

25th
Anniversary

THEN & now

As **Watercolor Artist** celebrates its 25th anniversary, we asked three renowned watercolor artists—**Michael Reardon**, **Laurin McCracken** and **Birgit O'Connor**—to reflect on the changes they've made and experienced over the years that have contributed to their successful careers. We also share some of the innovations and milestones achieved in the medium during the past quarter-century.

By Beth Williams



THEN:
Yellow Daylily (2003;
watercolor on paper, 20x28)
by Laurin McCracken

Watercolor Artist (WA): How has your work changed conceptually over the years? How, if at all, has your painting process changed?

Michael Reardon: Twenty-five years ago, I had only been painting in watercolor for a few years. At that time, I was still experimenting with paints, brushes and papers while trying to figure out how to paint in the medium. I was primarily a plein air painter, focusing principally on the faithful depiction of the scene in front of me. As I learned to be more technically consistent, I became less concerned with accuracy and focused more on mood, light and composition.

Laurin McCracken: When I began painting 15 years ago, I painted flowers. I used them as a subject that would force me to refine my watercolor technique. They had curved surfaces, a lot of color and challenging textures. Even though these paintings were accepted into competitions and won awards, I realized that if I wanted to differentiate myself in the profession, I needed to find subject matter that was more personal to me.

I recalled that the paintings that appealed to me the most as I visited museums around the world were the works of the 16th- and 17th-century Dutch and Flemish still life painters. I asked myself if I could take the basics of what they were doing and re-create them in watercolor. I was drawn to their level of realism and wondered if it was possible to attain that in watercolor. That worked well for me. Now I'm searching for a way to bring this level of realism to more contemporary subject matter.

Birgit O'Connor: Over the years, I've gone from thinking that I needed to paint everything I saw in all of its detail, to simplifying and minimizing to focus on what's most important. For instance, when looking for potential compositions for paintings, my approach isn't necessarily what I "should" be looking for; instead, it's more about how I feel at that time. I may be attuned to color, the movement of the design, detailed focus or an overall vision.

WA: How have the materials you've used changed? Have you added new-to-you mediums or embraced new products?

INNOVATION YUPO

YUPO is a 100-percent recyclable, waterproof, tree-free synthetic paper that became available in the United States in the early 2000s. The bright-white, super-smooth surface won't tear and wipes clean. Because the surface is waterproof, it's ideal for watercolor painters who want to lift paint easily from the surface or cut lights into darks. And, because there's no tooth to the paper, paints remain vivid.

THE ARTISTS



Fort Worth, Texas-based artist **Laurin McCracken** (lauringallery.com) combines many of the skills he learned as an architect with his experiences of traveling and studying art history, drawing and

photography. He studied at Auburn University and holds a bachelor's of arts and a bachelor's of architecture from Rice University, and a master's in architecture and urban planning from Princeton University. He's a signature member of more than a dozen watercolor societies, including the American Watercolor Society, National Watercolor Society, Transparent Watercolor Society of America, Southern Watercolor Society, Watercolor West and Watercolor USA Honor Society. He's an elected member of the Allied Artists of America in its watermedia category.



Avid traveler **Michael Reardon** (mreardon.com), of Oakland, Calif., uses watercolor to record his observations, convey a sense of place and light, and communicate his impressions of built,

natural, and imagined worlds. With a degree in architecture from UC Berkeley, he was an architectural illustrator for more than 30 years. He's a signature member of the American Watercolor Society, the National Watercolor Society, Watercolor West and the California Watercolor Association. Reardon is also the author of *Watercolor Techniques: Painting Light & Color in Landscapes & Cityscapes* (North Light Books, 2016).



Birgit O'Connor (birgitoconnor.com), of Bolinas, Calif., enjoys showing others how to view the everyday world in a new way by taking what's not first noticeable and bringing it into focus. The author of two books,

Watercolor Essentials and *Watercolor in Motion* (both by North Light Books), she holds signature membership in the Louisiana Watercolor Society and the California Watercolor Society.



NOW: Still Life With Drawer Handle
(2016; watercolor on paper, 20x20)
by Laurin McCracken

Reardon: My watercolor tools have changed little since the mid-1990s, when I switched my palette to Daniel Smith. Watercolor is sufficiently challenging in itself, so I stick with the paints and paper I know, preferring to concentrate on other aspects of painting rather than on technique. After using cold-pressed paper for most of my 30 years of painting, I now use Saunders Waterford rough paper because its traditionally applied sizing lets washes flow very nicely. The rough finish, somewhat counterintuitively, yields even smoother washes than cold press.

The most significant change in materials is my choice of brushes. For most of my painting career, I only used sable brushes, finding synthetics and blends unsatisfactory; however, there are now synthetic brushes that rival sable, so I now use them almost exclusively.

INNOVATION

Quinacridone Paints

One of the most impactful scientific breakthroughs in the medium, according to McCracken, has been the introduction of pigments that have come from nontraditional sources such as the chemistry laboratory and the car industry. "Quinacridone paints are an example of this," he says. "They've brought a new range of colors and an intensity not previously available."

McCracken: The primary change in the materials I use has come from learning more about the quality and consistency of the manufacturers of these materials. This has led me to use materials from those that I know are committed to the quality of their products, such as Daniel Smith and Escoda.

I also decided that Fabriano's Artistico soft-pressed paper was best suited to my approach to watercolor.

It's one of the whitest papers produced and gives the glass and metal I paint the sparkle I want to share with my viewers.

O'Connor: I've never been a fan of lifting or masking, but over years of teaching, I've found that the original Mr. Clean Magic Eraser can—with just minor fixes—transform a painting from something I think isn't working to something that's dramatically different; it's been a great tool.

I've also really enjoyed trying different-sized paper surfaces, such as a harder-sized surface that can take more abuse compared to the softer-sized papers that are a little more delicate, which produce entirely different results.

WA: How is life as an artist different today—for better or worse—than in 1993? What has been the most beneficial change for you? Has anything felt more like a drawback?

Reardon: In 1993, I was balancing a career as an architectural illustrator with my painting life. The illustration career paid the bills and usually won out. For the past five years, I've been fortunate to be able to concentrate full time on painting, which has been extremely beneficial to my growth as an artist.

Social media, which was unheard of in 1993, has allowed artists to share their work among themselves and a large audience. There's now a virtual community of painters, and I'm now familiar with the work of many artists who would have been unknown to me.

Color reproduction also has changed considerably since 1993. Instantaneous scans and digital photos have replaced poor-quality images from color negatives or slides.

McCracken: I took my first watercolor lesson the year I turned 60, in 2001, and I've seen changes in the 10 years that I've been painting professionally. The focus on the quality of the art has increased significantly. The international watercolor exhibitions have shown us what the rest of the world is doing. And, the competition to get into these exhibitions has forced everyone to raise both the artistic quality of

their approach to painting and the technical skills with which we produce our ideas on paper.

The biggest impediment to artists having a successful career working in this medium continues to be the price point of watercolors as opposed to acrylics and oils in the galleries. It has been a challenge for our profession since the time of J.M.W. Turner. While I've seen the market prices begin to rise, the last recession hurt the overall market around the world, and it has struggled to recover.

O'Connor: One big difference is that it's now so much easier to build

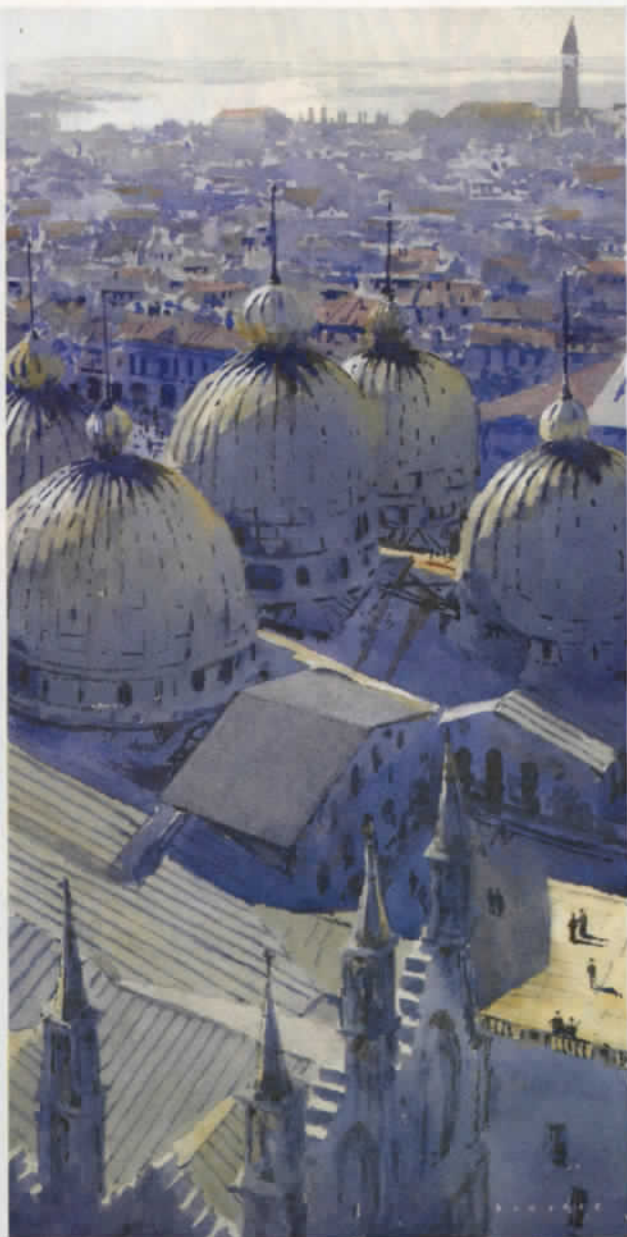


BELOW

THEN:
Summertime Pond
(1997; watercolor
on paper, 9x5) by
Michael Reardon

RIGHT

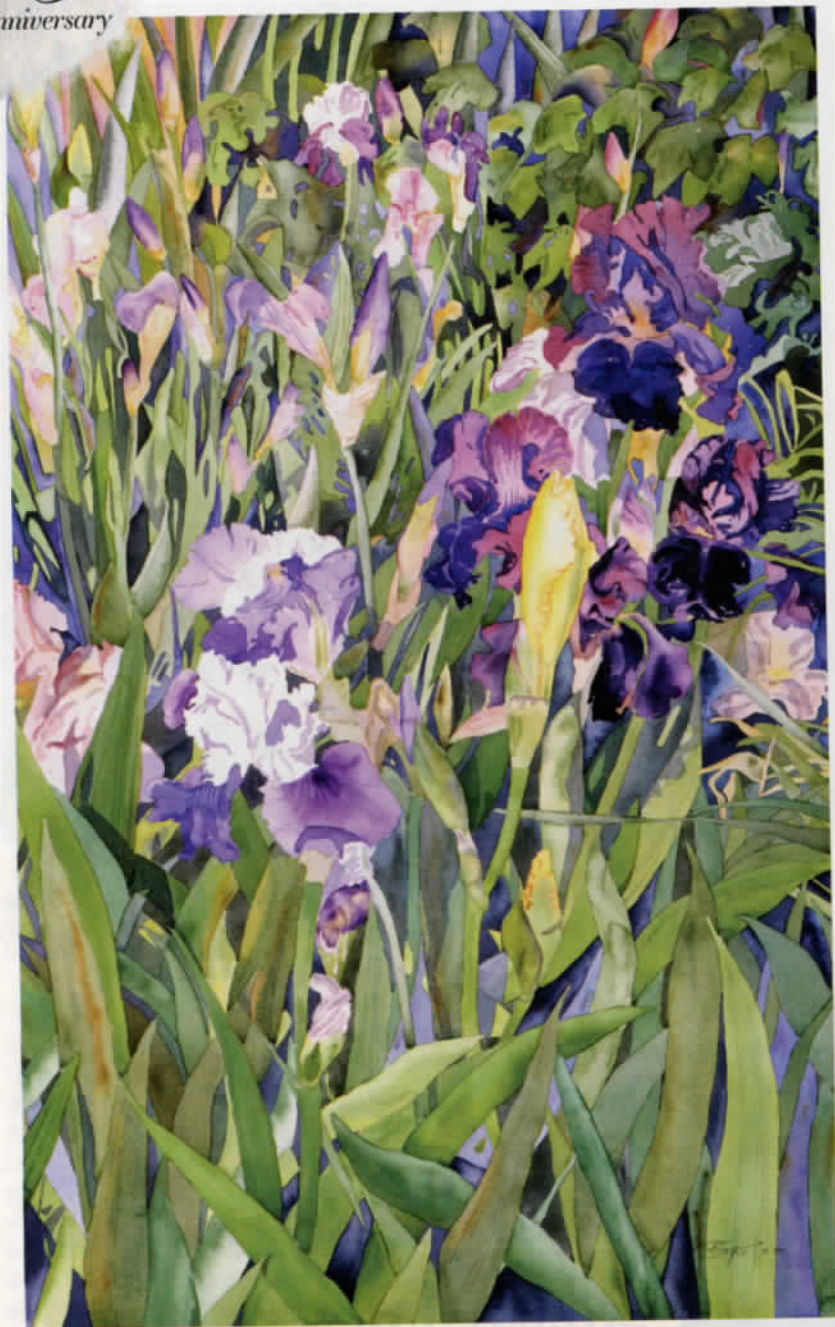
NOW: **The Domes
of San Marco**
(2016; watercolor
on paper, 20x10) by
Michael Reardon



MILESTONE

AWS 150TH ANNIVERSARY

The American Watercolor Society (AWS)—the oldest watercolor society in the United States—celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2017. Its mission is to promote and to offer education about watercolor. Since its inception, AWS has had many famous artists in its membership. Included in this distinguished company are notables such as Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper, William Merritt Chase, Thomas Eakins, Samuel Colman, Charles Burchfield, Gladys Rockmore Davis, Childe Hassam, John LaFarge and Edward Potthast, among many others.



INNOVATION Technology

The World Wide Web technology became freely usable for everyone in the early '90s. Since its life-changing advent, watercolor artists have been able to go online to purchase supplies; take classes and watch instructional video; share, market and sell their work more widely; connect to and build community with other artists across the globe; and enter worldwide competitions—all with the stroke of a few computer keys.

a photo reference library. We're no longer limited to a roll of expensive film and then having to pay processing fees and wait a week for printed pictures to be developed.

With smartphones and digital cameras, reference photos are instantaneous and readily available. They're easy to store and file, too, thanks to SD cards, external hard drives and the cloud. No more bulky prints to store and file!

This streamlined process also helps when submitting to galleries. In the past, artists needed to send a portfolio with a sheet of slides and promotional material. Today, depending on the galleries' submission process, it can be done digitally.

WA: What was your biggest art career breakthrough?

Reardon: There have been so many, but I'd have to single out the Gabriel Prize that I received in 2005. This fellowship allowed me to spend three months painting in Paris. Painting virtually every day for three months without any commercial constraints allowed me to experiment and fine-tune my painting style. It also permitted me to consider a complete transition from an illustrator/painter to a full-time painter.

O'Connor: When it comes to expanding what I love to do, which is both painting and teaching, one of the most exciting things that I'm now offering is interactive online courses. Within this format, in the comfort

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INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS

International competitions and exhibitions have welcomed watercolorists with open arms and have promoted the medium across the globe. Of note is the Beijing International Art Biennale, or Beijing Biennale, that was initiated in 2003 and is sponsored jointly by the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, the Government of Beijing Municipality and the China Artists Association. In addition, the Shenzhen International Watercolour Biennial, which first took place in 2013, is one of the largest and most prestigious exhibitions in the world.

of the students' home, they can interact with me and other students for painting reviews, discussions and demonstrations. It's been a lot of fun.

WA: What do you know now that you wish you had known as a younger artist just starting out?

Reardon: Watercolor really stumped me when I was starting out. There were many times that I almost gave up. But, I eventually got enough experience with it that I was better able to understand how to use it: making darks, paint-to-water ratios, brushstrokes, etc.

While I wish that I had understood these technical aspects more quickly, I now recognize that the process of painting is what matters most. I wish I had understood that more fully when I was first learning watercolor.

McCracken: Let me turn that question around and reply with what I brought from my youth that has served me well as a watercolorist—the love of drawing and the understanding of how important it is in creating art of any kind. In the workshops I teach, it's the skill that I see that's most lacking. Drawing isn't just a motor skill; it's foremost a seeing

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A GLOBAL SHOWING

Proving that art is indeed universal, the Missouri Watercolor Society will be the first U.S. watercolor society to host an international watercolor exhibition in another country. The 2018 International Juried and Judged Exhibition will be held from June 19 to July 5 at Qingdao Laotian Museum in China. (Entries are being accepted until Feb. 15.) A 17-day sightseeing and watercolor painting tour of China from June 21 to July 6 is also part of the event. For more information about the exhibition and the tour, visit MOWSART.COM.

skill. If you can't see the composition, you can't draw it. If you can't see details and texture sufficiently to draw them, you won't be able to paint them successfully. How to re-create what you see and present it to your viewer begins and ends with your ability to draw.

O'Connor: The hurdle to overcome is your belief system. If you think you can, you will; if you think you can't, you won't; and if you think you aren't ready yet, you may never be. If, for instance, you believe that to be a successful artist you need to be starving, then that's what you'll do. You don't need to assign where you

belong in the art world. Just get started and don't get stuck in someone else's idea of where you should be. The best advice I could give is to follow your intuition. If being a successful artist is what you want, then don't give up. The road has a lot of turns, so be tenacious. If you have a dream without action, nothing happens.

I'd also say: Be kind and work with others; you don't need to climb over anyone or have an attitude. You won't get there faster—and it won't make you a better artist. Do what you love. It's your journey; enjoy the ride. **WA**

Beth Williams is senior editor of Watercolor Artist.



OPPOSITE
THEN: *Iris Garden*
(1993; watercolor on paper, 40x25¼)
by Birgit O'Connor

LEFT
NOW: *Amazing Grace* (2012; watercolor on paper, 15x22) by Birgit O'Connor