

Observing Carefully, Thinking Abstractly, PAINTING TRADITIONALLY

FOR NEW YORK CITY ARTIST ELLEN BUSELLI, PAINTING IS CENTERED ON TRANSLATING WHAT SHE SEES TO CANVAS, WHICH IS WHY SHE FINDS OBSERVING AND UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF COLOR AND LIGHT SO IMPORTANT.

by Linda S. Price

Painting is all about observation," says still life painter Ellen Buselli. "The process involves thinking abstractly—even if you're painting traditionally—not looking at the objects themselves but observing how light, atmosphere, value, color, edges, and temperature work together to give an object its form. If you're thoughtful about all of the above, a painting will emerge, and a two-dimensional surface will become three-dimensional." Buselli always observes—and paints—from life in her studio, admitting that light is one of the most important elements of her still life setups. "I paint under north light," she says. "It's a cooler, indirect

Hydrangeas,
Pears, and
Grapes

2006, oil on linen,
16 x 15. All artwork
this article private
collection.

light, and shadows remain the same value and in the same position all day." Although she arranges her setup with care, Buselli prefers to plunge right into her painting without thumbnail sketches or value studies. She prepares her canvases by toning them with a warm mixture of burnt umber or burnt sienna and ultramarine blue because she feels this combination is easy on the eyes. After the toned canvas is dry, she roughs in the outline of her still life setup using an umber and establishes an initial horizon line and relative positions of the elements—which may change as she gets further along in her painting. The next step involves massing in the major dark

and light shapes, which sets up the two extremes of values against which to measure all other brushstrokes. From this point on, Buselli paints directly, establishing the right color, value, and temperature immediately. "Every new brushstroke depends on the previous one," she explains. "I ask myself, 'Is it lighter or darker, warmer or cooler than what I already put down?'"

The secret to painting complex flowers—such as those in this painting—is spontaneous brushstrokes and few details. Careful observation shows that stems appear lighter and brighter when seen through water.



The corners of the background in this still life were lightly painted, allowing the toned background to show through to create a sense of wear and timelessness.

Buselli gives a lot of thought to her background because she knows how strongly it affects the overall painting. "It must be the right value initially, otherwise I can't work on the rest of the painting," she emphasizes. The artist considers, for instance, that a translucent background recedes and lends a sense of depth, as does a neutral color. When she wants backgrounds

to look old and textured, as in Old Master paintings, she prepares archaic-looking boards that have "that old fresco decay of Rome" to place behind her objects. Alternatively, she uses drapery to achieve the right color, value, and texture. The artist also has a collection of platforms—light or dark, smooth or textured, stained or painted—on which to stage her still lifes.

Classical Light
2007, oil on linen, 20 x 21.

Of equal concern to Buselli are the objects themselves, especially the vases and pottery she collects on her travels, in antique shops, or at garage sales. She especially enjoys painting her collection of black Pueblo pottery, in part because of its dull shine that both reflects and absorbs light. If she wants a painting with drama, she chooses contrasting objects. If her goal is harmony, she selects objects



BUSELLI'S MATERIALS

Palette

Old Holland and Winsor & Newton oils—with some from Vasari—in the following colors:

- | Naples yellow
- | cadmium yellow
- | cadmium orange
- | yellow ochre
- | raw sienna
- | cadmium red
- | burnt sienna
- | burnt umber
- | raw umber
- | cobalt blue
- | ultramarine blue
- | viridian
- | sap green
- | alizarin crimson
- | ivory black
- | titanium white

Canvas

- | prepared Belgian linen

Brushes

- | Jack Richeson & Co. filberts, Nos. 3 through 12; some sable brushes

Medium

- | Maroger or Liquin

within a common color family and emphasizes shifts in value and temperature. When choosing flowers for her signature floral still lifes, Buselli opts for those that are in season, preferring hyacinths in the spring and peonies in June. “Sunflowers are also wonderful,” she says, “and any kind of lily—their shapes are so geometric. I enjoy the large masses of hydrangeas as well, but you have to be careful not to put in a lot of details.” She’s partial to pale pink roses for their wonderful translucent petals.

When painting flowers, Buselli works quickly and spontaneously with thin paint, trying to capture them before they fade and allowing the wet paint to connect the shapes. In opaque areas—where the light is directly hitting the objects and bouncing off—she gradually applies thicker paint but is careful not to overwork any area. She works wet-in-wet, dragging her



ABOVE
Old Roman Glass
2007, oil on
linen, 18 x 15.



LEFT
Hyacinth
(and the McCoy Pot)
2006, oil on
linen, 12 x 16.

Cast shadows coming forward, as well as strong light emanating from the leaves and inner space of the flowers, create depth and drama. Objects up close reach out to the viewer's space and give the subject matter a strong presence. Hyacinth (and the McCoy Pot) won first place in the oil category of American Artist's 70th Anniversary Competition, and was featured in the December 2007 issue.

brush to create color unity from one area of the canvas to another. Her goal is to keep reworking to a minimum, so as to retain the spontaneity of her original brushwork. Sometimes she sculpts the flowers out of the background, relying on the negative spaces to create the form of the bouquet. Dark-green foliage provides a base for the flowers to rest on and gives them weight and a sense of place in much the way cast shadows do for her pottery and glassware.

Buselli also gives a lot of thought to composition and the arrangement of her still life items. "The placement of objects affects how viewers relate to the painting," she says. "Objects closer to the front edge reach into the viewer's space, creating intimacy and almost a surreal feeling. When the main flower in a composition faces forward it can actually appear animated. Elements positioned farther away produce more atmosphere because there's more quiet space and a sense of serenity and mys-

tery. Sometimes I use both techniques in the same painting, positioning something close to the front edge to grab the viewer's attention, and then leading him or her back into the painting."

Details, the artist notes, should be used sparingly to define an object and should be concentrated in areas where the viewer is suppose to focus. It's the same with sharp edges; they shouldn't be everywhere, just where the eye should pause—such as the edge of a flower. The most intense color should be reserved for those areas meant to appear closer to the viewer, as should the areas of thickest paint. By using only one colorful or bright object in a setup, Buselli makes sure the eye will stop there. In complex setups she's careful to position the lights to lead the eye through the picture.

Buselli finds inspiration in the work of many artists of the past: Henri Fantin-Latour for the sheer beauty of his floral paintings; Emil Carlsen for his magical space; Chardin for his strong yet simple still life compositions; Walter Murch for the way his isolated elements emerge from the light; Giorgio Morandi for his pure, simple collective masses; and John Singer Sargent and William Merritt Chase for their spontaneity and wonderful brushstrokes. She advises students to look at the work of other artists, determine what it is about their work that attracts them, and then try to figure out exactly how they achieved that quality. That's what Buselli does, with every new discovery and painting leading to another adventure in observing and seeing.

Linda S. Price is an artist, writer, and editor living on Long Island, New York.

The lighter areas of the roses were painted with titanium white and alizarin crimson and warmed up with a touch of cadmium yellow. A little viridian or cobalt blue makes the flower look cooler as it turns. The shadow areas of the petals appear violet with the addition of a little more cobalt or ultramarine blue.



LEFT
Mystic Flowers
2007, oil on linen, 16 x 15.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Blue Hydrangeas
2008, oil on linen, 18 x 15.





In the painting at left, the dark plums set against the bright oranges create drama on the tabletop, while the grapes and vase fall into a harmonious color family.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Freesias, Plums, and Oranges
2007, oil on linen, 16 x 15.

BELOW

King Hydrangeas in Oriental Vase
2008, oil on linen, 20 x 24.



About the Artist

ELLEN BUSELLI received her B.F.A. from Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York, and also studied at the Tyler School of Art, in Rome, where she got to see firsthand the work of the Old Masters she loves. Studying with David A. Leffel at the Art Students League of New York, in Manhattan, however, proved most instrumental in preparing her for the style in which she would eventually paint. Buselli is a signature member of Oil Painters of America and has won their Best Still Life award, as well as the Winsor & Newton Award of Excellence and the Silver Brush Award. She is also a signature member of American Women Artists, and has won their Best in Show award. Other awards Buselli has received include those from Allied Artists of America, The American Artists Professional League, and Knickerbocker Artists. She is currently represented by Cheryl Newby Gallery, on Pawley's Island, South Carolina. The artist maintains a studio in New York City. For more information, visit www.ellenbuselli.com.