

VIRGINIA GOTT : PAINTING UNDER A HOT SONORAN SUN

Virginia Gott is a *plein air* painter of the Sonoran desert. Her work is a fine illustrative example of what painters working in that manner ought to strive towards: distilling the motifs of the landscape into their essential formal qualities.

Here's what I mean by that: All the subtle things that make a geospatial landscape unique – its geographic character, its distinct atmospheric, its topography, its flora and fauna – all these things must be streamlined into painterly forms via a localized palette and economy of style. The brushwork must be confidently executed in a decisive manner. A serious *plein air* painter will want to capture a specific lighting condition and must thus be able to work quickly. Knowledge of color theory is key: too much fiddling about with tonal values results in a muddy mess.



Virginia Gott, Sombbrero Peak Sunset, acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 in.

Note how Gott's fluid yet confidently executed brushstrokes outline a recurrent motif like Sombbrero peak – either matching or contrasting its tonal value with the sky, depending on the lighting condition of the moment. Also note how the local color of specific motifs like foothills, trees or shrubs is more pronounced in the mid and foreground of her compositions. All of this is done with an economy of style that – at the height of her game – she successfully reduces to abstracted impressions of those essential qualities of the landscape I keep referring back to.



Virginia Gott, Sombbrero Summer, acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 in.

Plein air is a French term that idiomatically translates as "outdoors". In the parlance of art, the term refers to capturing the effect of natural light, immediate environmental motifs and atmospheric conditions as they occur in a live outdoor setting. In other words, painting in this manner involves moving the easel outside of the studio and painting what one encounters directly out there in the world.

While *plein air* painting enjoys a rich and diverse history, it really came into its own in the mid 19th century when paint became available in tubes. This hugely facilitated the process of transporting a wide array of colors which could then be easily mixed on site. The invention of the French box easel made the process of transporting paint, canvas and easel even easier.

While much could be written about the trajectory of outdoor painting in Europe – how it was put in the service of the wider painterly concerns of the Impressionists, or Vincent van Gogh's transcendent concerns – Virginia's paintings are firmly anchored in the American tradition. In America, *plein air* painting is rooted in the landscape genre, which continues to be committed to mythologizing the North American wilderness in all glory to this day.



Virginia Gott, Late Afternoon Mesquites, acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 in.

Back in the Puritan days, the uncultivated wilderness was considered a hostile place where the human will was tested through toil and demonic torment. It was seen as a place of chaos that was to be tamed and made productive. This attitude would change with the advent of industrialization, urban squalor, and all the accompanying human misery and vice that that process entailed (not to say that these things didn't exist in rural agrarian societies, merely that this new development added a new dimension to these ancient problems).

Suffice to say here that our current notion of "scenery" didn't exist in America until the arrival of a young English painter by the name of Thomas Cole in 1818. Cole was a nostalgic type that was able to tap into a feeling in America among people rich and powerful enough to have the luxury to indulge in such idle thoughts that the America they once knew – the wild, pristine, idyllic America – was receding before their very eyes.



Virginia Gott, Last of Winter Tortolita, acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 in.

A century later, Cole's initial foray into mythologizing the wilderness for the American pseudo-gentry had trickled down to the masses. We'll call it what it is: the democratization of the American landscape. It went like this: after the second world war, your average middle class American or Canadian family had enough money to go someplace on vacation. The Hudson River school, the Old Lyme school, Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven all pointed the way to the Great Outdoors.

For some, the Mythical American landscape is essentially the most sacred church – every mountaintop infinitely more suitable as a place of worship than Saint Peter's basilica in Rome. For others, our wild places are a sort of extension of the national character – even if most of us are city dwellers.

For Virginia Gott and her fellow outdoor painters, it could be these things but also something more – the aesthetic layout of the land: its painterly forms, capturing the many facets of light on the palette, seeing its essential qualities with that painterly combination of great passion and the necessary clinical detachment required to work through the logistics of getting it right.

You can view Virginia Gott's paintings here: www.vgottdrawings.com





Virginia Gott, Summer Saguaro, acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 in.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: J.E. RADDATZ

Jonathan is a painter, writer and scholar specializing in the religious and philosophical landscape of Late Antiquity. He spends his time translating ancient texts, painting in the studio, taking his kids on field trips to museums, and writing about all kinds of things having to do with Early Christianity, philosophy, art history, and contemporary art. You can find out more about him by checking out his web site:

www.jeraddatz.com