

# Acrylics – The Plastic in “Plastic” Art

When acrylic paint first became available to artists in the early 60s, traditionalists decried the medium for its’ limited range of garish colors and drying time so fast that it defied blending. Some artists, though, loved the stuff because it allowed them to paint directly on canvas without the tedious applications of rabbitskin glue and gesso that keep oil paint from rotting the ground out from under all that hard work. Morris Louis thinned acrylic with water and let his drippy stripes soak into canvas the way a watercolorist slathers juicy pigment onto 300-pound aquarelle. Pretty soon watercolorists discovered that they could expand their bag of tricks, too, and the resulting pictures were virtually fade- and smear-proof. Portrait artists figured out that underpaintings done in acrylics and then finished off in oil could dramatically shorten the time required to put up with cranky or boring sitters. In spite of all this, a certain aesthetic snobbery clung to the versatile medium. The Danforth Museum School was, to my knowledge, the first in the area to offer classes specifically in Acrylic Painting almost 15 years ago.

Acrylics are all grown up now. They’re still cheaper, less toxic and certainly smell better than oils and are tougher than watercolor. The color range is as broad and rich, if not broader, than that of the other major painting media. There’s a big enough choice of textural additives, mediums and drying retardants available to keep art-supply junkies happy for ages. For unrepentant “blenders”, Golden has just come out with a line of “Open” acrylics, paint that has all the flexibility and virtue of plastic with a slower drying time to allow traditional modeling techniques. Acrylics works in all painting genres are included in major museum collections.

Students in my Acrylics Painting classes suffer a combination of American and European teaching approaches. Individuals are encouraged to develop their own styles and to follow their own interests-- still life, abstraction, portrait, the family cat, landscapes from vacation photos or the imagination. Lessons in composition, form, color, value, technical materials issues and other nifty stuff are popped in *ad. hoc.* as they are needed within the context of each painter’s work of the moment. Like European art students, my acrylics painters sometimes copy masterworks. Deconstructing a Vermeer, Matisse or even a very well-done illustration forces student painters to decipher the *process* and *technique* of good painting, to articulate and practice it in a disciplined way that then becomes part of their own skill set. The constant exchange of ideas among students working on different projects magnifies the learning experience for everyone.

Mostly, we just have a lot of fun-- as I believe you will see in these self-selected works.

**Louise Melton**

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