

Artists' connection to the work matters first

By Robert Schimmel

Right in the middle of a perfectly eloquent description to a client of how many artists work, I notice a disconnected, puzzled or glazed look that begs, "No kidding, must be a French pastry. Just what are you talking about?" And thus begins an enlightening exchange to edify me on presumption and my client on the purpose and discipline of plein air painting.

In my days of gallery sales I often rode the fence of saying too much and conversely blowing right by details the embarrassed or timid clientele would bluff, avoid or not realize they should request. Hence, the often subliminal query, "What does it mean so I can decide to care or not?" Fair enough. Plein air means "full of air" literally and "outside, on-location, and in the presence of one's subject" more practically. This stands in stark contrast to art done strictly from reference material (usually photos), imagination or both.



Robert
Schimmel

"But who cares?" you ask with a hint of indignation. After all, you just want something beautiful on your wall. OK, that's legit and appreciated from a sales point of view. But for one who enjoys a back-story or the sizzle that makes

fillet preferable to London broil, plein air has a history that literally gives us the foundational verities of light, form and recession (no, not our economic indicator, but how objects recede or appear more distant). Most often this truth and the emotional, physical connections between artist and subject are what energize, permeate subconsciously, and completely describe the artwork in ways unplanned or anticipated.

Let's face it, every day or vantage point at any location will be unique due to dozens of constantly changing influences (weather, direction of light, growth, season, etc.) that only the first-hand, caring, inquisitive eye will detect and record. Thus, plein air art will generally have myriad, unnoticed subtleties not included in studio work that the casual buyer needs to be aware of or taught. (Now, before anyone thinks I am favoring one kind of creative process over another, let me assure you that I am not judging anything here.) This certainly applied to me, not as a collector, but as an excited young artist in pursuit of understanding and accuracy.

I began my art career and courtship of nature (or perhaps she of me) from the painter's viewpoint with just a sketchbook and all the influence I could muster from my father's tutelage. Like too many relationships, ours became dependent on convenience and conditions not to mention the element of attraction ... hey, I'm a guy; what can I say? And like any self-respecting femme fatale, her whims and wiles challenged and enticed my sincerity and devotion. On a perfect day it's easy to just sit and focus on the miracles of creation and practice rendering all the nuances of form and light laid out like a tasty buffet. But add the not-so-perfect elements – wind, heat/cold, bugs, nowhere to sit and the passersby with endearing critiques and helpful comments – and one's powers of loving, accurate observation begin to deteriorate.

Suddenly the cool drink, bug spray-free finger prints and

odor, seductive chair and absence of sweat/chills are all lecturing your sensitivities about the wonders of your camera and how a "digital moment" is far better than anything you can duplicate, much less create! Yet nothing could be further from the truth. You know the adage "adversity builds character" or some such painful cliché. Well, the artist must feel, smell, and taste the bitterness as well as the sweetness in order to produce or evaluate his own work at a depth beyond just the visual. And this is what will be transformed and transmitted to the viewer ultimately through the plein air process.

So why do I digress with part of my background? Because this is the basic, requisite encounter any artist encounters who seeks a very personal relationship with the landscape, in particular, and desires to pass along that intimate connection and experience to the public. More important to today's commentary, this is the very story that the art enthusiast, buyer, collector and investor need to know in order to look with appreciation, sensitivity and acumen into, and not just at, any given artwork. (By the way, notice the word "artwork"; it is two words that combine creativity and effort, for you rarely get anything of value without both.)

Robert Schimmel is a professional artist and teacher in South Lake Tahoe as well as host of "Lake Tahoe Art Scene" on KTHO radio on Thursdays at 5:15pm.