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Maine and Travel in Art: An Interview with Melissa Pelletier Provencher

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Can you tell us a bit about yourself?

I am a self-taught artist from Biddeford, Maine who works primarily in colored pencil. I have been drawing all of my life and still have pictures that I did when I was very young. For the last 15 years I have owned and operated a small print shop in Kennebunk, Maine called Brown Fox Printing. In addition to the custom print projects I do for others, some of whom are also artists, my shop allows me to produce products, like art prints and notecards, that feature my original art. I have also written, illustrated, and produced a fun line of children's activity books—The Wicked Good Maine Activity Book series—of which I have sold 15,000 copies over the last ten years or so. They have been available for purchase in more than 60 stores throughout New England.

Growing up, I lived in many different places across the US and Germany. My father was in the military, and we moved every 3 or 4 years. For the last 33 years, I have lived in southern Maine.

I think there are two types of artists: those who are born with a natural gift and those who have to work at it—I have to work at it.

What inspired you to create this piece? How did you create it?

This piece took on a life of its own. (I love when art takes an unexpected turn in a new direction—it makes the entire process more enjoyable when I don't know where it will end up.) I started with the bird and had fully intended on making a more realistic piece, but then got the idea that adding some intricate designs would make it a far more interesting process for me to work through. I'm really pleased with the way this one turned out—it inspired a number of other

pieces that I am very happy with. This piece, which I have not named, is a mixed medium work using colored pencil, ink, and graphite pencil on 140# Strathmore watercolor paper.

Your work, like this piece, is often very detailed. Why do you think you draw such precise and intricate images? Are you a very analytical person, generally?

I like the challenge of a detailed/intricate piece. Some of that may be influenced by my admiration for MC Escher's work. I could easily turn out masses of work if I had a more laid-back approach to my art, but I don't think those methods would produce something I am really happy with. I would definitely say I am an analytical person, and it is reflected in the art I produce.

Do you think of yourself as having a particular artistic style?

No, I like to try new techniques and styles with my art. One week I may enjoy drawing photo-realistic pieces, and the next week I may begin to draw in a surreal style. Most artists do have a distinctive look to their work, but I like to mix it up. The one constant is my choice of medium—colored pencil, but I do also use watercolor, ink, and regular drawing pencils.

Your family name, “Pelletier-Provencher” is very Franco-American. Before you and I started talking about our shared Franco-American heritage these past few years, did you think about it much?

No, I never really thought too much about my heritage. I am Franco-American, and that is just a fact I have always known and never really investigated much. But after having many fantastic talks with you about our common heritage, I would like to take the time to learn more about my ancestors, their struggles, and where they came from. I recently returned from France

where I visited regions I believe much of my lineage originates from. It was a great trip full of wonderful surprises.

Do you think your heritage influences your work in any way? If so, how?

No, I think I am just a creative person who needs to express myself through art. My heritage does not influence my work in any way—at this point—but that could change if I learn a bit more about where my lineage comes from. That’s one of the joys of being an artist: I never know where my inspiration will come from and what direction it may take me.

We were friends in high school, and I remember you sketching at the cafeteria table during lunch. Did you start drawing in high school, or before then? Did you grow up in an artistic family?

I have been drawing my entire life—I have fun sketches I did when I was 5 or 6 years old. My mother and grandmother really encouraged me, and I am so grateful for their support. I remember sitting at the kitchen table and drawing with my mother. She taught me some fun techniques and has always been my biggest fan. One year for Christmas, my parents gave me an art studio in a box kit. It was the best gift I ever received and captured my interest in art for life. Once in high school, I really got serious about my work. There are a few other family members who enjoy creating things, or enjoy crafting pieces—my grandmother loved crafting and tried her hand at drawing and painting later in her life, and some of my nephews have expressed an interest in drawing and painting.

I remember, sometime around junior year of high school, you suddenly disappeared.

Many years later, when we reconnected, you told me that you had moved to Germany

during this time. In fact, you lived in many different places early in life, and now, you travel extensively with your husband. Do you think exposure to various cities and countries impacts your art?

I come from a military family. My father was a career Army man and a war veteran, and my family lived in many different places. So yes, my junior year of high school was spent in Germany. Though I did not fully appreciate the opportunity at the time, that year away greatly influenced my desire to produce art and inspired me to work hard to produce better pieces. The American school I attended had a great arts program with dedicated teachers. I was surrounded by students who shared my passions—it was a great experience. Today, I continue to visit Germany on a regular basis as I feel it is my second home. Some of the friendships I made while living there are still with me 35 years later. I have kept in contact with a couple of my former classmates who went on to pursue careers in art. They continue to inspire me to this day.

What kind of artwork do you most like observing or learning from?

I enjoy all sorts of artwork, from the surreal to the realistic. I have found inspiration in many artists, including MC Escher, who has a fantastic style that I really love, Beverly Doolittle and her wonderfully detailed “hide and seek” pieces, Gustav Klimt’s works in gold, Johannes Vermeer’s beautifully composed paintings, and many of the old masters. Living in Maine and owning my own print shop has also given me the opportunity to meet lots of talented local artists, which can help to keep me focused and motivated.

Are you able to tell us anything about what you are working on currently?

I have always wanted to write and illustrate a children's picture book, so I am toying with the idea of finally doing one. At this point, the title I have in mind is "If Guinea Pigs Could Paint." It will be a charming story about achieving your dreams and will feature some of the many pets my family had when I was growing up. I have been working on developing the characters for this project for a couple of months now and hope to have it completed in a year or so. I am so excited about finally doing this. I will probably only produce a limited quantity for family and friends, but I may try to get it published with a traditional Maine publisher.