

Lori Putnam, IPAP

interview by Sharon Rusch Shaver

Where did you grow up? I grew up out in the wilderness in middle Tennessee with my mom, step-dad, and two older brothers. Literally, our 48 acres sat in the middle of a wildlife game reserve of Cheatham County, on a dirt road. We were about an hour outside of Nashville, but it felt like we were a day's drive to me. I remember just sitting in the big front yard and praying, "Just please, let one car pass by... just one. Maybe they would wave! Is there anyone else in the world out there?" Most days were spent working in the garden, canning, freezing, and learning other wife-like and motherly duties.

What kind of things did you like to do in school? By the time I reached 10th grade, we had moved into a small town, Ashland City. I became extremely active in high school in the drama club and was a cartoonist for the school newspaper. I sang in all of the musicals, the school choir, and in any other show I could get in to, and cheered for the wrestling team. Our school offered two years of art classes, which I took. My art teacher meant a great deal to me, and has come to see my exhibitions in the past few years. It's odd being Facebook friends with her. She was one of the first people who ever really encouraged me that I could actually do something. I remember she told me when I asked if I could be an art teacher some day, "No. You have too much talent." I'm sure she doesn't remember that, but I loved her for it.

Who or what was your greatest influence on becoming an artist, and how has that influence affected your career?

My husband Mark. Without a doubt it is Mark, first and foremost. I would never have even thought about being an artist if we had not met.

As for artists who have helped me and influenced me, the top of the list is Dawn Whitelaw. She just opened her doors wide, even before I could paint hardly at all, and helped me. I wouldn't be painting without her encouragement. The other two most-influential friends are Scott Christensen and Quang Ho.

In terms of career influence, I would have to say Eric Rhoads. He continues to give me advice and has given me wonderful opportunities such as being on the faculty at the Plein air Convention. SO many wonderful artists could be doing that instead of me. I will always be grateful those blessings.

Approximately how many years have you been painting, and have you always painted plein air, or was it something that you discovered later in your career as an artist.

I picked up my first oil paint in 1997. I still have that painting. It is a really horrible still life with peppers. In 2005 I began my new business learning to paint "full-time." That's when we sold the house and all of our belongings. I got in a class with Quang and a few months later we took the plunge to move to Italy for 8 months so that I could learn. I was really a beginner and I knew I needed concentration and to learn fast. Most people know how to paint before they start a career in it. I'm odd, I know. During the 8 months, I painted nearly 200 paintings, just studying and experimenting and trying to learn on my own.

In 2006 I attended my first plein air festival, Plein air Easton. Talk about jumping in with both feet! I really should have started with something simple, but seems that just isn't the way I do things. I cried all week and swore I would never do another one. In 2007, I went to San Luis Obispo for their festival. I decided that plein air events would be a good way to market myself and get my name across the country, while getting to paint and grow in some of the most beautiful places in the U.S. That's how I've spent the last 8 years, traveling, painting, learning, teaching, and marketing. It's a great job... a greatly exhausting job. I love it.

What are your favorite supplies when painting plein air, can you please list them?

If I'm traveling for weeks on end in foreign countries all by myself, I want the smallest pack possible and I usually take my 8x10 Open Box M and a Slik SprintPro II tripod. Together they are only about 3 pounds! However, if I'm taking a road trip and painting most near my car or at least without much hiking, I might take either my 12x16 Open Box M and the same tripod listed above, or even my Beauport. I have half a dozen different set ups for different purposes. The common thread among them is the lighter weight, the better. I want to work as much as possible out of one backpack. I finally splurged and got a really great-fitting one with the added waist strap. It's a Kelty Redwing (which comes in a lot of different sizes to fit different height people). Best investment ever.

For many years I insisted on only taking 3 colors of paint and white. I think that really helped my color mixing skills and understanding of color, and I can still work that way if I really need to lighten my load. As for the paint brand, I'm currently using all Gamblin. I love their Solvent Free Gel. First of all, as the name implies, it is solvent free. Next, it is clear (rather than brown or cloudy) so my colors stay true and do not yellow over time. It helps paintings dry faster and leaves a nice sheen so the colors still look nice if you're having to exhibit work before it is varnished. Because it is a gel, I can get a good, heavy load of paint to hold a brush stroke or make a hard edge, and of course I use Gamsol as it is the safest OMS on the market. I also use GamVar for my final varnish.

It took a while for me to adjust to the different feel of Rosemary brushes. I used Silver Grand Prix for many years and I still believe they make great brushes for bristle-brush users. But after studying with Quang Ho, and learning more about making unique and specific shapes, (but not really being able to make them), he gave me some Rosemary brushes to try. The light bulb came on in my head... use different tools for different tasks. Before, it was like I was trying to turn an egg with a pitchfork or something. Now, almost every brush in my kit is Rosemary.

I use plein air panels from FrenchCanvas.com. They make a great linen panel (I use what they refer to as "landscape, smooth"). It has a feel I really love.

In my pack, you'll also find Wet Ones (which really remove the paint from your hands very well), assorted palette knives for mixing and experimenting with edges, sketchpad, hat, sunscreen, bug spray, water, paper towels... the usual stuff.

What do you think is most important to emphasize in plein air painting?

Sometimes I wish these plein air festivals had never been born. Don't confuse that thought with my not enjoying them. But in my little world, plein air is best used as a tool for gathering information and growth, not as a competitive sport. I think these events have been great for public awareness, but they do not necessarily always support the idea that as artists, we should never exhibit anything that isn't our very best. Whether that is completed outside or inside should not make a painting more or less important. Only exhibit your best, period.

When teaching workshops, what is the most important thing you would like your students to learn from you?

Something I learned from Quang... no fear, no ego. The only way to actually learn something or discover for yourself even, is to let go of your fears... fears of failure, wasting your time or worse expensive supplies, fear of messing up the good part of a painting because you don't know how to handle the not so good part. I love that idea (I forget who first said it) that if you really love an area of your painting, but the painting isn't working, the best thing to do is to scrape off the area that you love. It frees you up to work on the whole piece. I do that all the time. I also know some folks even fear success. Next, you have to let go of your ego.

Do you have any upcoming workshops that you would like to talk about?

It's a good year for workshops. I've already gotten to teach in some very beautiful places and have several more I'm looking forward to. This fall will be the first one in my new studio, so that's exciting. I want to make that an annual thing. It is a flexible workshop, meaning that you have some choice in the number of days you attend depending on your ability and availability. Sometimes I feel like I'm just getting going and getting through to someone and it's the third day of a three-day workshop. This format lets a smaller group have two additional days of more intense study. If it goes well, I may have even longer options in the future.

The other one I'm excited about is next spring in Sicily. I've never been and cannot wait to teach there. I know Italy very well, but Sicily is very different.

What are the pressures of being a successful artist? Are you finding the rewards far outweigh the hard work it takes?

Well, success, of course, is all relative to where you think you were, right? Or maybe to where you think you're going? Each of us defines success in a different way. I remember one of the questions on an application for a Scott Christensen class long ago was, "What would being a successful artist mean to you?" The most success I feel is not when I'm on stage at the Plein air Convention (although I have to say that is pretty freaky to think about... I mean... that I get to do that... who do I think I am, really?). The most success I feel, honestly, is when I learn something and have one of those moments that just happens on a painting and you don't even know how.

As far as the rewards, I never imagined that it could be this great. I still have a long way to go, of course, but it is unbelievable to me that so many great things have come my way in really a fairly short amount of time. But yes, to answer your question, there are many new, let's call them, opportunities that come along with success. Those opportunities create added stress and pressure. You won't find me complaining about them though. I'm blessed and it's all good.