

Dog Gone Art

the arts and literary magazine for the dog lover

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In this Issue

Profiles

Writer - Rachel Page Elliott

Artist - Deborah Strong

Articles

History of the Dog Writers Association of America and yearly writing competition

A Family of Painters - The Earls

The 2011 Bonham Dog Art Sale

*Deborah
Strong:*

*Pencils &
Silks*



"Raven" in coloured pencil

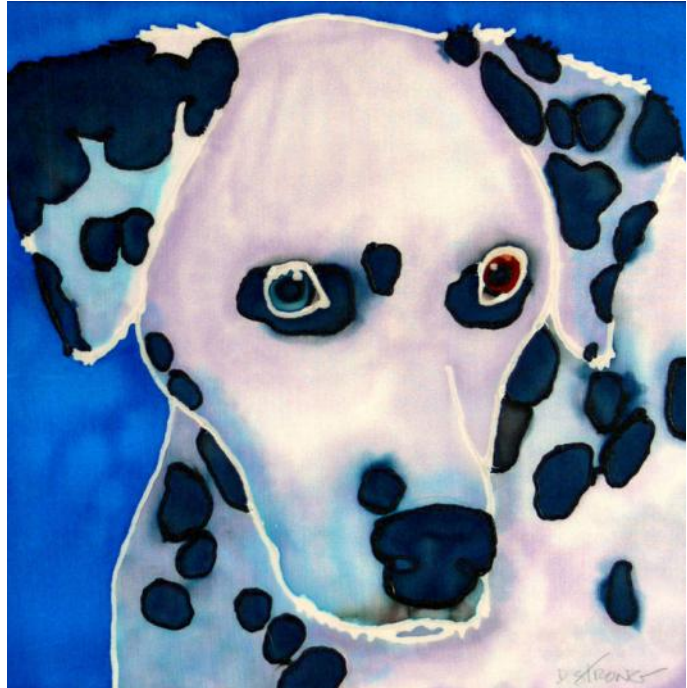
Deborah Strong was born and raised in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, Canada – a place she still calls home and where she maintains her art practice and studio. A life-long artist, she graduated from high school with a Fine Arts award and scholarship, followed by diplomas in Fine Arts and Graphic Design. She worked as a professional graphic designer for many years before shifting focus to her true vocation as an artist and dedicating herself full-time to fine art.

Deborah's art is all about animals.
Since her childhood, they played a key

(Continued on page 25)

(Continued from page 24)

role in her life, from the ponies, dogs, cats and barnyard creatures at her family's farm to the more exotic residents of the local zoo. The personal connection she makes with members of the animal world is the hallmark of her art. She completed her first pet portrait commissions as a teenager, working first in pastel then later moving into coloured pencil. In her 20s, she discovered silk painting and was engaged by the vivid colours and vibrant quality of that medium. Deborah now works primarily in both coloured pencil and hand-painted silk. Her silk paintings are often described as "whimsical" while her coloured pencil work demonstrates her proficiency with detail and realism. While they may seem like very divergent media, Deborah feels they help her achieve balance as an artist and infuse her work with a fresh quality. Coloured pencil is very controlled, detail oriented and time consuming, involving long hours bent over a drawing table. Contrastingly, silk painting is about bright colours and simple forms, and letting the dye "do its thing" as it flows through the fibres. Whatever the medium, the art she produces reflects her love of animals and her own unique style of expression.



"Fireman's Friend" in silk

Currently Deborah shares her life with two dogs: her Rough Collie Riley and little Ginger Snap, a Pomeranian. Interestingly, one of Deborah's early pastel drawings, completed as a teenager, depicts a tri-colour collie uncannily similar to Riley. In 2002, Riley found her way into Deborah's life via the local collie rescue group. She arrived at a vulnerable moment for Deborah: her beloved horse Duke, a golden palomino quarterhorse/saddlebred gelding and her best friend for nearly 30 years, had suddenly and unexpectedly died. In the depths of Deborah's grief, the phone rang and it was the collie rescue group saying that they had a dog they felt was a perfect match (Deborah, who did not have a dog at the time, was committed to adopting a dog in need but it was her wish for it to be a Rough Collie; she had

(Continued on page 26)

(Continued from page 25)

been on the waiting list for more than a year). The female collie, soon to be named Riley, was only 18 months old at the time and had bounced from home to home until finding permanence with Deborah, her husband Tom, and their two orange tabby cats Rupert and Jasper. At first they wondered why anyone would give up such a sweet, beautiful dog, but they soon discovered she had a challenging digestive problem that took perseverance and many sleepless nights to bring under control. Today, at nearly 10 years old, Riley is happy and healthy and is seldom far from Deborah's side.



Pastel done by Deborah as a teenager



Head study of Riley in coloured pencil

Through her adoption of Riley, Deborah became acutely aware of the need of so many dogs for permanent loving homes; dogs that get discarded or abandoned through no fault of their own. Now a firm advocate for animal adoption, she supports the work of local animal welfare groups by whatever means she can, often through the donation of art for fundraising purposes. She regularly contributes to

(Continued on page 27)

(Continued from page 26)

her local animal shelter and those in neighbouring districts, and to breed-specific rescue groups.

Deborah's second dog, Ginger Snap, is a 7-pound Pomeranian with a mighty big attitude. She had been the friend and companion of Deborah's elderly mom who passed away in 2009, at which point Ginger joined Deborah's immediate furry family. She is now 12 years old and quite possibly the cutest dog in the world. She suffers from Pomeranian alopecia (a mysterious hair-loss ailment), but compensates for that through an extensive wardrobe of adorable outfits. Being small and elderly, with thinning hair, few teeth and very short legs does not mean she gets left behind on long walks – **she simply snuggles into Deborah's backpack and goes along for the ride!** The only one who feels left out is feline Rupert, who is confined to the house for his own safety. He waits longingly at the window, often vocalizing his displeasure, till everyone returns.



*A photo of a dressed up
Ginger Snap*



"Ginger Snap" in coloured pencil

It would come as no surprise that hand-in-hand with Deborah's love of animals is her enjoyment of the outdoors, ranging from neighbourhood strolls, to rambling woodland walks, to rugged hikes, to the serenity of time spent pottering in her

(Continued on page 28)

(Continued from page 27)

garden. She has spent untold hours exploring the countryside on horseback and on foot, and her love of adventure has taken her hiking on **Vancouver Island's West Coast Trail**, exploring the swamps and forests of Trinidad and Tobago (**Tom's homeland**), sailing in the **Grenadines**, and long-distance trekking in the United Kingdom. The creatures she meets along the way, be they dogs, cats, horses, birds or wildlife, form the basis for her art. And, of course, her own collection of animal companions is always on hand offering continued inspiration.



Deborah handling a Rainbow Boa in Trinidad

Deborah's art has been juried into group exhibitions, displayed in private galleries, highlighted in magazines, and showcased at art festivals. Her coloured pencil drawings have received awards at regional juried exhibitions. She is the organizer of her community's **Artists' Studio Tour** and an active member of the **Federation of Canadian Artists**. Her ongoing professional development as an artist has included numerous workshops and seminars, the highlight of which was a recent week-long **artists'**



Deborah working on a coloured pencil portrait

retreat with internationally-renowned wildlife painter Robert Bateman.

While many artists dislike working on commission, Deborah thoroughly enjoys it! She maintains a busy art practice at her home studio and always has at least one portrait, usually a dog but often cat or horse, on the go. She welcomes each portrait as an opportunity to develop an intimate relationship with her subject, working toward the magical moment **when the spark of the animal's character** shines through its eyes and the portrait comes to life. The emotional response she receives from many of her clients is

testimony to her ability to capture the essence of her subjects. Their words speak for themselves:

(Continued on page 29)

(Continued from page 28)

- “Lots of people can paint animals, but you capture the spirit of the animal. That, to me, is the magical part.”
- “I want to thank you again for doing such a wonderful job... You have captured the look in [my dog's] eyes and on his face so perfectly.”
- “It's absolutely perfect... You don't know how perfect. This is absolutely 'priceless' to me. We will cherish it forever.”



"Waiting for Walk Time" in silk

While most of Deborah's commissioned portraits are completed in coloured pencil, offering a detailed, lifelike rendering of the animal, she welcomes the opportunity to create silk paintings of her subjects. The outcome is less representational and

(Continued on page 30)

(Continued from page 29)

more impressionistic but it captures the animal's fundamental likeness and results in a colourful, playful work of art. Neither medium is without its challenges, but with 25 years of experience Deborah has significant expertise to fall back on. She shares her knowledge in workshops at her home studio where small groups gather to learn the multi-step process of painting on silk using a method involving resist and steam-set dyes, or to explore the various techniques involved in drawing with coloured pencil. All students must be prepared to share the studio with Deborah's crew of critters who dislike being left out of the action.



Deborah teaching a silk painting class



Silk painting workshop participants

The development of a piece of art, be it in coloured pencil or hand-painted silk, a personal concept or a portrait commission, always begins with a period of contemplation. Deborah often works from photographic references, and when doing so — particularly when the photos are from a portrait client — she places the photos where she can see them as she goes about her day, familiarizing herself with the

(Continued on page 31)

(Continued from page 30)

images that will form the basis for the drawing/painting. If she hasn't been able to meet the dog (or cat or horse), she refers to notes taken in discussion with the client: notes about the dog's personality, characteristics, habits and quirks, and interesting anecdotes about his/her life. She also likes to have a series of photos



Whippets "Cisco and Kinley" in coloured pencil

showing the dog in action, in various positions, from various angles, and at various stages of his/her development in an effort to gain insight into personality as well as physical structure. When preparing for a silk painting, planning the colour palette is a significant piece of the process, choosing colours that will compliment, or in some cases represent, the animal's natural colouring. In either medium the composition forms the bones of the art piece, and gets worked out through rough sketches, usually on newsprint, that become increasingly more refined until she feels she has reached perfection. She then transfers the sketch onto her drawing/painting surface and sets to work.

In coloured pencil, she works on smooth illustration board, first creating a soft tonal study in French grey before adding more colours, paying particular attention to **the dog's eyes. As any portrait artist will tell you, if the eyes aren't right, then** nothing will be right! Working in coloured pencil involves developing many layers, blending and adding, and blending and adding, sometimes using an eraser to remove some of the pigment, sometimes using solvents to blend the pigment and deepen the tones, applying a variety of techniques as needed to obtain textures. **It's a laborious process but one which results in a highly-**realistic finished product.

Silk painting is vastly different in both application process and outcome. The composition is broken down into simple shapes, then the outline is drawn onto a **stretched piece of silk with a product called "resist", so named because it blocks** the flow of dye through the silk fibres. The dyes are applied with watercolour brushes, and a variety of techniques can be used to create textural effects, including sprinkling salt onto the wet dye. With silk painting, the trick is not to over-

(Continued on page 32)

(Continued from page 31)

work, guiding flow of the dyes but allowing them to find their own way, giving the medium a say in the outcome of the painting. Once the painting is complete, the process is not over: the dyes need to rest for a couple of days, then the piece must be steamed to permanently set the dyes, washed, ironed and prepared for framing.



"Three Red Raincoats" in silk

Despite their obvious differences, both mediums involve time, patience, an understanding of the materials, and dedication to the processes. One of Deborah's favourite quotes often becomes her mantra in the studio: "Learn diligence before speedy execution", attributed to fellow artist and left-hander, Leonardo da Vinci.



Instructor and helper

Every morning, Deborah heads downstairs to her modest but comfortable art studio, coffee in hand and critters (canine and feline) at heel, and settles down to her drawing table. She may be creating a memorial portrait of beloved canine companion, figuring out a composition to pose a pair of whippets together on their favourite couch, experimenting with the best way to depict the texture of a Bichon's woolly locks or a Lab's slick sheen, or selecting some bright colours that, on silk, will represent the many hues of a Collie's rough coat. Or perhaps she's working on a piece that's her own concept, based on a walk in the forest or a visit to the dog park. Often it's Riley's nudge at her elbow,

Often it's Riley's nudge at her elbow,

(Continued on page 33)

(Continued from page 32)

or Ginger's paws on her shin, or a cat tugging at her sleeve that reminds her to take a break and focus on them for a while. It's really a reciprocal arrangement: she cares for their needs but in turn, they provide quiet companionship, make sure she gets out for a walk every day, and give her endless artistic inspiration and support.

To see more of Deborah's work, visit her website: www.catnmousedesigns.com. Her work is available in prints, cards and calendars, as well as original drawings and paintings. She keeps a busy exhibition schedule which can also be viewed on her website, along with her upcoming workshops.



"Collies Running Free" in silk



"Emma and Baillee" in coloured pencil



*Above: "Rupert and Jasper" in coloured pencil
Over: "Walking the Dog in April" in silk*

