

Rusticating in paint

by Christopher Schink

If it's rusty, old, bent, or broken and somewhere out in the countryside, do you have an irresistible urge to paint it? Nothing seems to attract a watercolorist more than a rust bucket, a farm building in disrepair or the old rocking chair on its front porch. Where does this interest in the rustic and antiquated come from? Is it acquired or are we born with it?

Although every middle-aged painter must have felt some association with things that are old and creaky, making them the subject of a painting is a fairly recent concept in art history. Prior to the 19th Century, most landscape painting depicted some idealized classical scene with a title like "Herminia With The Shepherds."

Sketching old farmhouses (or "Agricultural Subjects:" as the English called them) didn't become acceptable until the early 19th Century and even then innovative painters such as Constable had to struggle to convince the critics that an old mill was as interesting and morally uplifting a subject as any scene in Greek mythology.

The 19th Century public, surrounded by the offensive ugliness of the industrial revolution, was quicker to respond to paintings of everyday, bucolic, rural scenes. Country landscapes became a common and popular subject for watercolorists, and painters no longer had to add a Greek nymph to every scene to have it accepted in the Academy show. The romantic view of where we come from

and what we were and the urge to record it in paint is understandable. Our contemporary world seems less inspiring. Certainly a dilapidated barn in the countryside seems to have more character than that new condominium down the street. But few of us today have much personal involvement with rusting farm equipment or rural life. To even find such subjects requires several hours of driving through heavy traffic. Rural subjects seem inviting

and appropriate, mostly because they're traditional. They're what watercolorists are supposed to paint, what they've always painted.

Painting, at least in the Western world, is not based on tradition. It is a form of personal expression—the artist's thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the world that surrounds him. Although we all on occasion can suffer from



"Cotswold Cottage In the Rain" by David Cox (1783-1859). Watercolor on paper, 12"x14". Collection of Christopher Schink

It was Cox's ability to capture effects of weather, not his rustic subjects—the thatched cottage, little old lady, and the ducks—that gained him a reputation as one of the great watercolorists in 19th Century England.

bouts of nostalgia, putting those feelings in paint will not produce great art. Remember, most of the landscape watercolorists from the past that we admire—Turner, Whistler, Cezanne, Homer, Sargent, Hopper, Burchfield, and Marin—were painting their contemporary world in a new and creative way.

What new insights can you bring to a painting of a dilapidated barn?

What will your painting tell us about that subject that is different from what Constable told us over 150 years ago? How will your painting be different from the 10,000 other watercolors of the same subject?



"Highland Majesty" by Fran Larsen. Watercolor on paper, 24"x36".

In this rural New Mexican subject Larsen finds a vehicle for her personally expressive treatment of color and shape.

What distinguishes contemporary painters who continue to work with rural themes is not the subjects they choose, but their creative treatment of them. For example, Fran Larsen in "Highland Majesty" has taken a distant viewpoint that offers exciting design possibilities and then has added highly personal color to her subject. And even in David Cox's 1847 watercolor of a Cotswold cottage, it is not the rustic building (charming as it is) but his convincing depiction of a quality of light and weather that makes the painting so effective. Simply finding a rusty bucket hanging on a fencepost and painting it won't pro-

duce a distinguished work of art. Painting things you know and feel deeply about and painting them in a personally expressive way is what makes painting rewarding. So, the next time you feel like loading up the car and going out into the countryside you might be better off leaving your paints at home and packing a picnic lunch.