

Artist to Artist: Frank Webb

This sought-after artist and teacher considers himself a perpetual art student, an approach that has played no small part in his success.



ABOVE
Port Clyde
2003, watercolor, 22 x 30.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Taxco
2007 watercolor, 30 x 22.
Collection the artist.

Watercolor: You have been a full-time artist since 1948. Describe your early art training and the events that led to your decision to devote yourself to painting.
Webb: Military service in World War II qualified me to attend the Art Institute of Pittsburgh under the GI Bill of Rights. My study included fine and commercial art. I learned life drawing, still life, design, lettering, and landscape. I learned to think with pencil, charcoal, brush, and chalk. For the next 30 years, I worked as an advertising artist for clients such as U.S. Steel. The demands of design and the handling of media have served me well ever since. Most important, in all those years I continued to draw and paint as a fine artist on my own time. I sent paintings to regional and national exhibitions, and I joined art societies, where I was able to network with other artists.
W: When did you begin teaching and how did you come to feel ready to instruct others?
FW: I began teaching part-time evening classes and some workshops in 1970. In 1980 I left my advertising art business to devote myself full time to painting and teaching. I was encouraged to do this by Edgar Whitney when I first met him. Each summer for 10 years I studied for a week in





BELOW

Funchal

2003, watercolor, 22 x 30.
Collection the artist.

BOTTOM

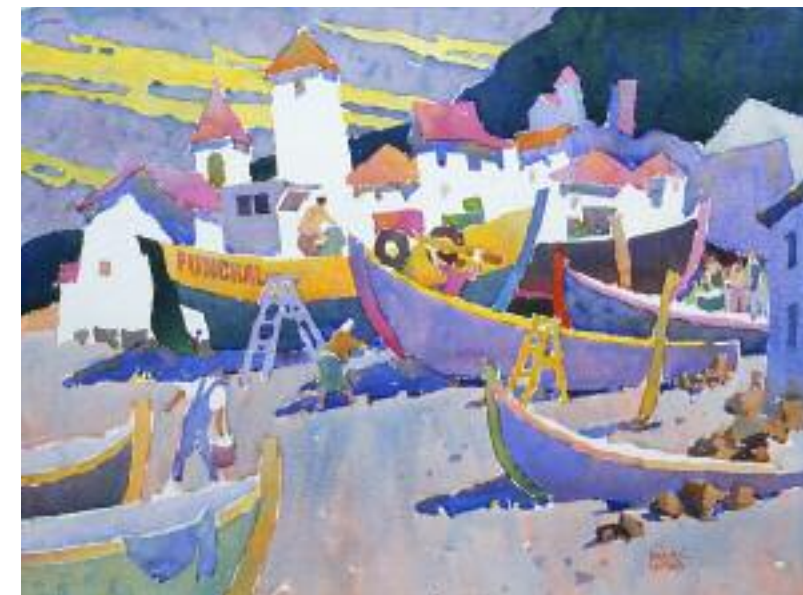
Beached

year tk, watercolor, 15 x 22.
Collection tk.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Allegheny Landmark

1990, watercolor, 22 x 30.
Private collection.



Maine with Ed. I considered myself qualified to teach others because I myself had been and still am a serious art student. Because I read so much about aesthetics and art history, I am chock-full of quotes and quips, as my students will attest. I also believe the teacher should be able to appreciate a wide range of “isms” (even though many have become “wasisms”).

W: How has your extensive experience teaching watercolor enhanced your life as an artist?

FW: As a teacher I am surrounded by serious adult students. Many of them are starting a second career in art. Their collective enthusiasm and thirst for knowledge charge and recharge me. As Robert Henri said, “In my office toward you I am simply trying to improve my own environment.” Henri no doubt believed as I do, that the teacher learns more than anybody. I enjoyed writing three books and made five DVDs to clarify and share my findings with others.

W: What is your process for selecting a painting subject?

FW: I choose a subject but the subject also chooses me. I respond to the scene when I see a picture in it, not so much as a ready-made picture but as a possible one. Let me make this clear: Although I live in the actual world, as a painter I live more in a world of possibilities. What ought to be is far more fascinating and fun than being stuck in the ordinary reality with all its awkwardness, injustice, impermanence, and man-made ugliness. If I am in a state of heart and mind whereby I see more clearly and love more deeply, then by means of painting I rescue those fleeting moments, making them permanent.

W: To what extent do you preplan the composition?

FW: I plan by making small drawings with a soft pencil. All of these drawings are made on location, and hardly ever from photos. I begin these with line but soon scribble tonal values right out to the borders. The first application of light

BELOW

San Miguel Allende
2008, watercolor, 15 x 22.
Collection the artist.



values identifies my untouched whites. These white help give my paintings a desired sparkle. Following this, I place my darker midvalues, and last I place my darkest tones. Thus I have as a basis for my painting as a design in four values. In this rough drawing are all my shapes, values, directions, and sizes. This drawing is my teacher for the painting at hand. Most of my paintings are then made in the studio.

W: Describe your basic painting approach.

FW: With the drawing as reference I decide on my approach. I have several choices, such as wet-in-wet, layering, calligraphic, and color patching. I consider a color scheme, but I never resort to the colors of the model or the scene. Generally, I paint the four to seven largest areas first, as these are paramount. Here I want to emphasize that since I have already designed the picture I can now devote

almost 100 percent of my attention to color. Some painters may think that planning as I do thwarts spontaneity, but I find that I have plenty of opportunity for intuitive painting. Much of my thinking about color is spontaneous. As the painting nears completion I place the accents, the darks, and calligraphic marks. How do I know if my painting is a work of art? I declare it a work of art if the paper looks better after I put paint marks all over it!

W: What is your philosophy on color?

FW: Color is the most personal of the art elements. When one says "painting," one says "color." It is the daily bread of the eyes. Color is not only seen but also must be felt. I try to intensify color because a painting is normally hung on a wall under subdued light. I often try to employ broken color since the resulting vibration in the eye of the beholder



ABOVE

Greek Church
2006, watercolor, 15 x 22.
Collection the artist.

LEFT

Gold Mine in the Sky
2007, watercolor, 22 x 30.
Collection the artist.



BELOW

Four Webbs

2004, watercolor, 22 x 30.
Collection the artist.



expresses some of the dazzle of outdoor light.

W: Which qualities of watercolor do you enjoy the most, and how do you use them to the best advantage in your painting approach?

FW: Watercolor has two great characteristics: fusions of wetness and transparency. Each of these is easily flaunted. To suggest wetness, we place paint on a wet surface in order to produce soft edges. We may also place one color into a still-wet other color. To declare transparency, we paint a wet passage across a dried area or areas. It is possible to thus make several layers. Each time I paint I consider watercolor's behavior in relation to concept, composition, and execution. All

these must merge into a unified, expressive communication.

W: What is the relationship within your works between realism and abstraction?

FW: Extreme realism may have limited expression because of the artist being overly concerned with copying detail. Extreme abstractionism may be little more than a giant doodle. I like to get qualities of each, and in fact, all good paintings have abstract shapes in them. To combine realism and abstraction is to get greater content in a work. Such a synthesis may be made at the drawing stage by making the creative and expressive shapes first and then fitting the academic drawing into these abstract shapes. It

BELOW LEFT

Mont Tremblant

2006, watercolor,
22 x 30.
Collection the artist.



BELOW RIGHT

From My Studio

2005, watercolor,
22 x 30.
Collection the artist.



BOTTOM

Thursday's Model

1998, watercolor,
22 x 30.
Collection the artist.





is almost impossible to start out with an academic drawing and then try to impose good abstract shapes.

W: What advice can you offer about developing and maintaining a career as an artist?

FW: First, determine how you will make a living. Perhaps you will be more free if you earn a living in some way other than painting. On your own time, draw and paint. Get as much education as you can, and draw and paint. Never work with one eye on the market. While you are young or just starting, get breadth of experience with all media and all “isms.” Later on when you have choices, concentrate on a chosen medium. By then you will have found your place on the dial from abstractionism to realism. Draw and paint. Become your own teacher, and draw and paint. Try to work from a life model with other painters. Exhibit locally, later regionally, then nationally. Try to paint every day. On down days, cut mats, read, mark, learn, inwardly digest, and reread. Look at all schools and epochs of painting. Draw and paint. ■

ABOVE

Stedman's Farm

year tk, watercolor,
22 x 30. Collection tk.

About the Artist

Frank Webb, a Dolphin Fellow of the American Watercolor Society, serves as the organization's vice president and chairperson of membership. A frequent juror, he himself has participated in numerous exhibitions and received more than 100 awards, most recently the Hardie Gramatky Award from the American Watercolor Society and the Lori Fronzak Memorial Award from the Transparent Watercolor Society of America. Webb's artwork hangs in such collections as the Butler Institute of American Art, in Youngstown, Ohio, and the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art, in Altoona, Pennsylvania. He is represented by Harbor Square Gallery, in Rockland, Maine, and Élan Gallery, in Sewickley, Pennsylvania.