



SEEING WITH THE HEART

By Mary Nelson

The influence of the Italian landscape is clearly evident in the paintings of Colorado artist Mark Pettit. It's not a huge stretch to understand his proclivity for the Italian essence in his art, as he believes that Italy is his domestic equivalent of a soul mate.

At the same time, nature is Pettit's backdrop. When he's not painting, he spends most of his free time on two wheels—road bikes, mountain bikes, or a Harley Davidson, "because this puts me directly in touch with nature and is an excellent way to see and experience the beauty of the American West."

Pettit's love affair with Italy began during a painting trip to Switzerland, Germany, and northern Italy 22 years ago. His admiration for the Italian landscape, people, and culture has insinuated itself into his paintings ever since. For almost two decades, Pettit and his wife Brenda have spent part of each year in Italy. For the past 12 years their Italian home base has been Montepulciano.

Pettit is enchanted by the Italians' appreciation for art and relates an incident that occurred during his first year living in Montepulciano that exemplifies that appreciation. Pettit was painting in a field in the hills near La Foce, when a tractor pulled onto the field. The driver stopped, turned off the engine,

Above - Grand Canal at Sant' Angelo, oil, 11" by 14"

"Well, what can I say about the Grand Canal? Everywhere along the canal, in any direction, the passing gondolas amid the magnificent palazzo are irresistible. The changing light on the splendid architecture, along with the sounds of the gondoliers in conversation, and the soft creaking and splashing of their oars make you feel as if you have stepped back in time."

Opposite Page - Rio San Francesco, oil, 17" by 10"

"The neighborhood of Castello in Venice is generally calm in comparison to other better-known parts of the city. Even to this day it is possible to wander the tranquil areas, experiencing the day-to-day life of the local residents. This scene along Rio San Francesco struck me, because of the reflective stillness in the water and the serenity of this quiet canal."





Teton Valley Floor, oil, 24" by 36"

"I believe everyone, who has ever stood in front of this mountain range, is overwhelmed by the majesty and immense beauty of these rugged peaks. The Tetons have been an enduring source of inspiration for most of my 35 years as a professional painter. It seems every visit to this area gives me something new. This scene, in afternoon light from the Antelope Flats area, has always been one of my favorites."

city's thriving music scene. During that time, he also met and married Brenda, his wife of 38 years.

Pettit played the clubs at night and pursued daytime gigs as a sign painter and creator of art for needlepoint designs. Fine art continued to be a hobby. Recognizing his artistic talent, Brenda encouraged him to show his art in an Austin gallery—a fortuitous suggestion that changed his career trajectory. In 1979, during a show at that gallery, "I met two well-known Texas artists, Delhart Windberg and A.D. Greer, both of whom gave me invaluable instruction and advice," Pettit says.

and walked across the long field toward Pettit. Introducing himself as the landowner, he scrutinized the artist's work. Then the farmer looked up and surveyed the scene Pettit was painting.

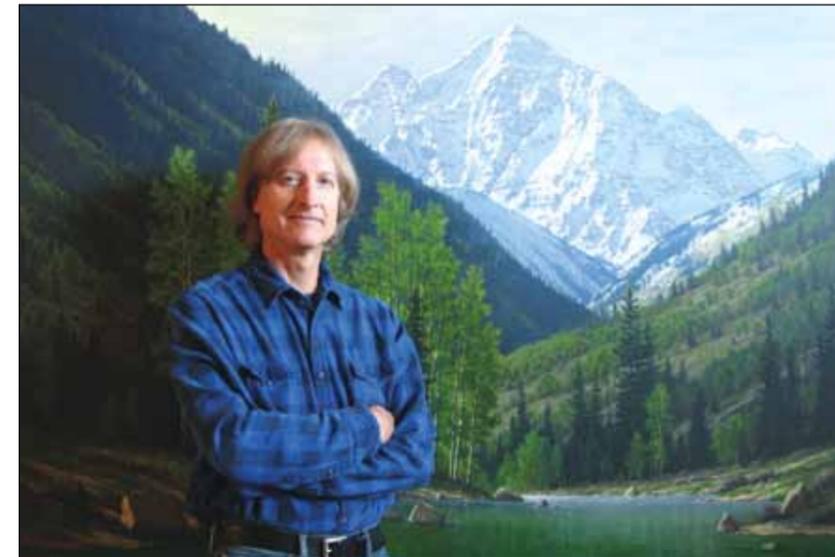
"[The farmer] said, 'Bravissimo!' Pettit recalls, "and then proceeded to ask me which bales of semolina he could remove without disturbing my composition. I thought, 'Wow, what a wonderful country.'" Already enamored by the country, that encounter sealed the artist's love affair with its people and culture.

"In my experience, I've found it can be difficult painting on private property in the United States," Pettit says. "But it was incredible that the owner of the land would come out and ask permission to do his work. That showed me the status a painter holds in Italy. I think some of the history of past artists is imbedded in the country."

Born in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1955, Pettit displayed a talent for art

early on—taking painting lessons at age 10—but, his first love was music. His father played violin, and an older brother was a violin virtuoso, so it didn't seem odd to Pettit when, "in the sixth grade my parents gave me a violin and sent me to school with it. I never argued about it; I guess it was just accepted that I was going to play the violin. Music and art from an early age have been important to me." The violin never quite made it into his musical repertoire, however. Pettit instead took up playing the guitar, something he still does today.

Being practical, Pettit did attend to the accepted mores of the day. Initially, he pursued architecture, taking courses in mechanical and architectural drafting at Texas Tech, but switched his focus and went on to earn a commercial art degree in 1974. Music sidetracked his technical career, however, and in 1975 he moved to Austin, Texas, and set himself up as a rock guitarist, playing with several bands in the



Venetian Blue, oil, 11" by 15"

"The lagoon, with sparkling light on the water and San Giorgio Maggiore in the distance, is quintessential Venice. Watching the gondolas departing from Piazzetta San Marco is something I can do for hours. I usually think of Venice in a warm light, but on this day it was bathed in blue and silver."

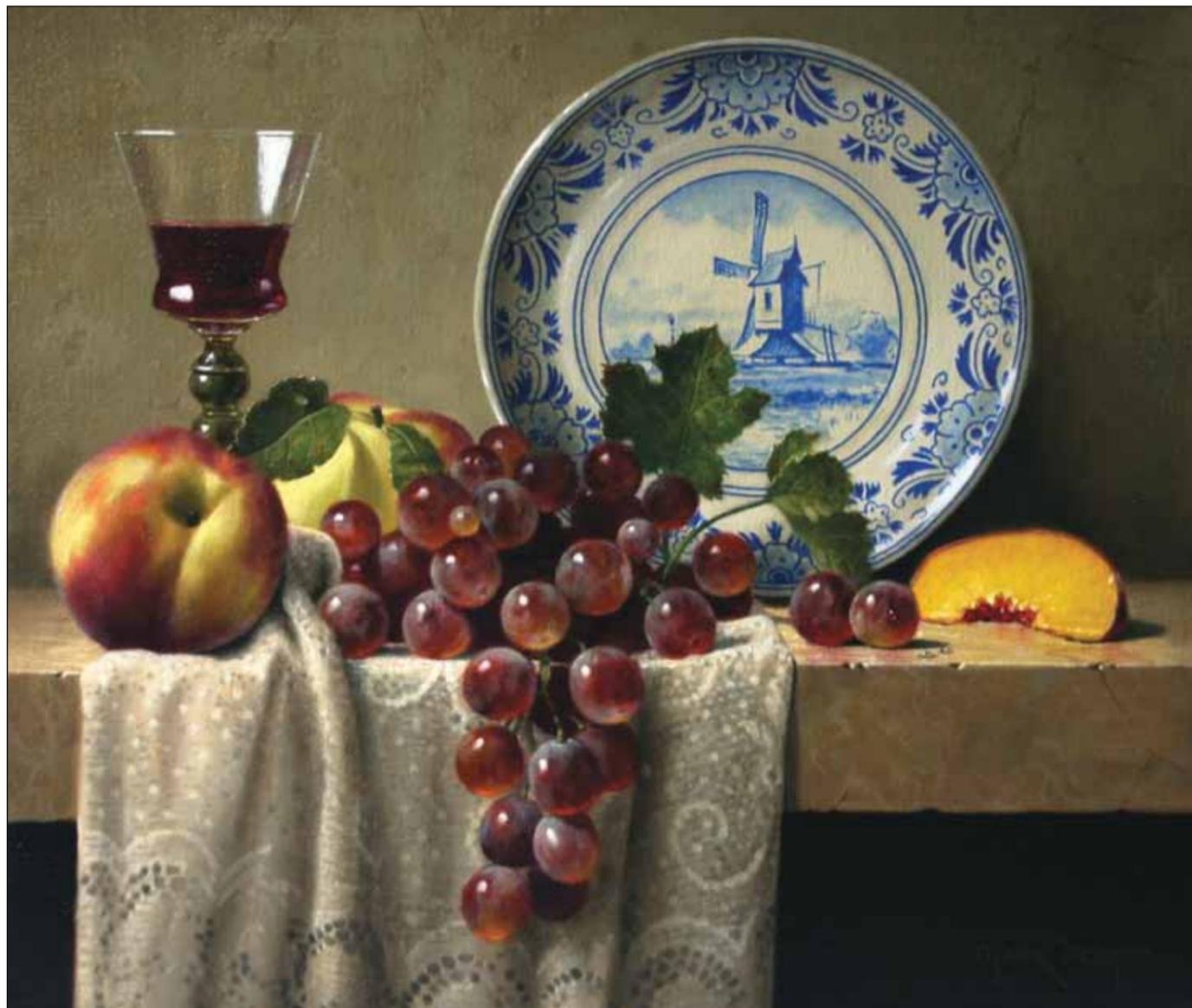
"Windberg encouraged me to put all my efforts into becoming a full-time painter. I was young and took his advice and never looked back."

Emboldened by Windberg's interest in his art, Pettit enrolled in the Schuler School of Fine Art in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1981, a school that focuses on the teachings of Jacques Maroger, author of "The Secret Formula and Techniques of the Old Masters."

While there, Pettit learned the essence of the luminosity the Old Flemish Masters imbued in their paintings. He describes it as "a painstaking process of making black oil and mastic varnish, then grinding raw pigments combined with the use of the linen canvas primed with white lead."

Applying the methods taught at





Delft Plate with Fruit, oil, 14" by 16"

"My still life paintings have been influenced by my early study at the Schuler School in Baltimore, where emphasis was placed on the techniques of the Flemish painters. Generally, I look for diverse textures and shapes in the objects I use for a composition. In this piece, the Delft plate, translucent grapes, fuzzy peaches, wine glass, and lace draped over a marble tabletop make for a rhythmic and colorful combination."

the viewer can get a sense of that emotional quality," he says. "For me, it's about seeing with the heart, not just the eyes."

Although Pettit says being an artist is a challenge, he also expresses gratitude for the ease with which his career unfolded. "I've actually been very lucky from the start," he says. "It seems my career sort of picked me. My early study with Windberg, and the exposure in shows and galleries, put my work in high demand

the Schuler, "really creates a sort of luminosity that you rarely see in today's paintings," Pettit says. "Not a lot of artists want to go to that much trouble. But this method is instrumental in achieving a quality a lot of the Flemish painters were able to achieve."

After his second summer at the Schuler School, Pettit and Brenda decided to move to Baltimore. "Being closer to the great art museums on the East Coast was beneficial, as well as being part of the close-knit community that surrounded the school," he says, adding that he absorbed the techniques and style of the Old Masters. That immersion and exposure were instrumental in the development of his technique, which Pettit describes as traditional or classical realism.

After five years, the couple moved to Ridgeway, Colorado. Even though he painted en plein air in Baltimore, the lure of the Western mountains had captured Pettit's imagination. Their home in a valley in a rural setting is nestled among the mountains, where he finds infinite inspiration in the ever-changing mood, lighting, and colors.

Pettit is reflective, as he discusses the nuances of his career. To explain his passion as well as his artistic philosophy, he offers a quote from French writer Emil Zola: "A work of art is a bit of nature seen through a temperament."

Because he paints various subjects and landscapes, Pettit is stimulated by the energy and moods of nature. "I try to convey the emotion I'm feeling when I see a subject, so



Autumn Woods, oil, 9" by 12"

"This is an early morning scene in Smoky Mountain National Park that is all about the light and haze the park is famous for. The strong contrast between the dark foreground and the intensity of the light through the autumn foliage creates the dimension and a feeling of intimacy in this secluded setting."

early in my career. Many of my pieces sold at what I thought at the time were really high prices. I've also been fortunate to study and become close friends with many great painters, which I consider to be the best reward."

He's also pleased that he and Brenda have had the freedom to "live and work surrounded by the Colorado Rockies and to travel and spend time abroad." Pettit spends most of his time abroad painting in Tuscany, where he finds a harmony

between the countryside and the small towns and cities that he describes as magical.

Venice also is a major source of inspiration. "The light, the water, and the architecture together provide endless compositional possibilities," he says. "It's a place of many moods that change from moment to moment."

The challenge for Pettit lies in continuing to master the techniques of the early Flemish artists, creating the luminosity that set their paintings apart. He says being a painter is a lesson in humility; although he believes he has achieved a certain level of expertise, there is always more to learn.

"Painting is challenging, because it just seems to become more difficult all the time," he says. "I think

the more you expect out of yourself, the more difficult it becomes to meet those expectations. I always want to improve and go farther, yet I never seem to be quite satisfied with what I'm doing at any given time."

Being an artist, Pettit says, means always learning—experimenting, seeing with fresh eyes, and being open to inspiration wherever you are. He feels fortunate to have the support and encouragement of his collectors, but more important, the love and support of Brenda, his biggest fan, who also recently began to paint. He is proud of her accomplishments and is honored to lend her the support and encouragement she has lavished on him all these years. *AW*

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