



Painting with Passion

Imagine Jan Dorion Whitney at age four: her head bent over, brown eyes nearly squeezed shut in concentration, dabbing paint onto a page. Her intensity could melt the goo on her tot-size brush. A glimpse of her at age seven would show her at the miniature easel she begged her parents to buy for her. A small black beret hides half her head of wavy red hair. A tiny mustache is painted on her upper lip, the self-imposed trademarks of an artist. Focus the mind's camera on Jan at age thirteen, and it produces a Polaroid of her in a mechanical drawing class at Las Cruces, New Mexico High School. She is one of only two girls in a group of nearly thirty boys. Jan is not there for adolescent romance; she wants to sharpen her artistic perspective and sense of proportion. Flash forward to today. Jan, now fifty-one, still has a brush in her hand and paints every day. "I always wanted to paint," she declares. "I'm one of those people who knew when I was four years old that this is what I wanted to do."

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ARTWORK COURTESY OF JAN DORION WHITNEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DONALD CLARK FONGER



Artist Jan Dorion Whitney's works are studies in intense color, lush scenes, and narrative moments. Her women, like the dark-haired subject of *A Quiet Moment* (opposite), intrigue viewers with their averted gazes and contemplative postures. Her still lifes, like *Yellow Blaze Floral* (this page), exude energy and abundance.

“I love the good old boys: Matisse, Cezanne, Gauguin, and van Gogh,” she declares, speaking of them as if they are favorite uncles. “They inspire me, and life inspires me.”

Her color-intense works with their texture-rich perspectives are born of such single-minded focus. Though she attended New Mexico State University, she dropped out to paint, paint, paint. She painted by day and worked as a baccarat croupier at a Tahoe casino at night, “back when they still played with bank rolls of cash,” she recalls. She also worked at pay-the-rent-jobs in California, devoting all of her spare time to her artwork. “It bothered me for a few years that I didn’t finish college,” she says, “But I learned so much more on my own. You can’t help but develop your own style.”

Her self-education allowed her a freedom that those in a college setting may not experience. “I mix my own colors,” she says. “I mix them so strangely. If you went to school, you wouldn’t mix them this way.” Though she eschewed the tutelage of university professors, she still learned from the best—the post-Impressionist masters. “I love the good old boys: Matisse, Cezanne, Gauguin, and van Gogh,” she declares, speaking of them as if they are favorite uncles. “They inspire me, and life inspires me.”

Jan has always looked to where she has lived for artistic stimulation, from her New England birthplace in Bennington, Vermont, to the purple plains of New Mexico, to her current home in Palm City, Florida. Her frequent travels also suggest subjects for her work. After a visit to family in New Hampshire last summer, Jan came back with sketches. She drove through Kentucky’s emerald racehorse playgrounds, and these scenes now tempt her to interpret them in a series. A few weeks’ visit in Chicago this past summer has her wondering: Could she catch the Windy City on canvas?

Part of her inspiration travels right along with her: her business partner, framer, and top promoter, husband Donald Fonger. “I’ll look at a spot and say, ‘Wouldn’t that look great in a painting?’” he remarks. To them, he says, the whole world is a veritable frame for art. That he should see the world this way makes sense. Donald once owned a framing shop and met Jan when a friend invited him to one of her shows.

Jan, seen standing in front of *Paradise Island*, travels to many edenic places and then translates them into vibrant paintings. In *Kindred Spirits* (opposite), two Eve-like women lounge in the lushness of their own private paradise.



Her details exude abundance: round, ripe oranges, profusely blooming plants, soft, silken drapes. Her human subjects are most often beguilingly elusive women.



Jan's paintings often suggest a story in progress, as does *Paradise Island* (above). One wonders, where is the couple that drank that bottle of wine? Are they on their honeymoon? In *Birdcage* (opposite), we have to ask, what is the woman in the patterned dress thinking? Why is one bird caged and another standing free?

"I didn't know she was the show artist when I met her. I saw her across the room and was smitten," Donald admits. "Framing was kind of my ruse to start talking to her." Kindred gypsies, they got married and sailed with friends to Caribbean islands such as Bequia and Abaco on their honeymoon, the first of many sailing trips that would result in art.

Today, at home in Florida, Jan paints in a glass-framed, 1,000-square-foot studio flooded with light. There she turns the sketches she has brought back from her travels into large works, like *Paradise Island* and *Tuscan Sun*. Jan long ago outgrew her tiny grade-school easel and now has several set up in her studio, including two easels that hold 300-pound masterpieces-in-progress. To reach the upper portions of paintings that measure up to four feet by five, she has to climb a stepladder. But large life delights her: "There's nothing more fun than

to walk into a home and see these big paintings," she says.

Though Jan's work has appeared on the walls of the *Friends* and *Ellen* program sets and has been featured at major art festivals like Artigras in Palm Beach and the National Art Festival in Naples, Florida, she will never forget the excitement she felt back in the early 1990s when a national company began marketing her prints: "I would be walking down a street and see one of my paintings, out of the blue, in a gallery window. It was such a thrill."

Jan's collectors know her by her favored themes: calm seas, curtains opening onto peaceable kingdoms shaded by palms or rimmed by mountains. Her details exude abundance: round, ripe oranges, profusely blooming plants, soft, silken drapes. Her human subjects are most often beguilingly elusive women. Far from sirens, these heroines fascinate through their own absorption. They gaze on a pet dove, a horizon chunky with mountains, or some arresting object just beyond the viewer's range. Observers might feel they have become the observed, caught in these languid femmes' field of vision. "The women all have a little mystery about them," observes Robert Forster, M.D., a south Florida collector who, with his wife, Gayle, owns seven originals.



“The comments are about how peaceful it makes people feel, how they can sit down with a cup of tea when they’re in the room with one and just enjoy it. They say ‘I want to be where that painting is.’”

He recalls the first painting he bought for his wife. It depicted a reclining subject: “There are two glasses with her, one empty and one half full, and she looks as though she could be listening to someone. You wonder, ‘Who is she talking to? What are they talking about? What’s on her mind?’”

Jan agrees that her subjects are meant to intrigue rather than explain. The man who taught her mechanical drawing class and became her mentor, L.B. Porter, would point to that as one of her trademarks. “You can just look at her work and say, ‘That’s a Jan Whitney work.’” Now an artist himself, Porter is the one who urged Jan to paint every day, advice that has served her so well. “I’d say her works are pretty unique,” he says, adding, “She’s a very special person.”

Jan’s buyers never seem content with one painting. Ted Fellenbaum, a doctor from Michigan, has been buying her works since he first saw them at an art festival ten years ago. “I came upon this art that was so distinctive, the colors, the Matisse look. It was a combination that I knew I would be buying before I left.” His favorite, a seascape called *Rocky Point*, acts as a veritable ticket back to a spot in Aruba he once enjoyed. “I am always enchanted by what Jan comes up with whenever she goes somewhere,” he says.

Donald says he often hears that his wife’s art has a meditative quality: “The comments are about how peaceful it makes people feel, how they can sit down with a cup of tea when they’re in the room with one and just enjoy it. They say ‘I want to be where that painting is.’”

Donald’s personal favorite is a Cezanne-inspired squarely brushed inlet rimmed with sailboats that Jan painted for him when he was away on a daylong sailing trip. No doubt while he was on that trip, he thought of his wife and imagined her busy at work in front of her easel, and there assuredly was she, full of intense passion, the image of concentration little changed from a similar scene that took place all those years ago. ☺



Tapestries of color, Jan’s renderings of the peaceful Tuscan countryside capture its distinctive, warm colors and rich textures. The orb in *Tuscan Sun* (opposite) sets the scene aglow, while in *Hills of Ochre* (above), the goldenrod and green hills spark the light.