

VISUAL ART

Painting fall: Nature's palette inspires artists

BY DANA GEORGE

Special to the Record-Eagle

There's an old Chinese proverb, says artist Lian Quan Zhen. The saying goes something like this: The mountains in winter are like sleeping beauty, but the mountains in fall are like a teenage girl, full of energy and color.

For many artists, the allure of an autumn day that's "full of energy and color" is enough to get them outside to begin painting. For artists who would like to learn more about the best way to capture the essence of a fall day, there are classes like those held at the Artcenter Traverse City.

One busy late-summer day found dozens of students from all over the country taking classes from Zhen, a former physician from Canton Province, China, known around the world for his exquisite watercolors. Across the room, Charles Gruppe of Connecticut was teaching. Gruppe's family has been considered a moving force on the American art scene for generations.

So what is it about autumn that so inspires an artist to pick up his brush?

"The fall is exciting because it's the best time of life," said Zhen. "Some people think the fall represents us late in life, but it doesn't. The fall is when we harvest, it's when everything is at its best."

To help his students focus in on just how breathtaking nature can be, Zhen begins class each morning by taking students outdoors to teach

them the Chinese art of tai chi.

"I laugh when people pay a lot of money to exercise inside. You should be outside, where everything is so beautiful," Zhen said.

By the time his students move back into the artcenter, they're ready to express their interpretations of fall on canvas.

"I'm not copying nature. Art is my interpretation of nature," Zhen explained.

On canvases scattered around the class are small masterpieces – dewy watercolor paintings that show fall in all her glory.

"Most artists go after those fall colors like mad," said Pat Ford, a Traverse City resident who is accomplished in oil and acrylic painting, and board president of the artcenter. "The fall colors are just so unbelievable."

Ford says that while many artists will paint fall colors against a blue sky, the real impact occurs when the colors are painted against a gray sky.

"Those colors will really bounce," she said.

Ford often joins a group of area artists organized by Mary Ellen Thero who paint "en plein air," or outdoors.

"We started in June and have been going through the summer," Thero said. "Some people come with pastels, others with oils. Sometimes we have two people and sometimes we have six."

The group will travel to a new outdoor location every Thursday through the fall.

"You get tired of so much



Photo courtesy Grand Rapids Art Museum

Contemporary landscape artist Ben Whitehouse explores Michigan's Leelanau Peninsula in "Leelanau: Michigan's Eden," a series of paintings that are now on exhibit at the Grand Rapids Art Museum. Above, "North Barr Lake, 2003."

green in the summer. In the fall you have a variety of color, a different kind of light," Thero said of the experience.

Regardless of the season, Gruppe said, painting is painting.

"Whether it's winter, spring, summer, or fall, you're faced with very much the same problems," Gruppe said. "It's all about values, drawing and color. The colors change with the seasons, but the basics stay the same with every picture."

For Ford, those basics boil down to three very simple

rules: overstate, understate, and never tell the truth.

"You overstate the things that interest you. You understate the things around them so that you can focus on what initially caught your interest. And in doing those two things, you never tell the truth. It's your version of nature, not exactly what you're seeing," Ford said.

Thero and Ford say there are benefits to painting en plein air as a group. Not only do they get to spend time with friends, but they are surrounded by a ready source of advice.

"Artists are very supportive, like musicians," said Ford.

"We help one another. If you were to comment on what a beautiful shade of blue someone was using, they'd tell you right away what mixtures they used to come up with that shade. More experienced artists will often share secrets with less experienced artists."

No one expects to go outside and capture the perfect portrait of autumn.

"We never succeed and that's the attraction," said Gruppe. "It's always a challenge and that's why it's exciting."

Area art galleries

Americana Collection of Leland 104 River St., Leland. 256-9350.

Amy Jo's Folk Art Studio Open 1-6 p.m. Wed.-Fri., 6995 Center Rd., TC. 941-1181.

Antiques at Railroad Place, fine antiques and collectibles, 620 Railroad Place, TC (next to the Grand Traverse Dinner Train); 946-6600.

Art & Soul Gallery Open 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Mon.-Fri.; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sat., 5754 U.S. 31, Acme. 938-5900.

Asher Gallery & Framing 445 E. Front St., TC. 932-8638.

Bay St. Gallery 109 Bay St., Northport. 386-7428.

Becky Thatcher Designs Main and Pine; Glen Arbor. 334-3826.

Bella Galleria at Old Mission Tavern "Stretching Boundaries, a collection of new paintings in acrylic, ink and watercolor by Robbie Carmichael featured through Oct. 31, adjacent to Old Mission Tavern, 17015 Center Rd., TC. 223-4142.

Bel Lago Winery Open noon-5 p.m. Thu.-Sun.; 6530 S. Lake Shore Dr., Cedar. 228-4800.

Belstone Gallery & Gifts 321 E. Front, TC. 946-0610.

Blue Heron Gallery 131 Ames St., Elk Rapids; Open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. 264-9210.

Lake St. Studios Center Gallery, Forest Gallery, Suzanne Wilson Painting Studio; Hours: 11-5 p.m. daily, 6023 S. Lake St., Glen Arbor. 334-3179.

Corners Fine Contemporary Art By appointment; 6920 Putney Rd., Arcadia. 352-7389.

Coyote Woman Gallery American artists; oil, watercolor, pastel, photography, decorative sculpture, wood, glass, pottery, mixed media, jewelry.

Gallery and frame shop open year round. Hours: Mon., Tue., Wed., Fri., Sat. 10-6 p.m.; Thu. 10-9 p.m.; Sun. 10-4 p.m. 160 E. Main, Harbor Springs. 526-5889.

Crooked Tree Arts Center Gallery 445 E. Mitchell St., Petoskey. 347-4337.

Crystal Lake Art Center Gallery 1-4 p.m. Sat.; 111 10th, Frankfort. 352-4151.

Elements 107 Bridge St., Charlevoix. 547-5820.

Evergreen Gallery Featuring pottery, glass, tiles and watercolors by C.L. Forman and Darla Raney; 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Mon.-Sat., 531 W. Front St., TC.

929-9522.

Fired Earth Pottery Studio Art Gallery 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Sat., 121 E. Nelson St., Cadillac. 775-0888.

Handiworks of Beulah Art, clothing and shoes, 253 S. Benzie Blvd., Beulah. 882-9579.

Hands On Art Paint your own pottery studio, 144 Hall St. (behind the Lighting Center), TC. 941-5071.

Hattie's of Suttons Bay Through Nov. 28 Paintings by Kristin Morris and Roseann Church, photography by Heidi Johnson. Viewing hours 2-5