

Beyond The Law: Betsey McCandless

Interview and photos
by Daniel J. Murphy



In art, as in life, it is not always what you see, but how you see it. For Elizabeth “Betsey” McCandless, a studio painter, this concept rings especially true. Expanding upon a life-long appreciation of art, McCandless accepted a friend’s challenge to pick up a brush and create her own artwork. Viewing the challenge as an opportunity, McCandless took intensive lessons aimed at developing her skills and has been painting in oil and watercolor ever since. Through the process, McCandless has gained insight not only into the composition of colors and forms that she translates onto canvas, but also an appreciation of the creative process. McCandless, a trust and estates attorney at McCandless LLC in Portland, sat down with the *Maine Bar Journal* to discuss her interests.

MBJ: Tell us about your interest in art.

ETM: I grew up in New York City. As a child I would go to the Museum of Modern Art and the Met and just look at the beautiful paintings. It was fun for me to go for an afternoon and wander. I had favorite paintings, so I would always go back to visit them.

MBJ: When did you start painting your own pieces?

ETM: I didn’t start painting until I was 45, after my three children were older. I have always had a fondness for artists—my father was a scene designer. I have one particular

friend, Mary Louise Norton, who is an interior decorator and artist. I loved to watch her paint. I would get so excited! One day she said, “I really think you should paint.” And I said, “I’ve never painted in my life.” So she did a wonderful thing for me. She set up a week of lessons with DeWitt Hardy, the watercolor artist. This was in the summer when life tends to be a little slow in the trust and estates world. She said, “You can leave work every day at 1:00 and come down and have a painting class, but you need to take Friday off and you have to paint all day Saturday.” So I showed up my first afternoon and walked in and DeWitt said, “So Betsey, have you painted before?” And I said, “No.” He said, “Well, what do you do for a living?” I said, “I’m a trust and estates lawyer.” And he





looked at my friend and he said, “What did you bring me?” And I said, “Well, my father was a scene designer,” and he said, “Okay.”

We worked on the most basic things. Painting balls with different shading and just playing with the flow of the paint. I had never done it before, so I was terrified, but found it was really fun. The interesting thing I learned was that my brain really hurt after such an intense week. By the end of it, I had such a headache from using a different side of my brain. People may think that artists just know how to paint naturally, but painting is actually very technical and you have to be thinking all the time. I thought, “How can I possibly do this?” But DeWitt was very patient and encouraging. After the week of classes I was hooked.

MBJ: How did that week of classes change you?

ETM: I noticed a shift in my brain. On the Sunday of that week, I played nine holes of golf with my son, who was a teenager at the time. At the golf course, all I could see were the shadows and different shades of color. Toward the end of the day, we saw a lot of shadows and it was fantastic. It was quite an experience to play golf with a totally different eye and it was because of the painting I had done during the days before.

MBJ: What kind of painting media do you use?

ETM: Either watercolor or oil. My dear friend the artist uses oils in the cold months of winter and does watercolor in the summer and warmer months. With oil, I love the texture and smell of oil paint. I like painting with a pallet knife, with my fingers and with brushes. With oil, you build from dark to light. With watercolor you build from light to dark. And with water, you really can't make a mistake, which makes working with watercolor very challenging. You can try to lift off something you don't like, but it's very difficult. With an oil painting, you can scrape off and start over or just cover the paint. They are very different mediums but I like them both.

MBJ: What are some of the challenges involved with painting?

ETM: Most of it is a challenge! The biggest challenge is actually sitting down to start. I play mind games with myself all the time about that. It's really having the courage to take the time and to be open to whatever comes. Sometimes it is difficult to get into the groove, and other times I get lost in painting and it feels great. When you are doing well, it is like meditation—very clearing. If you can get to that place where you're putting the paint on and you're just watching it go, it is a joy.

MBJ: Do you have a creative process or sources of inspiration for painting?

ETM: I'm a very visual person, so I take a lot of photographs. If I see a great tree or even laundry on a line, an interesting city scene or something beautiful in nature, I'll take a photograph, which is good inspiration for me. It's really a discipline. I also enjoy looking through art books and if there is a painting that I really like, I'll copy it. That's a great way to learn.

MBJ: Are there any particular paintings that you've painted that have special meaning for you?

ETM: I think each painting is special in its own way because I can remember what was going on at the particular time I was working on it. The framed painting of a teapot was done on a Saturday afternoon in my friend's kitchen. She and I were painting at the same time and it really was a lot of fun. It's not that we chat when working together; it's just nice to have someone there and break once in a while to look at one another's work. Another painting was a still life of a bottle and an orange from a class assignment that I had with Janet Manyan at the Maine College of Art. That painting was done over the course of four Friday mornings—some days were enjoyable although one day I was distracted by the work I had to do that afternoon.

MBJ: Any intersection between your interest in art and your work?

ETM: I like to think that the type of work that I do (trust and estates) is very creative. I listen to people and then put their plan together in a way that suits them, so I'm constantly looking at alternatives, which is what you do when you're painting. You shift things around and search for different ways of doing things. So that is the creative side of what I do, which is the artistic side of me.

MBJ: Your office walls are adorned with paintings of different artists. Are many of these works created by local artists?

ETM: Yes. I love having pieces by local artists in my office. I know some of the artists and I look at their paintings and think of them. I really believe that our society does not give proper respect and economic rewards to artists. If you think about it, over history what remains? Buildings and art! And yet there are not many resources to support the arts, particularly in these times. I believe it is very important to support artists.

MBJ: What's the best advice you've ever received?

ETM: I've received a lot of advice! The best advice is to listen to your intuition and go with your heart.

MBJ: Did you tap into that instinct when you first were interested in art?

ETM: Yes, it was terrifying, but my gut and my heart said I

might as well try it. I was thrilled to find that it gave me a greater balance in life, including my work and how I relate to my clients. I think you've always got to take a breath and listen to your heart.



Daniel J. Murphy is a shareholder in Bernstein Shur's Business Law and Litigation Practice Groups, where his practice concentrates on business and commercial litigation matters.

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207-781-7350
72 Foreside Road
Cumberland ME 04110