

Ronald Bean — All for art

BY LISA CRAWFORD WATSON

Grinell College had nothing to do with art, but he went there. No art classes, no studio. A practical kind of guy, he enrolled in history and business administration. It would serve him well. But it wasn't art.

The art worked out by accident, really — particularly watercolor. He thought he was an oil painter — probably was — until he discovered watercolor. Imagined he'd never use oils again. Never has.

Ronald E. Bean grew up in the wide open spaces of Iowa, taking in the color and textures of his Midwest landscape and capturing it little by little on paper. "I can't remember when I didn't like to draw," he says. "When I was eight my mother got me a little paint set from Sears Roebuck by mail, and I did some drawings to enter a newspaper contest. At 12, I won a \$5 gold piece in a statewide contest for the best drawing of Jiggs from the cartoon strip."

During high school and college, he developed skill with lettering brushes, which he applied to posters and class yearbooks. As art editor for the college magazine, he won a prize in College Humor, a national magazine. Up to this point, his skills were self-taught.

Upon graduation, Bean moved to Chicago and landed his first big job doing newspaper layout for Montgomery Ward. "Partly because I had lettering skills, and partly because I was new and didn't know what to charge." He laughs. "They were just opening their stores and launching their catalog." By the time his employment caught up to his skills, he had become the art director for an advertising agency.

In service for WWII, Bean was stationed in North Carolina and the Southwest; he fulfilled his obligation through artwork. During that time, he also married Ruth, his wife of now 51 years. "I married the secretary at the ad agency," he says. "Wouldn't you know. She's still my best critic."

After the war, the Beans returned to Chicago where he was offered his old job and three or four others. He moved on.

While building his career in advertising, Bean studied oil painting through night classes at the Chicago Art Institute and the Chicago Academy of Art "to make up for what I didn't know about art," he says. "I would



come out of there walking on air, I was so excited. I advanced in oils to life classes; I really liked the oil medium."

Yet, on a day worth capturing, he and a friend drove out to the country to sketch the landscape, and there he discovered the beauty of watercolor. "I like to paint on site," he says. "It's wonderful to get an inspiration right there where you can see it, smell it, feel it. It's hard to paint with oils outdoors — but watercolor! It dries quickly and the colors are so rich. I liked oil a lot, but once I caught onto watercolor, I couldn't give it up; you might even say it caught me."

In 1981, the Beans made the decision to retire to California. After a three-month tour, they discovered their haven above the Carmel Valley Village where, against a wide straw meadow edged with elderly oaks, a spacious house harbors a well-lit basement. "It just looked like my studio," he says. "We wrote a check that day."

Since then, Bean has filled his studio with a profusion of watercolors. When not painting, he has devoted much time to refining his craft through workshops with Rex Brandt, Dong Kingman, Gerald Brommer and Frank Webb.

"There's just no end to the things you can do in watercolor," he says. "I'm constantly looking for a new subject, style, perspective, a new way of putting the paint on the paper. It's fascinating from the time you start to the moment you finish."

He continues, "Traditional painter John Pike once wrote, 'You have to paint 1,000 pictures before you understand the watercolor medium,' and I kinda believe it. You can't just come down to the studio and paint a picture; you have to take your time and dream about it. My paintings usually take about three hours plus 25 years of planning and experience."

Bean wanders among the paintings that line his studio, then fingers an array of ribbons clustered against one wall — including the blue one from the Seaside Art Competition last fall, for his Spanish Dancers. He studies the winning image and smiles. "When it's going well, when you paint one that's good, it feels easy; you aren't tired. 'Oh what a beautiful feeling. Everything's going my way.'" He laughs. "With one that fails, it's work. You feel like you can't paint anything.



Ronald E. Bean (above) and some of his paintings: "I can't remember when I didn't like to draw," he says.



Right now I feel I can paint everything, except maybe abstracts."

Most recently, Bean has completed a set of paintings documenting the floods that washed away our winter. "These pictures record the development of everything west of Rosie's Bridge during the deluge," he says. "I caught the energy and fervor, the destruction of the landscape, the urgency of the people."

He continues: "I paint whatever image inspires me; I go through a lot of photos when I'm driving around or traveling, I'm always looking for ideas and inspiration." Like his New Mexico series that captures the adobe walls and weathered gate of a hacienda, the vegetable shades of a Santa Fe sky, or Georgia O'Keefe's ascetic Ghost Ranch.

Like O'Keefe, Winslow Homer and other admired watercolorists, Bean is recognized for his dramatic use of color. "I definitely like lots of it," he says, lifting his palette in a grand gesture; "especially harmonious warm colors against cool tones to create a vibration, a richness. I believe an artist usually sees more color than other people would see, then tends to exaggerate, add more color than is really there."

Find a fishing boat, a vintage barn, a group of kids, or a rose in full bloom — then look for the man in the broad-brimmed straw hat with a brush in hand and a twinkle in his eye. "I've

always wanted to paint a covered bridge; we should have some here. I hear they're pretty popular these days," he said. Ronald Bean; still practical, but everything to do with art.

Bean's work has been shown throughout the United States in both public and private collections. He currently exhibits in the Central Coast Art Association and the Monterey Watercolor Society, and hosts annual shows at the Carmel Valley Library. ■

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