

Mary Booth Cabot

The Power of Color and Light

by J. Rose Steward



If plants require full-spectrum light to thrive, doesn't it make sense that human beings are in need of it as well? The idea resonates with a lovely brand of logic that I heard when I listened to Atlanta painter Mary Booth Cabot describe her theory that beauty and color possess restorative powers. "People react to the colors I use without knowing; it's an emotional thing. They say that tranquil, vibrant color is healing, and I came to believe, while battling cancer a few years ago, that the body is light sensitive, just like a plant. But too often we sit inside of our houses, the windows blocking out all the warm colors, so we need to get that vibration in another way."



Cabot's detailed portraits of birds and flowers and her contemplative landscapes celebrate nature's gifts to us in a symphony of color, light, and form. "We have these tiny miracles, and to see the detail, you have to paint it up close. Using full-spectrum color when I paint, getting as much color as I can into each piece, also means that people can't look at something I've painted and say it doesn't match the colors in their home," she adds, her soft southern drawl giving way to laughter. Never mind that her paintings are simply beautiful to look at.

Cabot traces her love of flowers and birds back to a childhood spent helping her mother and grandmother tend their gardens. "When I was young, the goldfinches were up in the crab apple tree, and in the spring I used to lay down in the grass underneath with my cat and watch the birds, their quick movements causing the petals to fall down on us like a soft rain. The more contact I have had with birds, the more I've come to realize they each have their own personalities."

Even as a child, Cabot used to paint and draw, particularly when she wanted to do something special for her

Hydrangeas

mother. “I always have had this in me, so did my mother, but in her day it simply wasn’t done; you were to be a secretary, or a teacher. I thought I was going to be a nurse, but I couldn’t hack math so I transferred into education. For a while I even taught English to fourth and eighth graders, which was wonderful,” Cabot recalls.

Cabot made time during her college years at Georgia State, and later, at the University of Tennessee, for drawing and color classes along with Art History, but high tuition and the pressures of working full-time eventually forced her to give up her studies. While she continued to paint, her first love was left to survive in the margins of her life with night classes in oils and weekend watercolor workshops. “I had a little German teacher named Cornelia Ilgner who would call me at home if I didn’t show up and pry me out, no matter how tired I was from work.”

In her early 30’s Cabot was living in Tennessee and working as a secretary when, late one night as she drove home from work, she suddenly heard what she now describes as a clear and insistent voice in her head: “What are you doing?” it asked. “I didn’t understand what it meant, and then I realized, oh, something must be wrong. So I started looking at my life. I didn’t really like my job; I was good at it but it was just something I did. And I had given up studying art. After this experience I changed everything. I quit my job and moved back to Atlanta, not sure what I would do, but something in me said perhaps I could be an artist. It always had been sitting there, waiting on me, like when am I going to wake up and make it mine. I knew the only way to find out was to try.”

It’s been over twenty years now since Cabot made that brave decision to change her life and follow her heart. “I started out doing rural, outdoor things – gas pumps or old cars sitting in the weeds – and sometimes I would do birds; they were part of the landscape,” she says. For a while she made a living painting race cars on commission (she owned a Porsche for 26 years) and then antique cars. “It’s all curves – flowers, landscapes, birds, and cars – and I tend to like curving, sculptural forms,” she says. “Art is about shape and form, and how light hits shapes and forms; I went from cars to flowers in a heartbeat, because basically they are the same shapes.”

The artist tends her own garden now, about an acre and a half of land that is terraced from the rear of her home down to the edge of a lake. “I just think plants are wonderful things. I have an orchid collection, an epiphyte collection, and a cactus collection; I also have a greenhouse chuck full of tropicals. I probably have seven or eight hundred plants; I’m crazy about them.”

Of course, birds are an integral part of any garden, she says. “I think they are just beautiful little creatures, and they move so fast it’s hard to see all the information that is there.”

When it comes to painting birds as opposed to painting flowers, the artist says it’s just a matter of applying the same technique to a different subject. It can be hard work, but it also can be a joy. “My artwork absorbs me. When you’re painting you use your spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental bodies; and for everything to flow you have to have those four bodies together, like four horses running neck and neck. At least that’s my version of being centered.

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Waxwings on Pyracantha 2



Mockingbird on Holly

Artwork courtesy of the artist, Roswell, GA 30075

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“If I hit a snag and find myself jumping up and down with frustration – in watercolor coming up with the wrong solution can ruin the whole thing – I find that I have a tool, perhaps something we all have, where if I just calm down and breathe, the solution will be shown to me. I have to let go in order for it to work; maybe that’s what other artists mean when they talk about getting out of your own way. For me, it’s absolutely spiritual. It is only when I surrender and let go of the frustration that I am shown what it’s supposed to look like, just as in life.”

Cabot’s investigations into botanicals have taken her to many parts of the world, including Guatemala, France, Holland, and China. She says she was pleased to find that her knowledge of Latin allowed her to communicate with locals about the indigenous plants in many of the countries she’s visited.

Forever the versatile artist, she also likes to venture into other media from time to time, from lithographs to couch pillows painted on canvas, etchings, and ink drawings, even experiments with dye and natural fibers to see if her knowledge of watercolor can transfer onto silk. “But I always come back to watercolor,” she says.

“I love beauty, and I think that we don’t have enough beauty in the world. I once had this professor named Joe Perrin who said that nothing had a reason to exist if it wasn’t both beautiful and functional, and that stuck in my mind like a boulder. He was a great mentor, and I still can call on him if I get into hot water. When I sit and think about it, that may be what I am doing in the paintings. I love beauty, and the sensitivity of the color, and the reality of what God’s actually given us. It’s just amazing, I mean, look at a camellia. All you can do is go WOW! At the same time, it’s something for your wall, something that makes you feel good.”

For Cabot, painting isn’t something she could ever *not* do, and for her the beauty she creates, the precious moments she captures and shares with the world are an act of faith. Δ