

Art & conservation

When it comes to enthusiasm for nature and wildlife, artists are some of the most fervent champions—a passion that often translates not only into their visual art but into conservation efforts as well.

BY TUCKER COOMBE

Bring together 500 talented

artists and see what kind of impact they can have on the world. That, in a nutshell, is the premise of Artists for Conservation (formerly Worldwide Nature Artists Group), an international organization founded in 1997 by Canadian artist, author, biologist and software engineer Jeff Whiting. Artists for Conservation (AFC) is an online community that currently brings together artists from 27 countries to promote preservation and protection of the natural world. To be considered for membership, artists must not only demonstrate excellence in their chosen medium, but also show a genuine commitment—financial or otherwise—to conservation.

“All of our artists maintain their own online gallery page, or portfolio, if you will, on the AFC website,” says Whiting. The site (www.natureartists.com) gets 10,000 to 15,000 visits per day, which offers great exposure for its members. And because AFC requires no commission on the sales it facilitates, artists have the option of pledging a portion of each sale to a conservation organization of their choice. When an individual purchases a painting of a koala, in other words, 20 percent of that sale may wind up in the coffers of a wildlife sanctuary in Australia. And this is only one of the many ways member artists support the organizations near and dear to their hearts: Some assist in field research; others spearhead publicity or education efforts; and many donate their art to be auctioned off at fund-raising events.

“I think member artists like being part of a community that’s trying to make a difference,” says Whiting. Last year, the group launched its first-ever juried exhibition at the Hiram Blauvelt Art Museum outside of New York City, featuring 120 works by member artists. The exhibit was held in conjunction with the Wildlife Conservation Society, which received a portion of the funds raised.

Another exciting AFC program called Flag Expeditions provides a modest stipend to artists, assisting them with travel to remote parts of the globe to draw, paint or sculpt the subject of their choice. By telling the stories of these lesser known regions and their inhabitants—rare seals in Russia’s Lake Baikal, painted dogs in Zimbabwe, or flora and fauna of Bhutan, for example—member artists raise awareness about wildlife and wild places that might otherwise rest in obscurity.

To Whiting, art and conservation are a natural pairing. “Art has a very special role to play in terms of reaching out to the public in a visceral way, in communicating with them in a nonscientific manner,” he says. “Protecting biodiversity, and the world’s habitats, needs more than science; it needs an emotive response from the public. Our role at AFC is to galvanize artistic talent and make this happen.”

Deb Gengler-Copple and Leslie Delgyer are two AFC artists who’ve chosen the medium of pastel as a way to express themselves artistically and to communicate their powerful connection with nature and wildlife.

Deb Gengler-Copple

Deb Gengler-Copple's paintings of wolves portray a calm, unassailable strength or a quiet, forlorn loneliness. Her big horn sheep denote power and movement. Her bison are formidable. The immediacy and

the realm of drawing and painting. "I just loved horses, and drawing them was my passion. I remember being in second or third grade, when the teacher passed around a test one day. I don't know

where my mind was, but I just put that test in my desk, pulled out a blank sheet of paper and started drawing. Did I ever get in trouble! Later, I learned that my teacher had called my parents and said, "Why don't you just get that girl a pony?" Eventually, they did."

Drawing and painting horses, it turns out, was an excellent form of training because it focused her eye on anatomy. Even today, when she draws deer, elk and sheep, her



Deb Gengler-Copple (www.debcopple.com) of Hubbard, Nebraska, has worked as a graphic artist, but her passion for painting wildlife has redirected her career and taken her to the national parks to photograph and view wildlife firsthand. The artist is a signature member of the Pastel Society of America and has won a number of awards, including an honorable mention in this year's Pastel 100 competition. Her work helps support a number of wildlife causes, including Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited and Defenders of Wildlife. While working on this article, she reported that she was nurturing a newborn screech owl back to health.

richness of her works derive, at least in part, from her ability to immerse herself completely in the natural world, closely observing every nuance about her subjects, their behaviors and their environments. "You can go to magazines and look at fantastic images of wildlife," Gengler-Copple says, "but for me, what's important is experiencing the animal, seeing how it interacts with others, feeling the excitement of watching it."

When Gengler-Copple travels to Yellowstone National Park or to the Big Horn Mountains, she takes dozens and dozens of photos. When she returns home, she burns the photos onto a CD and then puts them away, often for months. "It may be half a year later," she says, "but those images are still in my head. Later, I'll find the photo I'm looking for—depicting, for example, a particular wolf—and when I look at it, everything just rushes right back: what the weather was like when I took that picture, how the wind was blowing, how the light was coming through the trees, how the birds around me sounded, and what it was that grabbed me about that animal."

Love at First Horse

Although wildlife has always been an interest, it was horses that first lured Gengler-Copple into



On the Edge (24x18)



Sleepy Head (15x15)

familiarity with the horse's bone structure and musculature stands her in good stead.

In art school, Gengler-Copple began to focus on Western art—horses, cowboys and Native Americans. “After college, I began to broaden my horizons a little bit. But it was one painting—two cardinals in a cedar tree—that changed everything for me. I was outside one day in the middle of winter, watching how the snow was landing on the branches of this tree, noticing those shiny little cedar berries, the greens, the browns, the blues. I

just had to paint it,” she says. The next thing she knew, she was travelling to Yellowstone in search of additional inspiration to feed her passion.

These days, Gengler-Copple visits Yellowstone National Park about three or four times a year. One of her favorite destinations is the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center, where she can observe and photograph the animals in their natural habitats, from a relatively close distance. The center is one of the many organizations she supports through her AFC sales.

Deb Gengler-Copple



First Encounter (24x18)



In the Lead (20x16)

Back in the Studio

Gengler-Copple and her husband have made it a priority, she says, to make the land around their Nebraskan home inviting to native wildlife. Thanks to the hundreds of shrubs and trees they've planted, the area is a haven for regional and migrating bird species. The artist says she's awakened by pheasants each morning, and frequently sees deer and coyotes.

The artist keeps two studios in her home, and it's here that she does all her sketching and painting. Using a photo as her starting point, she begins her drawing with vine charcoal, keeping the sketch loose and allowing the composition to emerge somewhat spontaneously. "I start with the eyes, block in the shape of the animal, then try to visualize what I want to happen around that shape," she says. Many of her pastels are done on Kitty Wallace sanded paper, but when she anticipates creating a soft, out-of-focus background, she uses velour instead.

Gengler-Copple paints in acrylic and oil, too. "Recently, I've started setting up an oil painting right next to a pastel," she says. "The paintings are not of the same subject, but what I'm hoping is that the sense of freedom and emotion that comes when I'm working on the pastel can flow into what I'm doing with the oil." Of the three media, pastel is clearly the favorite. "I love its spontaneity, and the immediate gratification you get when you put the colors down. It's a pretty exciting medium," she says.

Getting a Feel for Fur

As a wildlife painter, the artist is well-practiced at painting all kinds of animal fur, and has developed a few tricks. "It's a matter of blocking in certain parts of the fur, such as the sunlight side and then the shadow side," she says. "I don't usually capture fur in my photographs, because of the distance between the subject and myself, but I do study the way fur lies on animals. I have friends who do taxidermy, and I might examine one of their animals, and I



Window Watcher (36x24)

might even go look at my dogs to see how the fur lies on them.

When I paint the fur, I'll put down one layer of base color, and then start right in on the light areas, the dark areas and the mid-values. Often I'll work into the fur, then move to the background, trying out different colors." Because she wants the background colors to support the animal and the mood she's hoping to convey, she usually works on both simultaneously, moving back and forth between the animal and the background.

In terms of capturing something special, she considers the eyes particularly important. "Near the end of the painting process I go in and really start working on them," she says. "And when those eyes look back at me—when the expression tells me what's happening in that animal's life, or what that animal might be feeling—that's the most gratifying point in the whole process."

“What’s important is experiencing the animal, seeing how it interacts with others, feeling the excitement of watching it.”



Power Pack (24x18)

Leslie Delgyer

In Leslie Delgyer's pastel, *The Apparition* (opposite page), a thin, white wolf faces out, framed in the foreground by bleak, black branches and lichen-covered rock, a rushing stream faintly visible in the background. You can see almost every hair on his body, every muscle in his front legs. "Wolves have had a bounty on their heads for years," says Delgyer. "This wolf is like an apparition, appearing in the woods he once freely roamed."

Delgyer says she can't remember a time when she wasn't surrounded by animals and art. "I grew up

with three brothers, so we always had plenty of furry, scaly, feathered friends in the house, and I even raised spotted mice for a pet store. My Dutch grandfather lived with us, and he and his brother were both artists," she says. "They taught me to look at things in a creative way."

Making Time for Art

Delgyer studied commercial art for three years at the duCret School of Art and graduated with skills in lettering, package design and illustration, but she



No Place to Hide (17x24)



The Apparition
(14½x20)



Leslie Delgyer (www.natureartists.com/lesliedelgyer) of North Plainfield, N.J., is a graduate of the duCret School of the Arts and a member of the Pastel Society of America and the Salmagundi Club, and a past president of the Society of Animal Artists. She supports a variety of conservation groups, including the World Wildlife Fund, the Cheetah Conservation Fund and the Nature Conservancy. To get detailed information about her subjects, Delgyer spends a great deal of time researching her subjects and their habitats, often studying and sketching animals in zoos. On many occasions she has enjoyed behind-the-scenes access to zoo animals. Feeling the fur of a big cat, she points out, is invaluable if one is to render it realistically.



never got the chance to put them into practice. “People started asking me to paint pet portraits,” she says. “I used to say that my commissions—little dogs and cats—would just walk right up to me.” These early subjects provided an excellent stepping stone for a future painting wildlife.

When her mother died shortly after her graduation from art school, Delgyer and her husband and young son moved in with her father and three brothers, to help them out. “At night, sitting at the kitchen table while everyone else was watching TV or had gone to bed, I painted,” she says.

Pastel became her medium of choice, simply because it was practical. She could paint at the table, have her work interrupted without dire consequences, and pack everything up quickly and easily when she was finished. “Pastel was perfect. And before long, I fell in love with the medium because it was very subtle; I liked the layerability, and it was an easy way to render feathers, fur and scales.”

Stamp of Approval

Increasingly, Delgyer’s animal paintings focused less on companion pets and more on rare and endangered wildlife. In the

late 1980s, Prince Philip commissioned her to paint for the World Wildlife Fund international stamp collection. “I was told, simply, that they wanted me to paint a tuatara,” she says. “At that point, I had never even heard of a tuatara!” The animal, she learned, was the oldest living prehistoric reptile on earth, inhabiting an island off the New Zealand coast where the public was strictly forbidden. Through some diligent research and a bit of lucky networking, Delgyer contacted the one person in New Zealand who had access to the island population, and obtained a wealth of original photographs.

After completing the tuatara commission (see page 31), the artist was asked to paint three other endangered animals (four paintings were required for each stamp commission). Soon afterward, she was asked to join the Society of Animal Artists. “All of a sudden, I was surrounded by people like Robert Bateman, Guy Coheleach, Charles Frace—really wonderful animal artists—who were already doing so much for conservation,” she says. “That was a real influence on me.”

Setting the Scene

When selecting her paper, the artist first considers the color, then the texture. Canson Mi-Teintes is a

Leslie Delgyer



Silent Woods (19x25)

favorite. “They have the most beautiful brown—it’s absolutely like a piece of chocolate—and a lot of the big cats look really good on it,” she says. “I also like the dark green.” She also uses Strathmore paper, which has a smoother texture than the Canson Mi-Teintes, a quality that she finds particularly nice for animal portraits. “Sometimes I’ll see a beautiful piece of pastel paper, with a certain color and texture,” she says, “and I can envision what animal would be perfectly suited to that paper.”

When beginning the actual drawing and painting process, she never starts with the animal itself. “I always start with the setting,” she says, “and for me, that’s the most challenging part of the work. The area around the animal always takes the longest, and seems to present more problems than the animal itself.” So, she begins by laying in the background.

Because she’s right-handed, she usually starts at the top left and works down and to the right, to avoid smudges. Then, she works on the foreground. “The setting has to look like a place where the animal will feel at home,” she says. “When I’m happy with the setting, I begin the animal.”

Drawing First

Delgyer devotes a lot of attention to her preliminary drawings, and uses transfer paper to move her drawing to her pastel surface. “Everything, for me, has to be drawn,” she says. “It’s hard to correct something once you’re working with the pastels.” Often, she uses a mirror to check the accuracy of her drawing. “If the drawing seems ‘off’ but I can’t figure out why, holding it up to the mirror lets me see the image in reverse, and then I can figure out exactly where the problem is.”



Cat Nap (19x24½)

Once she's moved to the pastels, the artist employs a light touch—"like a butterfly," she says. "I lay down a very, very light amount of pastel at a time, and just keep layering on different colors, and then blending really lightly. For an animal's whiskers and guard hairs, I use pastel pencils. For blending, I prefer a cotton swab or cotton ball; I think the stumps take too much of the pastel away."


Because of the degree of detail, the artist prefers to work on one painting at a time, and usually spends months on a single piece. *Cat Nap* (above), for example, required about six months to complete.

Like many AFC artists, Delgyer donates paintings and prints to organizations that protect and preserve the species featured in her works. She also hopes that her work will encourage others to appreciate the importance of environmental conservation, and perhaps play a role that goes beyond fund-raising. With this in mind, for each of her wildlife paintings, Delgyer writes a paragraph about the animals and their natural history, in hopes of piquing viewers' interest in the species.

For the same reasons, the artist likes to visit schools to talk with children about her work, thus



Leslie Delgyer was commissioned by the World Wildlife Fund to work on an international conservation stamp collection, for which she depicted such endangered animals as the tuatara (shown here) and the Siberian tiger.

emboldening the future generation to care not just about the wildlife she depicts but also about art—a subject that can also feel endangered at times. 

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