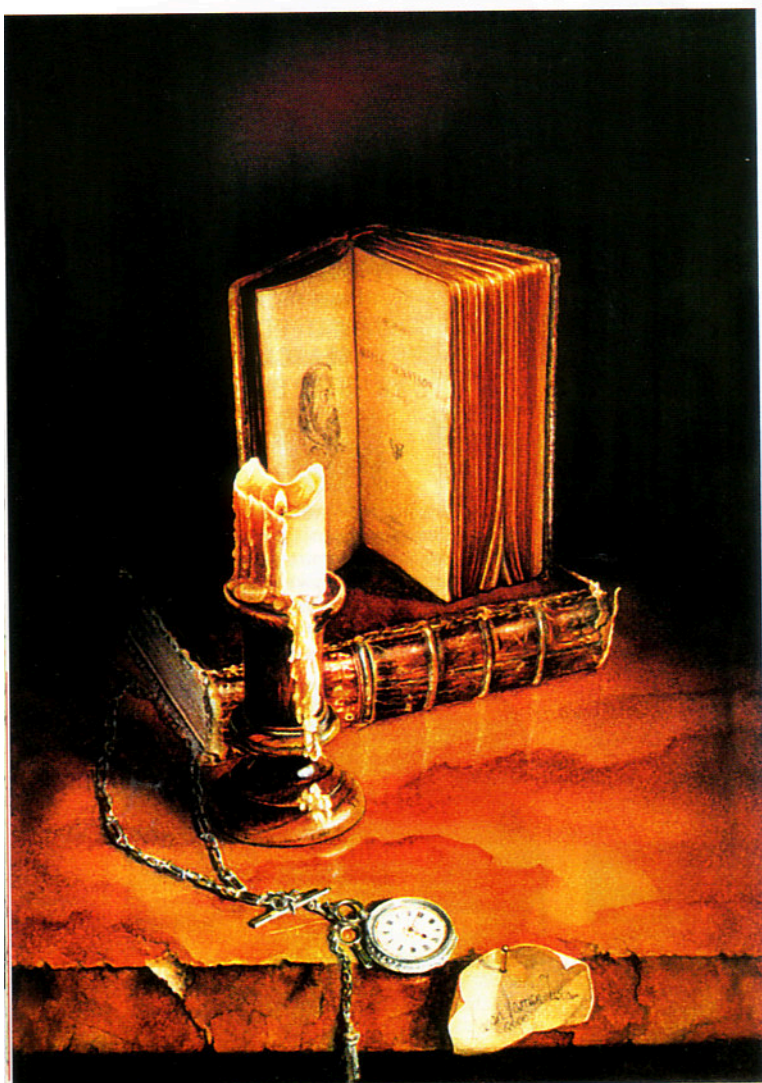




# The Artist's Eternal Triangle

**Susan Harrison-Tustain** explores the connection between the Artist, the Viewer and the Subject



*Time Stands Still, Watercolor*

**T**here are many truths about portraiture and figurative painting – but I believe the compelling strength and appeal of any painting does not lie solely in the ability of the artist to paint skilfully. To captivate the viewer of any work an artist needs to focus initially on a well-placed subject, supporting objects and lighting.

Carefully chosen backgrounds, foregrounds and objects that help define the person are all essential to establishing a mood and an atmosphere that depict the nature and character of the subject. A frame will not confine a sensitively painted portrait. Such a painting is much bigger than that and will engage the viewer, beckoning them to become immersed in the moment.

These are the threads that weave together to form a painting that will speak to the viewers. They lead us into a more private world where we can capture an unguarded expression or an emotion that describes the person within.

So how do we “choose a subject well”?

No matter what I paint – my goal is to reach out and touch the viewer. I want them to feel something about the subject and relate to it on a level way above that of “a good rendition”. I want to create a connection between the viewer and the subject.

Observation is key. When choosing your subject, ask yourself what is it about that person that makes them who they are. Can you capture some of that life force that you see in their demeanour or in their expression? Maybe their eyes give you insight into their personality. Maybe it is their stance? Is it the tilt of the head, a fleet expression shown on their lips? Most often it is all of these as well as a myriad of muscle changes in their face and body. Define this narrative and you will ensure your painting tells the story for you.

Surround your subject with supporting objects or ‘suggested’ items that offer an insight into their nature. Is she graceful? Is she elegant? Does she work in a field where her skin, hands and body show obvious signs of hard work? Ask yourself the questions. Tell your viewer the answers but remember to leave a little mystery.

My philosophy is universal regardless of medium: Oil, Watercolor or Acrylic – we can create a compelling story with any medium and the wise use of composition. □

**Echoes of Yesterday, oil on Belgian linen,  
75 x 40cm (29½ x 16")**

Have you ever wandered outside a derelict cottage – peered through the window frame and mused on what had gone before? Here in New Zealand we have many abandoned farm cottages that are now relics of our short history. I ponder the sounds of children playing, the farmhouse kitchen aromas of fresh bread baking in the oven, and the personalities of the people who had once made this their home. These walls have absorbed all of that history – I love the thought of capturing those notions on canvas before what once was a home becomes part of the earth yet again.

I chose to describe my subject in almost monotone hues. The beauty of age is rich and deep. It has a depth far greater than anything bright and new. My composition needed to reflect that. I supported this notion by dressing Shelley in an antique lace skirt. Although the lace was perfect – I chose to paint it as if it were ripped at the hem. Shelley's foot has picked up some of the dust and detritus from the well-worn path. Once again – these details give support to the narrative we wish to suggest.

Beneath the decaying cottage – out of the rubble – there is new life. A New Zealand fern unfolds and reaches out to the light. Bramble flourishes in these places and not only suggests new beginning, but also adds a dash of subdued red which gives a lift to the almost monotone painting.

Above Shelley's shoulder you can see another dash of very subdued red. This is hardly noticeable but it creates a change in color temperature and without being overtly obvious – it pulls our thoughts deeper into the story.

I once dreamed of being able to create paintings that would speak to those who viewed them. I set about teaching myself how the almost indefinable could be defined. What I learned was how well-chosen subjects can captivate those who love art – but equally as important – how an intelligent composition will allow our paintings to live in the memories of those who have seen them – long after leaving their presence. It is like a painted verse – a silent poetry that speaks through emotion and a connection between artist and viewer.



## ***Enchanté par La Provence (Enchanted by Provence),*** **oil on Belgian linen, 120 x60cm (47 x 23")**

**T**his painting is about elegance, grace and femininity. This is not a portrait of one specific person – it is a painting that speaks of many things – all of which are timelessly feminine. This could have been painted 100 years ago – or a 100 years hence. The appeal of the subject and composition is also timeless.

Notice the angle I chose for the viewer. We are low in the field and our eyes travel through the poppies and up to the girl. As we gaze at her we take in her gentleness, and her grace. How does one describe such things?

Look at her demeanor. Notice there are no harsh lines, her shape is rounded – not sharp. Her muscles are relaxed and her body flows, rather than being taut. Her skirt falls softly and the late afternoon sun filters through the folds and allows us to juxtapose a glowing radiance alongside the complementary cool folds of fabric.

This allows a wonderful vibration/interaction which makes the painting sing with colour – although it is still subtle. These are supporting articles - we don't want the viewer's eye to be drawn directly to such things. It is not unlike a fine wine – the elements need to be softly blended and balanced – as opposed to each of them jarring the senses and fighting for attention.

Our gaze takes in the delicate embroidery on the skirt, the peek of skin at the waist and the soft folds of handmade lace on the antique cotton camisole. Shelley's head is tilted on the side – this gives us insight into her thoughts. She is gazing at the poppy in her hand. Is she examining the poppy in minute detail or do you think she is lost in the moment? I hope you agree it is the latter.

Notice how the poppy is in sharp focus, in comparison to the other poppies in the same plane. This helps direct the viewer to Shelley's point of focus. Her hands and nails are elegant and feminine. Their form is gentle as opposed to sharp and gripping.

The warm sunshine casts a lace pattern shadow on her arm. It is soft and has blurred edges. Had I painted it stronger, it may have given the impression of being tattooed on her skin. Instead we have something that adds to the impression we wish to create and is often commented on.

The dappled light glistens on her hair as it falls naturally around her shoulders. An umbrella or a hat holds focus on our subjects and I have chosen to use a lace umbrella for this subject as it also helps to portray the warmth of the summer sun.

I paint lace by initially suggesting the negative space. This means I paint the 'holes'. It is simple – what you see in the background on the other side of the umbrella is what you would see inside each of the holes. Just as you would paint lace on a wooden sideboard: you would paint the wood you see through the holes.

Although the umbrella reads 'white' – I have used numerous different whites mixed with other colors to describe this umbrella: the myriad of whites range from cool to warm, light to lighter – and of course you will also see the delicately reflected colors from other areas – such as the light 'poppy' red you can see tinting the underneath at the front of the umbrella. These are the 'tools' I use to describe the form of the umbrella. A cool white placed next to a cool white would not give any depth, nor would it effectively describe the shape.

Shelley's face is not our focus. Her features are painted without strong definition. This is not a portrait – it speaks of many women. Soft blurred edges and moulded form give us the impression of a kind personality. More defined features would give us a different painting.

To add to the atmosphere, you will notice the distant poppies appear to be in the light shadow of fleeting clouds as they float across the sky. There are areas of warmth, which suggest the sun peeking through the clouds. A vineyard in the background gives a change in texture and colour. The variety of trees and foliage on the side of the hill add to that texture and also variety of hue. Notice the terra-cotta rooftops amongst the trees? These little 'gems' add surprise and hold interest as the viewer looks for more.



**Detail of skirt ruffle**





A sixteenth century village overlooks the field – almost like a sentinel. The buildings are undefined with edges that flow into each other. Distance (aerial perspective) removes sharpness and narrows tonal values. These things are all a foil for our main subject and allow us to push her foremost. But never underestimate the value of our supporting subject matter. In this painting it places our lady in Europe with the ancient village watching over her and giving a sense of tranquillity and guardianship together with a sense of belonging. She looks as if she has wandered into this serene landscape many times doesn't she? The supporting material also gives us the impression of distance and it invites us to look deeper into the painting and become enchanted by the things that aren't initially obvious.

I love the notion that viewers of this painting may become lost in the same moment, as I was when I stood painting in this fine field of poppies. But to do that – we have to invite the viewers of our work to feel the 'presence' of our painting.



**All Aboard, detail,  
Watercolor on  
Arches HP 140lbs  
(300 gsm)**

Lost in his imaginary world of 'bus-drivers' – his perplexed expression and placement of his hand up to his mouth suggests he may be pondering how he is going to fit all of us – the viewers of this painting – on his bus.

**"A frame  
will not  
confine a  
sensitively  
painted  
portrait."**

**Artist's Truths**

- Believe in yourself and your work
- Be influenced, but compose your own music and sing your own song – the reward is uniquely 'you'.
- A rejection is the best motivation to succeed
- 'Feel' your subject
- Paint what you feel
- Reach for the stars
- Enjoy the journey – an artist never reaches an end-point

***Time for Reflection,*  
Watercolor on Arches  
HP 140lbs (300 gsm),  
62 x 36cm (24 x 14")**

My model, once again, is my daughter Shelley. Shelley's demeanor speaks of someone lost in thought. She is contemplative. This mood was supported by the use of shadow and light. She has emerged from a darker place (the upper steps), and she is drawn into the light by the warmth of the summer sun. She is on a journey. To make a 'suggestion' and then allow each viewer the opportunity to connect with the moment and complete the story themselves gives them a richer and more memorable encounter with our work.

**"Art can often be a 'self-portrait' – a glimpse into the person behind the brush."**





**No More His Song, Close-up of hands (detail), oil on Belgian linen**

She raises her hand – should she let him go or should she ask him to stay?  
This painting asks a question.

**Detail of Awakening, Close-up of hands, Watercolor on Arches HP 140lbs (300 gsm)**

The suggestion of elegance in this painting strengthened by the gently illuminated long and graceful fingers held in a relaxed pose.





**Enchanté, oil on Belgium linen (detail)**

A tender moment expressed by a relaxed and trusting pose.



## About the artist

Susan Harrison-Tustain is an internationally recognized and award winning New Zealand artist. As one of New Zealand's leading representational artists, demand for Susan's work far outweighs her output. Her natural affinity for timeless subjects is reflected in her highly sought-after paintings.

The essence of Susan's work is the 'presence' and reality she creates within each painting. Largely self-taught, Susan's work is described as 'Naturalistic Realism'.

Susan has written and illustrated a highly successful book featuring her paintings and her painting style. Published in the United States, 'Glorious Garden Flowers in Watercolor' (North Light Books Cincinnati) has become a world-wide best seller and has introduced her art to a multitude of people.

Demand for her DVDs has also become exponential and she is in high demand as a tutor of workshops. In 2006 she began a series of international watercolor workshops. More are planned for Maine, Oregon and New Zealand in 2008 and 2009.

Susan's work can be found in collections in the U.K., Italy, South Africa, France, the U.S., Turkey, Australia and New Zealand.

Susan is exclusively self-represented. Susan's exhibitions are only held once every three to four years. A sneak preview of her exhibition collection is available on her website:

[www.harrison-tustain.com/exhibition/index.html](http://www.harrison-tustain.com/exhibition/index.html)

Feel free to contact Susan through her website: [www.susanart.com](http://www.susanart.com)

