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ZOE ORTH

AN ARTIST AND HER GARDEN



Flowers, trees and gardens have been an integral part of the life of Zoe Orth, who states that her main goal as a painter is to , "give others a tactile experience of walking down a garden path, feeling the aliveness of the plants brushing against you, and visually falling into a flower." Her aim as an Impressionist is to manipulate paint so that the viewer senses the sunlight, the shade and the endless play of colors and patterns in her paintings of intimate gardens, cottages, and wildflower landscapes. Beauty in the realm of nature whether in places of peaceful sanctuary or a windy wildflower field, signify her profound understanding of nature's ability to fill us with a sense of place and to experience harmony in designs of color and light.

Zoe is my mother and the daughter of Greek immigrant parents. Born in 1928, she grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area during the Great Depression and World War II. Survival in her girlhood left her with little more than paper from the local butcher shop and a small box of watercolors for her first art expressions. She recalls spreading them on the kitchen floor and industriously painting dots of every color to resemble her mother's garden and house. Zoe's parents, concerned with keeping their small restaurant running, and their children fed in such hard times gave little notice or encouragement to their daughter's artistic interests, even when she won her first award for a drawing of a duck after being absent for the drawing lesson. Zoe's mother taught her to embroider dresser scarves, flour sacks towels and sew her own clothes as she got older. In the 1940's in America it was traditional for a young woman to receive a "hope chest" and fill it with hand worked linens and dishtowels, in anticipation of her wedding day. In her

family, like most in that generation, as woman came of age, finding a husband was supposed to be her primary consideration.

However, in an attempt to use her creative abilities, Zoe began studying interior design and window decorating, along with drawing classes at San Francisco City College after graduating from high school. Her old world authoritarian father was not pleased by what he considered too much freedom in the normal academic and social contacts Zoe was making in college. At 19 she met a young man, who had just come out of the Navy, working in a diner. She married Gene Frasu, son of Basque immigrants, two years her elder in 1947. Zoe's mother had had several paralyzing strokes and to help her regain use of her hands Zoe bought her a paint-by-number kit of a Winslow Homer scene. Having left school to assume her wifely role, and one as an expectant mother, she realized while assisting her mother in painting that she had a interest in doing more than paint-by-number.

Zoe and her husband bought a small house in the suburbs of San Francisco and over the next six years had three children. I was the middle child and the only girl. In the new neighborhood my mother joined the Garden Club and landscaped our large back yard while beginning adult education painting classes at a nearby community center. Art supplies were free, which was a big factor in allowing Zoe an opportunity to begin painting. A growing family left my mother with little time and four dollars a week spending money. A group called The Society of Western Artists (S W A) presented lectures to the art classes and Zoe found encouragement in the organization which met to talk about the trends in modern art and problems of artists. Attending meetings, she recalls feeling envious of the male artists in the group who could

"devote their full time and efforts to their art", without dividing their energies with childrearing and housekeeping. But she felt sorry for their wives who seemed to have no choice but to endure their husband's artistic struggles which usually involved lack of steady or any income. There was a definite male hierarchy in the S W A and eventually a group of ten amateur artists, mostly other housewives and part time painters, formed a new group, the San Francisco Artist's Guild. Zoe was president, vice-president and secretary numerous times in the guild's formative years and took part in arranging and promoting a venue of places to show their art on weekends around San Francisco. They organized shows at the Marina Green, Golden Gate Park, Washington Square and several other regular park locations during the spring through fall exhibition seasons. The guild required that artists attend their own art in the outdoor shows and that only original works be shown, no prints. Other than galleries or museums, which did not generally accept unknown artists work, selling art in public street fairs or parks was one of the only avenues available to amateurs but was considered degrading by professionals.

However, Zoe found that meeting the appreciative or even critical public viewing her work was stimulus for continuing to advance her skills. Little by little as her work sold, she gained knowledge and confidence in painting to meet the desires of the outdoor market. At this time, during the early 1960's she was experimenting with palette knife paintings of the city skyline and small paintings of fruits and vegetables on wooden shingles. One good thing about the weekend shows in the parks was that we children could come along and play all day in the parks or at the waterfront while she attended her work. She simply set a

blanket and picnic style food on the grass near the paintings and when my brothers and I found ourselves exhausted and hungry from playing we could rest or do our homework there. My mother always found time to meet her children's needs , and yet she put a tremendous energy into her art creation and art shows. When I asked her what the importance or driving motivation in her art was, she simply replied, "I have an inner need to be creative."

My mother was divorced from my father in ¹⁹⁷²1974 after more than 25 years of marriage. By that time we children were grown and moved away from home. Zoe had to find a way to support herself and worked at various office jobs and opened an art gallery in San Francisco with a partner. She felt both were dismal failures. It was a low period in her art and her aunt suggested that they both take painting lessons from the Jean Henry School of Art in San Francisco. Reluctantly, Zoe began but quickly found the new style she learned, Impressionism, fit her temperament and embodied all the elements she wished to express: her lifetime love of gardening, the vibrant colors she understood and an emerging sense of freedom and happiness. When she remarried in 1975, it was to a man that, unlike her first husband, wholeheartedly supported her painting and interests. She also had the opportunity to travel extensively with her husband , visiting gardens and galleries around the world. After a trip to France and Giverny, the famous Impressionist painter's Claude Monet's enchanting home, her inspiration was at a peak and she worked at home in her studio prolifically producing oil paintings in the Impressionist style, including commissioned works. In their new home, her own garden flourished in an exhilarating combination of colors and textures. At this time she also began to produce and

direct art shows in malls and outdoor locations, such as art and wine festivals and blocked off street fairs, all around the San Francisco Bay Area. Her new husband was the perfect salesman for her art while she attended to the business of organizing and directing the art shows at the sites. By the 1980's, outdoor shows were becoming a thriving market for many painters, print makers and artists in a strongly emerging crafts movement. Zoe gave crafts people who produced original pottery, sculpture, jewelry, stained glass, photography, textiles and other mediums an opportunity to participate in her circuit of annual shows. Zoe's Art Productions and sales of her own paintings were highly successful enterprises overall. There were times when running the business conflicted with the time she needed to paint, but with help she persevered. Toward the end of the 1980's at the height of her successful shows, some rather cut throat competitors in the art show business arrived on the scene, aggressively stealing shows out from under her and undermining her loyal artist following. It was discouraging and her desire to paint more and her husband's health problems motivated her to sell the business in early 1990's. She continued to paint, receive commissions and show her work as she was able.

All through the mid 1980's up to the present, a new decorating trend emerged for homes and offices that shed the rustic dark brown oak and orange style and adopted a more romantic and neo classic decor in white, beige, and rose tones that is accented perfectly by Zoe's palette of soft pinks, reds, lavenders, and blues. Her impressions of flower gardens, window boxes spilling over with flowering vines, and empty place settings of inviting and intimate tables and patio nooks surrounded by potted flowers are not portraits of individuals, but

surrounded by potted flowers are not portraits of individuals, but solitary places into which our eye can linger and rest from hectic fast paced lives. These images merged beautifully into the new decor. She sold numerous paintings and displayed her work in several galleries.

Sadly, Zoe's husband passed away in September of 1993. It was a deep loss and painting was a small comfort in the first year of grief. Pressing affairs of settling the estate weighed heavily on her mind and she found difficulty in concentrating and focusing. She experienced the fears of finding her direction in life and in her art work without her husband's support. I realized then that my mother had never faced either living alone (there was only a year between her first and second marriages) or solely supporting herself. This is a far cry from the type of struggles I have undergone along with most of my own generation. Partnership has changed in it's design and ability to provide complete financial support for either partner. Because of changing social and economic pressures compromises may be necessary to be reached in attempting to balance marriage, two educations and careers, and the responsibilities of a household.

This past year as Zoe's energy and direction have become clearer she has begun to teach. At present she is finding it challenging and stimulating to have four students come to her home for painting instruction. It fills her need for contact and artistic spontaneity and freshness.

Zoe joined a revival of the San Francisco Artist's Guild, of which she was a founding member some 35 years ago, when they recently decided to become a non-profit group and become more involved in sponsoring high school age art students and fund raising efforts. Somewhat predictably,

factions and problems have developed within the organization, which as a senior member , Zoe is participating in resolving. As so many accomplished persons do, who have a wealth of experience and knowledge to contribute, Zoe at ⁶⁷~~76~~ is moving into the most important and satisfying aspect of her long art career; passing on the accumulated wisdom of her years in the art field, her vision, and adventurously moving towards her most sublime and masterful impressions.