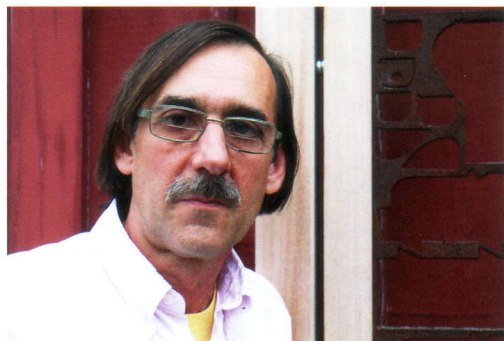




greg st. john



By CB Wismar
arts@mainstreetmag.com

Talking with Greg St. John for the first time, one might hear the echo-whisper of the final lines of Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Greg's comments about his life and career often begin with a wistful glance into the distance, and the hint of a smile. It's the badge of honor for someone who has, at critical points in his life and career, taken the road "less traveled."

From archeology to art

First intrigued by the painstaking work of archaeology, with its sorting and labeling and sketching, Greg St. John took his experience as a young lab assistant at the Cleveland Natural History Museum and enrolled in Toledo University to follow his muse.

But, the roads diverged. The sketching required in his archaeology classes intrigued him more than the relics, and Greg began to take classes at the Toledo Museum of Art's School of Design.

The drawing and painting classes he took intensified his passion for art and a transfer to the Cleveland Institute of Art became a logical choice. He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, but not until he had taken an academic "year abroad" in both Lacoste, France and Florence, Italy. Degree in hand, he returned to France and became a teaching assistant for painting classes at L'ecole Des Beaux Arts in Lacoste.

When he returned to the United States, St. John took up residence in an 8,000 square foot loft space on the south side of Chicago. There he both lived and worked on his art. The canvases were large. He began doing large woodcuts. The paint and imagination flowed freely – so freely that he acquired a laboratory ink mill and started making his own paint. "These were great times," remembers St. John. "Lots of space. Freedom and time to create."

And, the roads were about to diverge, again

On the ground floor of his loft building there was an architectural woodworking company. The principals had seen St. John's carvings and woodblocks and asked if

he'd like to apprentice with them. With that invitation, he started a career in architectural woodworking that would take him across country and through the complex process of building a widely respected business.

The years rolled on and included a time in New York City and a graduate degree from Hunter College and a move to Rhode Island. His painting and working in wood-blocks morphed into abstract relief wooden paintings. There were some shows in Massachusetts and New York, but working with wood was becoming dominant.

A life in Kent

By 1995, St. John and his future wife, Jeanne, had migrated to the Kent area, and in 1996, St. John's Bridge – an art furniture and cabinetry business was established near the center of town. From strikingly dramatic tables to wall-filling custom cabinetry that graces many homes in the tri-state area, Greg St. John had followed a road not often taken, and established a reputation for artistry and craftsmanship that is widely applauded.

"I love working with people from design development through the fabrication process – be the project big or small. It's always full of challenges," comments St. John, with a knowing smile that belies the hours of planning, the inherent sense of what the wood can do, and what

artistic statement the finished piece should make.

Something missing, a calling

A successful business career would possibly be more than fulfilling enough for most. With six employees and a reputation that has work in queue for months ahead, Greg St. John could have been well satisfied. The road he chose has taken him on a satisfying journey.

But just as things were going so well, a diverging road appeared, and St. John has decided to explore where it might take him.

"I missed painting," he admits. "I missed the process, the smells, the tactile sensation of the paint, the tools, the brushes, and the dance of creation."

In the past 18 months, that "dance" has led St. John into the open expanses of Bartholomew's Cobble and the Butternut Creek Bird Sanctuary. Although he has established a small studio behind his home in Warren, the first paintings to emanate from his return to painting are "en plein air" works – paintings done in the field with natural light and the final work on canvas expressing what the artist sees.

Influence and style

It was, after all, the German Expressionists who influenced St. John's work from his first forays into painting. In some ways reminiscent of the bold layering of paint popularized by Frank Auerbach in his

Looking Towards Mornington Crescent Station as much as the peaceful ambience created by Claude Monet in *Morning on the Seine Near Givenchy*, St. John's outdoor paintings carefully bring order out of the chaos that is nature.

Bold strokes, bold colors and the overwhelming sense that the artist has "been there and seen that" characterize St.



Opposite page, L-R, top to bottom: One of St. John's plein air landscapes; a mixed media piece; Greg St. John. Above and below: A kitchen and bathroom vanity created by St. John. Photos courtesy of Greg St. John.

John's work. His plein air paintings are done at one sitting – no going back. As the light changes, as the day matures, the images reflect what he sees ... and when they are done, they are done.

Beyond painting

St. John is not however, limited to painting. His multi-media constructions are abstract works based on the building of plaster frames and overlaying objects in paper and wood that are adhered with hot wax and colored with pigments. The results are both bold and inviting.

From Greg St. John's artistic perspective, "the paintings with plaster surround come from my interest to have a quiet white space so the painting becomes a window. One's mind can drift into a visual place where a story unfolds."

Greg St. John may yearn for that "quiet white space," but the viewer of his compositions is drawn through the window into the complexity of the picture and what it can tell us about interior spaces as much as about landscapes.

St. John's Bridge (the title comes from St. John's desire to successfully connect his artistic perspective with the discipline of fine woodworking) continues to be a successful, going

concern directed by St. John's steady hand, solid business sense, and the magical "seasoning" of wanting to have each customer entirely satisfied with every step of the creation process.

It is in the "spare time" of evenings and weekends when Greg St. John can follow this other road – the one less traveled for well over two decades – and explore what it has to offer.

There is, to be sure, a sense of "re-discovery" in engaging with his new work, for as skilled a painter and artisan as he is, Greg St. John continues to discover things long not seen. "The magic of seeing a relationship for the first time ... the running of all the energy one can muster in the moment of seeing and discovery. These are the things that make me make art."

"And that," to borrow, again, from Robert Frost, "has made all the difference." ●

Greg St. John's work has most recently been displayed at the Gallery at Naples Studio in Kent Green. Further interest in his work can be directed to the gallery, 3 Landmark Lane, Kent, CT (napleschristopher@gmail.com) or to the artist at gregstjohn@sbcglobal.net.

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