

The History of Watercolor USA and the Watercolor USA Honor Society

The Springfield Art Museum, Missouri 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 the Museum. The second occurred in 1985 when the Museum encouraged and supported the inception of The Watercolor USA Honor Society, a new national watercolor society born from the award winners and jurors participating in the 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 exhibitions.

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 Art Museum's director, had the foresight and courage to establish Watercolor USA as a yearly competitive event to showcase American artists working in watercolor. The Springfield Art Museum 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 Springfield Art Museum staff and Board including Bob Johnson, Curator of Education, Kenneth Shuck saw the opportunity for his Museum 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 contributors to Watercolor USA had become well established in academia and/or commercial galleries and had no further need to compete with emerging talent. The Springfield Art Museum, Missouri 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 the new Museum Director and he decided to invite a number of established artists to participate in the annual show thereby insuring quality Watercolor USA exhibitions.

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 the awards winners. Public response and patronage for the Watercolor USA artists was fervent. The Museum's Board, staff, visitors, individual and corporate patrons accorded the Watercolor USA artists the respect they deserved for their inventive originality and enthusiastically selected paintings from Watercolor USA to go into their own private collections. The Museum's Director and Curator of Collections purchased watercolor paintings from each annual Watercolor USA Exhibition for the Springfield Art Museum's permanent collection. Soon the Museum realized that they had acquired the beginnings of a major collection of American watercolor paintings produced in the last half of the twentieth century. The Museum believed their 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. They 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 the Watercolor USA exhibition at the Museum coming up, Bill Armstrong approached Bill Landwehr, the Museum's director, and Bob Johnson, the Museum's Curator of Education, who had been on staff when Watercolor USA was conceived twenty-five years earlier. The Springfield Art Museum's Board 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 Museum Board 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 The

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. The Watercolor USA Honor Society was established with the intention to cultivate watercolor painting through the Watercolor USA Exhibition and to make contact with all those artists who had contributed to the success of the exhibition. Recognizing that the Springfield Art Museum's holdings were the nucleus of a historically significant collection of American watercolor paintings, a chief goal of the organization would be to focus on and to help expand the Springfield Art Museum's permanent collection. Watercolor USA was to become the competitive show that would keep on giving by yearly producing signature members to The Watercolor USA Honor Society.

The Watercolor USA Honor Society would pay tribute to those people 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. The Watercolor USA Honor Society was launched.

Since its inception, Watercolor USA has grown in size, importance and popularity. As of the summer of 2011, for five decades, The Springfield Art Museum, Missouri will have 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 Art Museum, Missouri under the leadership of Jerry Berger, its current Director, to champion creation of works in aqueous media to further enhance the annual Watercolor USA exhibition. Seeing the astounding artistic achievements each year in Watercolor USA is a humbling experience and gives tremendous gratification to those who carry forth the Museum's design to bring excellent visual arts opportunities to the community of Springfield, Missouri, to the nation, as well as internationally.

The Watercolor USA Honor society's intent is huge, and its tradition of quality and recognition of excellence in watermedia paintings is unparalleled. By focusing national attention on The Springfield Art Museum, Missouri as a major repository for conserving, preserving and collecting watercolor art, the aim of the Museum and WHS will endure to benefit both artists and the public. As it continues to grow, the Museum's collection 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

Art Museum, Missouri, birthplace of a national competitive exhibition called Watercolor USA, and where its offspring The Watercolor USA Honor Society, was created.

Since 2008, The Springfield Art Museum, Missouri has expanded in size and scope. Watercolor USA Honor Society made a sizeable monetary contribution towards the building of the new Bill Armstrong wing of the museum, which has greatly increased the museum's exhibition space. The new wing showcased the Japan Watercolor Federation (JWF) Exchange Exhibition in 2008, and will showcase the upcoming JWF Exchange Exhibition in 2010. Due to the success of the JWF/WHS art exchange, with a delegation from JWF visiting Springfield in 2009, and a return delegation from WHS visiting Tokyo in 2010, WHS hopes to continue international exchanges with other nations in the future. Finally, for his dedication and support of the Watercolor USA Exhibition and WHS over the years, WHS honored Jerry Berger as a Lifetime Honorary Member in 2010; Jerry Berger is only the second person in the history of WHS to receive this honor.

History compiled by Missie Dickens from information in past articles written by Jerry Berger and Bill Armstrong; edited for the newsletter by Sandra Schaffer