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June/July 2007

Le magazine par des artistes pour les artistes • Das Magazin für Künstler zusammengestellt von Künstlern

La revista por artistas, para artistas • La rivista degli artisti per gli artisti • 隨集藝術家而成的藝術家雜誌

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the foundation  
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technique



Creating  
a timeless  
aesthetic



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***In the Lemon Grove, Oil on Linen,  
30 x 24" (76 x 61cm)***

Here the shadows of the lemon tree are strongest against the model's face and arm. This helps create the focal point and keeps the flesh from getting lost in the foliage. This strong contrast also keeps the white robes from drawing too much attention away from the face.





# CREATING A TIMELESS AESTHETIC

**Nicole Klassen's** love of the classical style means her beautiful images will be objects of joy forever

***Masquerade, Oil on Linen, 24 x 30" (61 x 76cm)***

Here the strong line of the violin and the bow are countered by the position of the mask and sheet music. The meandering line of the mask ribbon helps soften these strong lines and gives the composition a more unified effect.



**Artist at work**

**O**ne of the joys of painting is that the artist has total control over the outcome of the piece. This is especially true of the still life, because nothing goes into a still life that isn't carefully considered and desired by the artist. Any mood desired can be created by the thoughtful use of the objects represented, the lighting, and the execution of the piece. In effect, still life artists genuinely become sole masters of their canvases, with the success of their work determined only by their skill and knowledge.

When I begin a painting, I have a general idea of the type of the painting I wish to produce. Sometimes I desire a dark, masculine, even stark, effect.





***Dress Rehearsal, Oil on Linen,  
30 x 24" (76 x 61 cm)***

The raking, morning light creates a calm drama to this piece. The shadows cast by the windowpanes are as important a design element as the solid objects. The painting in the corner of the piece helps balance the composition and adds interest.

Consequently, I typically spend one to two days on changes before I'm satisfied with my setup.

It is my particular aesthetic taste to produce a picture that appears nearly timeless. For instance, I wouldn't want any of my current paintings to scream the year 2007. And I like my still lifes to make sense. That is, the pieces are arranged so that it is highly plausible that someone could have left them exactly that way. Also, to enhance interest, I like to have a variety of surfaces in my paintings. If I have, say, a choice between a metal or glass goblet, and I already have metal in the setup, it's likely I will introduce the glass for variety.

Lighting is another critical aspect in creating the mood of a painting. I have in my studio a raised platform with means of blocking external light from my setup. I also have a single color-corrected light directed at this platform. In fact, I always want to work with a single light source shining upon my arrangement. Too much bounce light from other sources confuses the form of the objects and creates a less beautiful effect. The light should fall on the items so as to best explain their shapes, and ideally create interesting interplays of shadow and reflection. I'm certain that carefully choosing the direction and strength of the light can significantly affect the mood of the painting. A strong, raking light, for example, can almost always produce a dramatic effect.

Once my arrangement is complete, I determine the exact dimensions of the canvas I want, and it is at this point that I stretch the canvas. I maintain in the studio a variety of

At other times I may want a piece that is busy and decorative. In any case, the character of the painting is largely established by the choice of objects. A kitchen scene, for instance, will probably be casual and warm, whereas a setup of fine oriental objects will encourage an elegant and serene effect.

When setting up a still life, I have a main object in mind that will help me decide the mood of the painting. I then set up the rest of the composition to complement this object. At this point, I also have a general idea regarding the appropriate size canvas that should be used, and this helps me determine the number and size of items within. I should also note that objects should

appear smaller than or equal to their actual size. Objects larger than life are perceived as odd. While choosing items to include, there are a variety of important composition issues to keep in mind. The colors, for example, must harmonize, not clash, with one another. An artist must also think of the values of the composition; they must have a range on the gray scale so that the composition would be pleasing even if it were in black and white. Moreover, the subordinate objects need to complement the focal point, not compete for attention. And the items must, together, create a balance within the picture. This composition stage of the painting is very important and must not be rushed.





**The Five Senses, Oil on Linen, 16 x 20" (40 x 50cm)**

This painting was inspired by the Flemish masters' paintings of the five senses. The concept lends itself well to a rich composition. Being a sensuous subject matter, I felt free to introduce lots of swirling cloth and different textures.

stretcher bar sizes and a roll of linen canvas, so I'm able to make the size of canvas needed without cluttering up the studio with numerous canvases already stretched.

Blocking in the painting comes next. Before beginning this stage, however, I make certain to mark the exact position of my chair in the studio, so I won't inadvertently move my point of view during the painting process. The blocking-in itself is done fairly quickly with large brushes and thin paint. I paint one tone for

the light and one for the shadow side of each object. The goal is to place the objects on the canvas in their correct basic tones without getting into any detail or nuance. I use a measuring stick to achieve accuracy in drawing, measuring proportions horizontally and vertically against the setup to place items within the picture plane. This is the time to make sure that I haven't made any mistakes in the composition. And I believe it is imperative not to go on until this stage pleases me, because

no amount of skillful painting can save a flawed composition.

Now comes the part I like best, where I really become intensely involved in the painting. And it is also where my love of the classical painting style can be expressed. I have always been fascinated by the paintings by the old masters. I recall even as a child being mesmerized by reproductions of certain paintings in my grammar school history book. These works often depicted explorers in lace collars and silver armor, and →





## Art in the Making

### What the artist used

#### Support

The demonstration piece was painted on fine textured, single oil primed linen, stretched on standard stretcher bars. The dimensions are 24 x 18" (61 x 45cm).

#### Brushes

#8 Bright	#0 Flat
#4 Bright	#00 Round
#2 Bright	#000
#2 Flat	Round
#1 Flat	

#### Other materials

Liquin  
Mineral Spirits

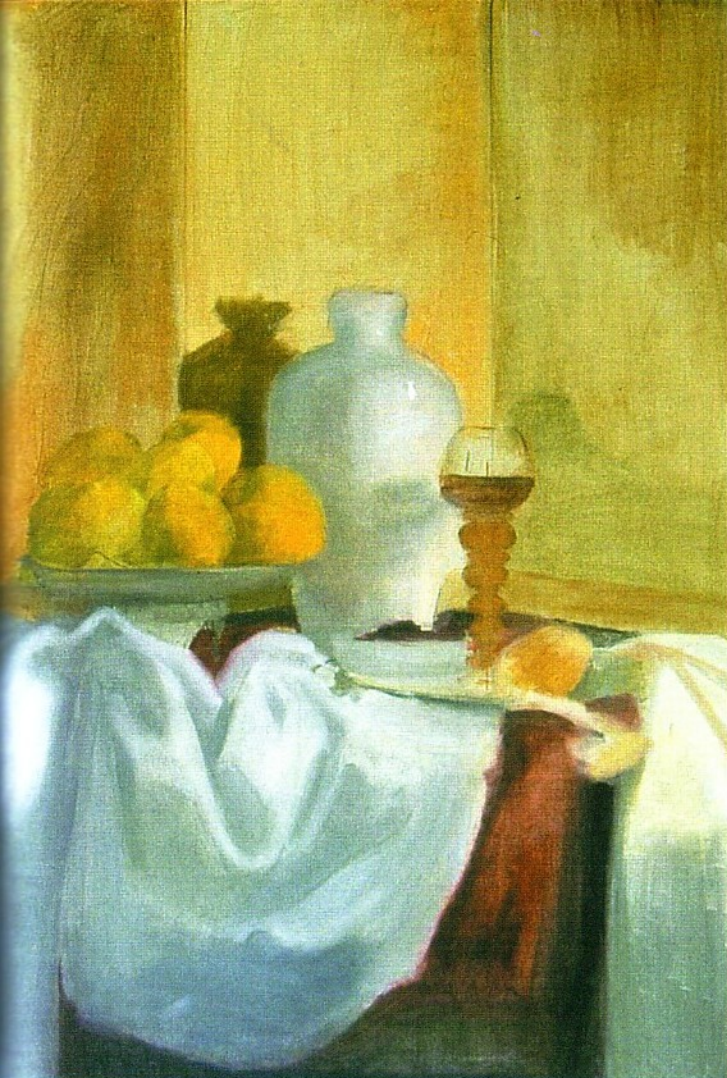
#### STAGE I

After I am generally satisfied with the setup, I spend quite a bit of time making small adjustment to the objects. This includes making the folds of the cloth more pleasing, moving objects slightly to avoid unpleasant tangents, etc.

#### Quality Artists' oil color

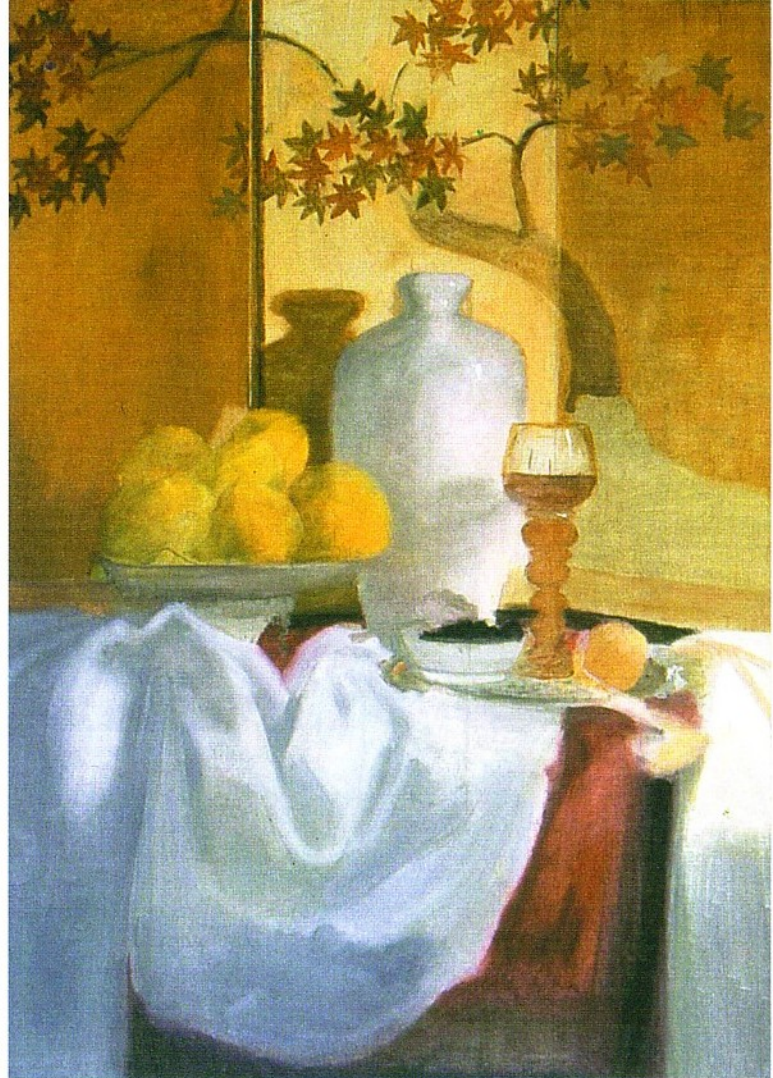






## STAGE 2

I block in the objects on 24 x 18" linen canvas using one tone for the light and one for the shadow part of each object. Now I can make sure I have a pleasing composition. If the composition looks flawed at this stage, it has to be fixed. Otherwise the painting will never look right.

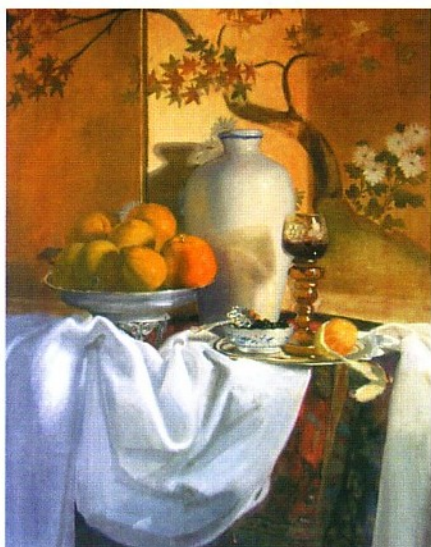


## STAGE 3

I paint in the general design on the screen since it is a strong image. I have to make sure the design of the screen stays in the background and doesn't grab too much attention. This will help me key the rest of the tones as I work the painting. I make sure not to leave ridges on the edges of the design since this is supposed to be an image on a screen, not real leaves, and it's in the background so the edges should be a little diffuse.

**"The colors, for example, must harmonize, not clash, with one another. An artist must also think of the values of the composition; they must have a range on the gray scale so that the composition would be pleasing even if it were in black and white."**





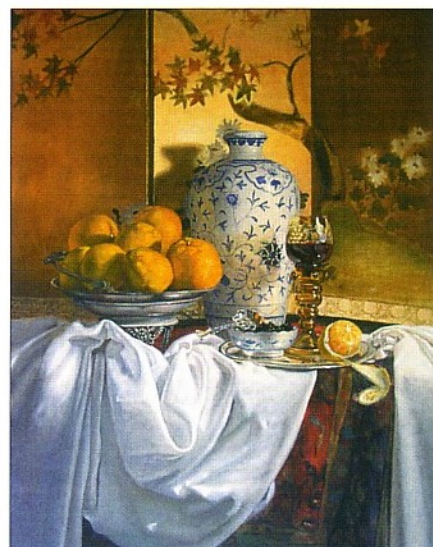
#### STAGE 4

I paint the vase in as accurately as I can so that I can superimpose the blue design upon it once it is dry. I keep my brushwork smooth except for the highlights. I keep in mind that since this is a highly reflective surface, it will reflect light and color from other objects in the setup so I make sure to paint the yellow reflections of the lemons and red from the wineglass.



#### STAGE 5

The entire painting is becoming more refined. Notably, I have painted in the design on the vase and further developed the rug pattern. The silver berry spoon and wineglass are nearly finished. Since they also have reflective surfaces, I paint bold reflections with smooth brushwork but make the highlights with thick globs or streaks of paint.

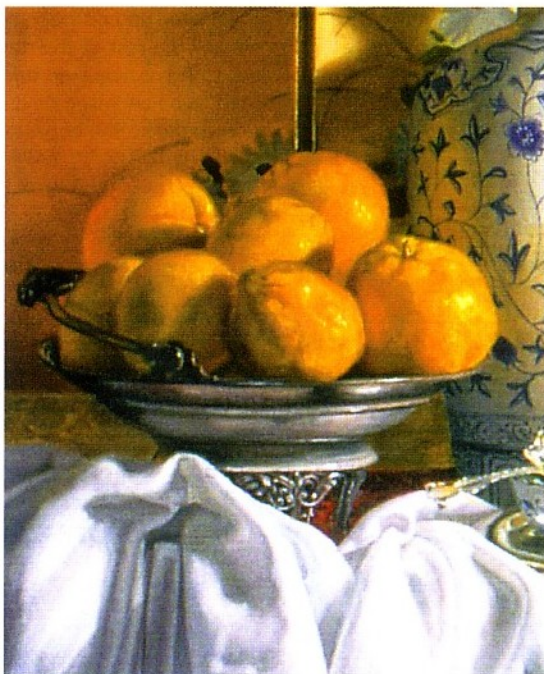


#### STAGE 6

Now that I have most of the tones refined, I see that I need to make the screen darker on the end sections and lighter on the center section. This illustrates why I work the whole painting to the same level of finish. If I had worked from back to front, I would have finished with the screen before I could see exactly how bright to paint it. This way, I make adjustments before too much work has been done.

#### STAGE 7

I enjoyed painting the misshapen lemons. They reminded me of the strange citrus the Flemish masters painted. I used rough scumbles of color in the light and lowlight areas. This helped achieve the bumpy texture of the fruit.



#### STAGE 8

##### Finished Work

***Still Life with Golden Lemons,***  
oil on canvas, 24 x 18" (61 x 45cm)

I created the texture of the rug in the light and lowlight areas with short strokes, imitating the short rug yarns catching the raking light. This was done holding the brush at about a 20 degree angle to the canvas and painting in lighter values than the painting beneath. The shadow area of the rug was left diffuse since objects in shadow do not appear well defined to the eye. Now the piece is finished. The subject matter, lighting and execution give the work a serene and elegant look.









**Good fortune, Oil on Linen, 16 x 20" (41 x 50cm)**

One of the greatest challenges for me with this composition was the length of the samisen, the three stringed instrument, because the neck is very long. I needed objects to fill the space along the neck without the composition looking choppy and cluttered. The figurine was tall enough to break up the line of the samisen's neck and the large fan helped pull the composition together.



**Tulips and Daffodils, Oil on Linen, 16 x 20" (41 x 50cm)**

The daffodils were added to this bouquet of pink tulips to give the painting a focal point. I arranged the light so that the water in the vase would cast the dramatic light onto the table and wall. I extended the stem attached to the bird's nest towards the vase so that the nest would not appear isolated and would instead relate visually to the vase.

→ I was dying to know how such an effect was achieved. Later, I made two trips to Europe to study the paintings in the grand museums. Their beauty enthralled me. To see a Gerome, Bouguereau, or Ingres in person is, for me, to be transported to a land of enchantment. There are, of course, many delightful styles of painting, but the classical style is that which I love best and strive to achieve. I know that some artists wish to create art that shocks the viewer. I, however, think the world is shocking enough without my contributing to it with my brush. It is my belief that art at its best can elevate mankind, even if the subject itself is a sorrowful one.

After the blocking-in stage of the painting is complete, I take care not to simply copy that which is in front of me but, instead, to use my knowledge to improve upon reality and correct flawed perception. For instance, I must remind myself where I should expect to see reflected light, and sometimes choose to paint that light in even if I don't see it in the setup. Or I may perceive, say, that a white paper against a dark object in low light should be painted actual white. But I know it only appears that way to the eye due to the phenomenon of simultaneous contrast, and I therefore must paint it darker. Further, I may exaggerate a highlight or change a shadow if it improves the effect overall.

Another important aspect of creating the desired mood in a painting is the execution of the textures. The character of the surfaces can evoke a subtle emotional reaction. The shining, hard look of silver will create a different response in the viewer than the fuzzy, soft appearance of a peach. Successfully painting the various textures is largely dependent upon remembering the principles of light on objects. For example, if I have a silk drape in my painting, I must keep in mind that the smooth surface would reflect





**The Annunciation, Oil on Linen, 30 x 24" (73 x 61 cm)**

Instead of the accepting, serene look on Mary's face that is usually portrayed in the great master's paintings, I wanted Mary to look a little surprised and confused. My young model expressed the emotion that I wanted perfectly. The lilies were growing in my garden. I dug them up, put them in pots and kept them in the studio while I painted them. I planted them again when I was done. They still bloom in the garden every year.

the light strongly. As a result, the highlights will be many and strong, and the reflected light will be quite prominent. On the other hand, if I'm painting a wool rug, it will be less reflective and have very subtle highlights. Brushstrokes, as well, are an important factor in creating the illusion of texture. A porcelain vase will look best, in my style, with very little brushwork evident, because the surface is smooth. The aforementioned rug, however, will be painted best with the brushstrokes

apparent and describing the uneven surface represented.

I work the entire painting to the same level of finish throughout as I go along. This way I can more accurately relate the tones to one another. Eventually, after reducing to smaller and smaller brushes and greater detail, I complete my painting. If I am successful, I know I have used the subject matter, the lighting and the execution to evoke the precise mood I intended to create. □

## About the artist

A traditional still life and figure painter, B. Nicole Klassen received art schooling at San Jose State University where she is proud to have had Maynard Dixon "Dick" Stewart as an instructor. She further developed her skills under the instruction of the brilliant painter, Robert K. Semans.

Nicole had her first one-person show in 1994 at the Alma Gilbert Gallery in Burlingame, has exhibited at the Montara Gallery and New Masters Gallery, both in Carmel, and also the previous location of the Bingham Gallery in San Jose, all these in California. She has since had four more one-person shows at Winstanley-Roark Fine Arts in Massachusetts. Her work was in two group shows at the Cahoon Museum in Massachusetts.

Collectors hold Nicole's pieces both here and in Europe. Some notable acquisitions are a still life bought by Alma Gilbert to hang in the house of the late Maxfield Parrish, and a Madonna purchased and displayed by The Cathedral Church of the Advent in Birmingham, Alabama. She recently received honors from the Art Renewal Center for a still life and a figure piece.

Nicole has always been enthralled by the art of the old masters. She spent two trips to Europe studying the paintings in the great museums. She is constantly striving to perfect her art by studying the masters of our time and the past.