken, who is the marketing and strategies officer for the Memphis-based architectural firm of Looney Ricks Kiss, has been so taken by watercolor that he's arranged to work his schedule around it. "I don't come to office the first full week of each month so that I can paint," says the artist, who also still devotes most weekends to painting. His evenings are devoted to the business side of being an artist—putting together packets to send to galleries and shows and so on, and keeping records of where his work is. That's no small task in itself. "Last month I had paintings in four galleries and in five different shows around the country," he says. "Now my house is full of paintings again." ■

*Elizabeth Forst is a freelance writer based in New York City. She frequently writes about art and photography.*



@ [www.myamericanartist.com](http://www.myamericanartist.com)

To see another example of Laurin McCracken's use of digital photography in his watercolor paintings, visit the Online Exclusive section of the American Artist website.



THE COMPLETED PAINTING:  
**Still Life With  
Oriental Screen**  
by Laurin McCracken,  
2004, watercolor,  
18 x 18. Courtesy Jack  
Meier Gallery, Houston,  
Texas.

### **Capturing Oriental Screen**

McCracken enlisted a similar process for this still life, which was set up in front of an ornate wooden Oriental screen. At the top is the reference photo. Below it is the color-corrected version of the reference. McCracken then cropped the photo on his computer so it would match his idea of the final composition. The resulting watercolor painting is above.