

## **A Brief History of Watercolor USA Honor Society**

Springfield Missouri Museum of Art (SMMA) has the unique and distinguished reputation for being the birthplace of two watershed events in the history of art in the United States. The first milestone took place in 1962 when Watercolor USA was conceived and organized as a major national competitive exhibition to be sponsored annually by Springfield Missouri Museum of Art. The second occurred in 1985 when Springfield Missouri Museum of Art encouraged and supported the inception of Watercolor USA Honor Society (WHS), a new national watercolor society born from the award winners and jurors participating in Watercolor USA exhibitions. The history of these two important intertwined creations unfolded as follows.

The competition show was part of the historical evolution of post World War II American art. Thousands of young Americans were allowed the luxury of trying their hand at the arts via the GI Bill. As they graduated from their universities, these freshly minted artists wanted to show the product of their newly acquired skills. The number of art shows with quality jurors that would comprise a creative track record resume was very important to young artists seeking to gain employment in the university system and for making gallery contacts in the nineteen sixties. Only a handful of major competition shows were in existence at that time and these exhibitions could only display a couple of hundred pieces of art a year. Consequently, small art groups and universities with exhibition space started to sponsor annual competition exhibits.

Few exhibits specifically focused on watercolor at the time of Watercolor USA's inauguration. Many exhibit sponsors considered watercolors to be somewhat lesser in importance than oil paintings. In 1962 Kenneth L. Shuck, Springfield Missouri Museum of Art's second Director, had the foresight and courage to establish Watercolor USA as a yearly competitive event to showcase American artists working in watercolor. Springfield Missouri Museum of Art was not seeking to be a tastemaker; rather it would seek each year to unveil an active cross section of the very best that was being created in watercolor painting in the United States. With the encouragement of Mario Cooper, American Watercolor Society President, along with the support of the SMMA staff and Board including Bob Johnson, Curator of Education, Kenneth Shuck saw the opportunity for Springfield Missouri Museum of Art to explicitly devote itself to advancing watercolor painting and seized it. Watercolor USA was soon catapulted into national prominence.

Over the intervening years following Watercolor USA's birth, there was a glut of art shows. The scene started to take on an almost art lottery complexion. During those years, the unforgiving aspect of the medium of watercolor in terms of necessity of skill and control required to complete a successful work was grasped. Many of the most famous artists included watercolor paintings in their achievements. By the mid nineteen seventies the art boom artists who had been regular contributors to Watercolor USA had become well established in academia and/or commercial galleries and had no further need to compete with emerging talent. Springfield Missouri Museum of Art understood that it could not attain its objective to highlight watercolor painting on its efforts alone. The participation and support of artists would be essential to Watercolor USA's continued success. In 1976 Bill Landwehr was selected to be Springfield Missouri Museum of Art's new Director and he decided to invite a number of established artists to participate in the annual show thereby insuring quality Watercolor USA exhibitions. Landwehr was responsible for further promoting watercolor painting by touring Watercolor USA competitive exhibitions within the United States and for two exhibitions of watercolors from the SMMA's permanent collection traveling to Taiwan and France.

Initially, several jurors selected the works to be included in the annual Watercolor USA exhibition. Since 1984 a single judge has determined which paintings would be included in the Watercolor USA competition as well as designating its award winners. Public response and patronage for Watercolor USA artists was fervent. SMMA Board, staff, visitors, individual, and corporate patrons enthusiastically selected paintings from Watercolor USA to go into their own private collections,

and so accorded Watercolor USA artists the respect and admiration they so deserved for their inventive originality. SMMA's Director and Curator of Collections chose which watercolor paintings would be purchased from each annual Watercolor USA exhibition for the Springfield Missouri Museum of Art's permanent collection. Soon Springfield Missouri Museum of Art had acquired the beginnings of a major collection of American watercolor paintings produced in the last half of the twentieth century. The Board believed their Springfield Missouri Museum of Art's formidable contemporary American watercolor collection would be of historical significance regardless of how the accomplishments of artists working in watermedia were graded by future historians.

Bill Armstrong talked with artists from around the country who had been a part of the early years of Watercolor USA. The artists all agreed that the show had been very important to their success and they wanted to be involved in doing something to insure its continuation. In 1985 with that goal in mind and with the 25th anniversary of Watercolor USA exhibition at the Springfield Missouri Museum of Art coming up, Bill Armstrong approached Bill Landwehr, SMMA's Director, and Bob Johnson, SMMA's Curator of Education, who had been on staff when Watercolor USA was conceived twenty five years earlier. The Board of SMMA was presented with the idea of having an invitational watercolor exhibit that would be more than just a fashion show of current art trends. The idea of organizing a society to recognize jurors and to honor the widespread talents of artists working in the kinetic medium of watercolor was discussed. Once again the Board of Springfield Missouri Museum of Art made a bold decision and authorized Bill Armstrong to pursue his vision.

Well aware that the country really didn't need another watercolor society with two national plus some 250 regional and state societies already in existence, Bill Armstrong knew there was something novel about the new national watercolor society he was beginning to build. This society had a museum, one that was serious about American watercolor. The dream of Watercolor USA Honor Society as an independently governed, not for profit organization was brought into existence with the formation of its Articles of Incorporation signed on October 7, 1985, by Bill Armstrong, Bob Johnson, and Bill Senter. Watercolor USA Honor Society was established with its intention to cultivate watercolor painting through Watercolor USA exhibition and to make contact with all those artists who had contributed to the success of its exhibition. Recognizing that the Springfield Missouri Museum of Art's holdings were the nucleus of a historically significant collection of American watercolor paintings, a chief goal of the organization would be to focus attention on and to help expand its permanent watercolor collection. Watercolor USA was to become the competitive show that would keep on giving by yearly producing signature members to Watercolor USA Honor Society.

Watercolor USA Honor Society would pay tribute to those people most responsible for making Watercolor USA a success by offering membership with the signature WHS to acknowledge those gifted individuals who had served as its jurors and the participating artists who had received the jurors' awards. The response by those eligible to become members was excellent. One hundred and seventy five artists out of some three hundred that were eligible responded to the first membership drive. The new members were located very well geographically, and the news was spreading fast about the exciting, prestigious, newly formed WHS. Watercolor USA Honor Society was launched.

The first move of Watercolor USA Honor Society was to hold a symposium titled Watercolor NOW! in Spring Green, Wisconsin, to find out who the members were, what WHS was about, and what the organization might be capable of. The first meetings were held in the Aldebaran barn adjacent to Frank Lloyd Wright's hillside school at Taliesin East on May 28-31, 1986. The trailblazers present were co-chairmen, Bill Armstrong and William Landwehr, Director of Springfield Missouri Museum of Art, plus WHS charter members Jerry Baum, Merry Berry, Edward Betts, Judi Betts, Rich Clubb, Jim Foose, Judy Richardson Gard, Edward Herbleck, Francis Meisch, Fred Messersmith, Rosalie Price, Carl Sublett, E.J. Velardi, Lee Weiss, and Doris White. Stephen Doherty, Editor-in-Chief, American Artist magazine, was present as witness bearer to the birth of a new watercolor society, panel discussion presenter, and given his certificate as first WHS Honorary Life Member. The first Directors elected from the fledgling Watercolor USA Honor Society were Bill

Armstrong, first WHS President; Lee Weiss, Vice-President; Bob Johnson, Secretary; and Bill Senter, Treasurer.

Subsequent to the Taliesin meeting, new President Bill Armstrong harnessed the energy and directed the passion and imaginative ideas that rushed forth, all the while constantly keeping the ambitious WHS members focused on the purpose and goals of Watercolor USA Honor Society. A conference in San Diego was called to plan WHS's first exhibit to be held November 1 – December 27, 1987, at the Springfield Missouri Museum of Art. WHS member exhibitions would be titled Watercolor NOW !! in honor of the WHS first symposium titled by that same name held in Wisconsin in 1986. Bill Armstrong organized the Watercolor NOW !! exhibit and produced the graphics. The WHS exhibit was unprecedented because artists made their own choices for the exhibition. There was no jury of selection. The debut exhibit itself was an excellent cross-section of watercolor paintings being produced in America. The exhibit was peculiarly American and quite often regionalist. It was charmingly intimate and very human. The exhibit showed that more than any other print or painting media, the oeuvre of the American aquarellist echoed the concerns and innovations of folk, pop, and jazz musicians. Instead of using the traditional printed format, a pioneering project of a "video catalog" was produced of the first Watercolor Now! exhibit. Geared for an audience of teachers and artists, the video was the best awareness tool for watercolor painting. The video was distributed nationally for education on the diversity of watercolor skills and techniques and to instill intense interest in painting in watermedia. The video served as well as advertisement to inspire artists to submit their paintings to Watercolor USA in hopes of receiving a Juror's Award, and, thereby, an invitation to join WHS. A traveling exhibit was selected from the first exhibit and a purchase picked for the permanent collection. Watercolor USA Honor Society Purchase Award for the Collection of the Springfield Missouri Museum of Art was instituted for Watercolor USA exhibition. Kirk Pedersen of Kearny, Nebraska, was the first recipient. The mission of Watercolor USA Honor Society had begun.

Since its inception, Watercolor USA has grown in size, importance and popularity. For more than four decades, Springfield Missouri Museum of Art has celebrated the finest examples of aqueous media being conceived in this country in its annual Watercolor USA exhibition. Watercolor USA enjoys renown for being the most significant exhibit to view for paintings by outstanding contemporary artists from across the nation. It is the resolve and commitment of the Springfield Missouri Museum of Art under the leadership of its Museum Director to champion creation of works in aqueous media to further enhance the annual Watercolor USA exhibition. Seeing the astounding artistic achievements each year is a humbling experience and gives tremendous gratification to those who carry forth with SMMA's design to bring excellent visual arts opportunities to the community of Springfield, Missouri, to the nation, as well as internationally. The recognition of the considerable talents of the aquarelle artists has many rewards and its jurors and juror award winners are invited to join Watercolor USA Honor Society. Watercolor USA Honor Society's intent is huge, and its tradition of quality and recognition of excellence in watermedia painting is unparalleled. By focusing national attention on Springfield Missouri Museum of Art as a major repository for conserving, preserving, and collecting watercolor art, the aim of SMMA and WHS will endure to benefit both artists and the public. As it continues to grow, the permanent collection of Springfield Missouri Museum of Art will provide the ultimate perspective on watercolor painting in the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond. In a nutshell this is the fascinating journey of how a historical legacy developed at the Springfield Missouri Museum of Art, birthplace of a national competitive exhibition called Watercolor USA, and where its offspring, Watercolor USA Honor Society, was created.