

SPECIAL IN THIS ISSUE: HOW PASTEL ARTISTS ORGANIZE THEIR STUDIOS & SUPPLIES

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HERMAN MARGULIES

*“Art is my life, it is my religion,
it is my international language”*

BY ELIZABETH WILSON

HERMAN MARGULIES is a Master Pastelist, Pastel Society of America, a past member of their Board of Directors, and a member of many other art organizations. He has won over 150 awards for his pastel landscapes, which have been exhibited in numerous one-person and group shows. His work has appeared in many publications. He has taught workshops for many years and is a sought-after juror for national competitions.

For Herman Margulies, art is more than a pastime, even more than a livelihood—art is life. Art has saved his life many times, he says, and as he now faces a life-threatening illness, he is confident that art will once again come through for him. Recovering from last summer’s cancer surgery at his home in Washington, Connecticut, the 78-year-old artist

reflects on his life as a Holocaust survivor, as an inventor and an artist, and shares his optimistic belief that he will be around to “paint another 300 paintings.”

“I’m not a starving artist. I’m a surviving artist,” he says. “Art is my life, it is my religion, it is my international language. Art was my surviving asset in all that has happened to me. It helped me to survive the Holocaust. Even

today, art is the backbone of my life.”

Though chemotherapy has slowed him down, Herman still picks up pastel sticks whenever he has a burst of energy. Because his art has provided him with a comfortable financial base, there is no need to rush his recuperation just to produce sales. His financial security was assured in 1997 when two art patrons purchased over 300 of his paintings, thus relieving him of the pressures of galleries, sales, promotions and exhibits. He sells his newly-completed works mainly to these patrons and to a few other selected collectors.

Throughout his life, art has been Herman's key to survival. As a young child, his parents encouraged his obvious talent for drawing. As a teenager, he used art to aid his countrymen while Nazis occupied his hometown of Boryslaw, Poland, during World War II. He was often called on to copy identification documents which would allow more freedom of movement for fellow Jews who were under curfew.

When he was captured and sent to Plashow Concentration Camp in Krakow, Poland (made famous by Steven Spielberg's movie, *Schindler's List*), he listed his occupation as “artist” and was assigned to the enamel factory.

“This assignment saved my life for the next three months,” he said, adding that his father was saved because of his mechanical skills. The rest of his family, including his mother and three brothers, died at the hands of the Nazis.

Because Herman and his father arrived at the camp late, they were not included on the famous list that saved hundreds of lives when Schindler's camp moved to Czechoslovakia. Instead, Herman and his father were sent to Mathausen Concentration Camp. “In this camp my art once again became a rescuing asset. I was occasionally asked to do a portrait for the Nazi soldiers. For the effort, I received extra bread or soup.”

His father died in the camp just 23 days before the war ended. Herman survived. He weighed 86 pounds when



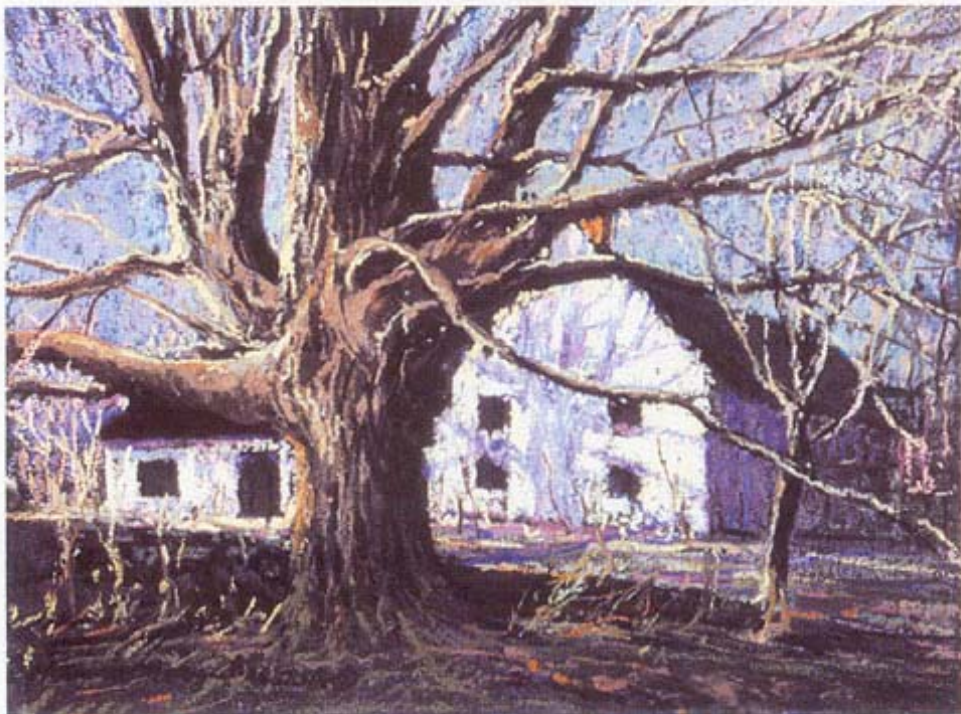
Opposite page: *Abandoned #91*, 24"x30"
Above, *Abandoned #76*, 28"x36"; below, *Fall Impressions #7*, 28"x36"



the camp was liberated, and he spent two months in a hospital before being sent to Brussels to live with an aunt. Here, Herman received his only formal art training. During that time, he studied oil painting, classical drawing and anatomy at the Academie Royale Des Beaux Arts. In the evening, he worked

in a leather factory cutting leather for ladies' pocketbooks. While he lived in Brussels, he also learned lettering which earned him a permit as a graphic artist.

Herman came to America in 1951. He did graphic art for a time, but soon began inventing things. “I became interested in new marketing concepts in



Above, *Spring Impressions #76*, 15"x17"; below, *Abandoned #81*, 20"x28"



packaging, specializing in paperboard and plastic components. I eventually landed a position as Manager of Creative Development for Sterling Drug, Inc., a pharmaceutical company known for such products as Bayer Aspirin and Demerol. If they needed a disposable syringe to be invented, or a new mouse trap, the artist became the inventor. As a result of this creativity, I was awarded 22 international patents."

He painted whenever he had time and often showed his work in New Jersey where he lived, and in nearby New York City. "I always painted," he said. "I was training for the future. I knew I had to keep my hands in the fine arts." He stayed with Sterling Drug for 24 years, from 1961 to 1985.

"When I reached the age of 55, I decided to retire from the corporate world for good, to become the artist I

always wanted to be." He and his wife (now ex-wife), Laura, moved to Connecticut in 1985 and he launched his full time career as an artist.

He converted a garage into a gallery and built a spacious studio in his home complete with large windows, skylights and projection cubicles. Until his illness, he painted every day, producing hundreds of luminous pastel landscapes which have been shown at area galleries and in national competitions. During the past 15 years, he has become recognized as an acclaimed American Impressionist, and has won over 150 awards in national shows.

Teaching became a large part of his life as a professional artist. He has taught seminars around the country but prefers teaching in his studio. Nowadays he limits his home class to one student who is accommodated during the week-long workshop in a private room with bath.

"Students from every walk of life come to my studio. They are people who have one thing in common, one desire—they want to become an artist," he says.

"Teaching art, demonstrating every day in my workshop, became a habit, almost a religious ritual. I believe art is truly a universal communicator. It expresses love, passion, intensity and the desire to know how to paint. It creates interest and love for nature."

Love for nature is evident in his paintings, although he paints a variety of subjects. He has painted seascapes, fishing boats, flowers, old buildings and cityscapes with people. On a recent trip to France, he became fascinated with the landscape there and has since painted many renditions of poppy fields. His major work consists of landscapes in all seasons, some with cows or sheep grazing on nearby hillsides. Many of his paintings depict scenes close to his rural Connecticut home.

"Where I live here in New England, the landscape is beautiful and ready for me to paint. I don't need to call a

model and make arrangements for appointments; all I have to do is take my camera and go. Walking or driving, I always find a subject of interest." He takes his camera—he uses a Leica R4S—wherever he goes. "You never know when an interesting subject to paint may come up," he says.

Herman is a studio painter. He works primarily from his own slides but spends a great deal of time observing his subject matter. He has amassed some 5,000 images filed by category on projection trays so they can be shown on the screen with the flick of a button. The images are projected onto a screen in a darkened cubicle so even if the studio is bright and sunny, the scenes remain clear and sharp.

He says that the colors and nuances of each season and the beauty of nature fascinate him even more because of his war-time nightmare.

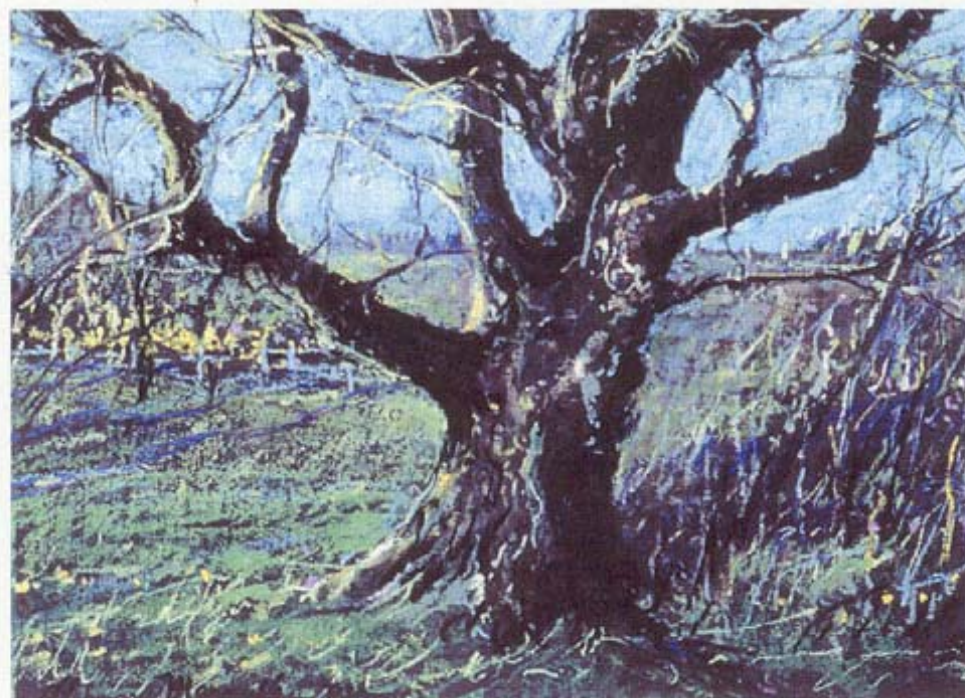
"I'm intoxicated with the new life I have. I could only dream back then of such a life. The landscape I see is more beautiful in my new perception. It provokes all my senses to a passion to paint. This landscape was always here since its birth, waiting for me to paint whenever I wish."

Barns have a special place in his heart. He identifies old, crumbling barns with the sense of abandonment he felt in his youth. He recalls that many times during the war he had to hide in barns to avoid capture by the Nazis. Barns also spark another childhood memory, a more pleasant one: "I also remember when I was very young vacationing on a farm with my parents and sleeping in the haybarn, drinking fresh milk from a cow."

Often he paints barns just as they are about to be demolished or just before they collapse, thus his painting may be the only evidence that the structure ever existed. He takes many photographs of the barns and sometimes goes inside to study the construction. He has painted many versions of a favorite barn, sometimes in different



Above, *Summer Impressions #53*, 24"x32"; below, *Spring Impressions #75*, 8"x10"



seasons, or at different angles.

"The barns I paint are mostly abandoned, left to decay, overgrown with weeds, obliterated with rotten boards around them. They look sad, torn by the winds," he says. "When the painting is finished, they still look proud and beautiful, even when they are totally abandoned." Barns are appealing subjects and sell easily, he says.

No matter what the subject matter, his medium of choice is pastels, more specifically French-made Senneliers. "I painted in oils for many years. The process is slow, requiring drying time. It does not suit my temperament. I like to see results immediately. I like to paint quickly, where spontaneity is visible. The passion of painting is more apparent in the faster tempo of



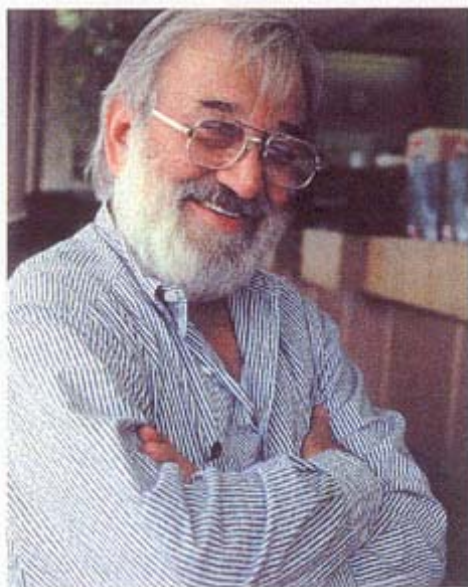
Above, *Fall Impressions #50*, 16"x20"; below, Herman Margulies

painting, so I changed from oils to pastels."

He compares the process of pastel painting to a musical performance: "Like the conductor in an orchestra performance, I become the conductor of a symphony of color. Pastel is the only medium where such an experience can be felt. The painting process is transformed into a performance, and with a single intermission the painting comes to a finale."

Herman's bold approach demands speed and spontaneity. "In my method of painting, pastel strokes are applied

"In my method of painting, pastel strokes are applied with variable pressures. Twisted, twirled, flat or on the edge of the pastel for finer lines. When the painting is completed it vibrates with life, sensuality and emotion."



with variable pressures—twisted, twirled, held flat for broad strokes or on the edge of the pastel for finer lines. When the painting is completed, it vibrates with life, sensuality and emotion."

He continues the musical analogy by comparing his strokes with the vibrations resulting when a violin bow hits the strings: "Strings touched in different places will produce different tones. The results are similar but instead of sound the artist produces the image."

Painting in this manner demands a sturdy ground that will accommodate many layers of pastel. Here again, Herman has put his inclination as an

inventor to work. Through the years, he has developed his own boards which he hopes to introduce to the open market soon. They are made from acid-free, 100-percent rag museum board coated with a mixture of gesso, pumice and acrylic paint. His boards are colored a neutral gray which Herman prefers because he feels the colors sparkle more brilliantly against a dark ground.

"Not only is this ground great for creating brilliant effects, it is also very permanent," the artist says. "Acrylic paint, gesso and pumice are neutral and prevent attack by acids, molds and other properties that can damage a work."

The best part of all, he says, is that it is a correctable board. "I can use many layers of pastel freely without using fixatives. The board is correctable by simply wiping off with a wet sponge any part of the painting I wish to change. It dries in a few minutes, and the painting is corrected without any trace, even under a magnifying glass."

Herman frames his paintings using double mats, as some pastel particles inevitably fall from the surface. The dual mats form a channel which catches excess pastel dust.

Herman admits that many of his techniques have been developed through years of trial and error and suit his style of working. He advises students to develop their own style and character and to "paint as individually as they would write." He teaches speed and spontaneity but encourages students to find their own tempo much like he did. Drawing on his musical analogy in which he says he can finish a painting with one intermission, he says he realizes beginning students will work more slowly.

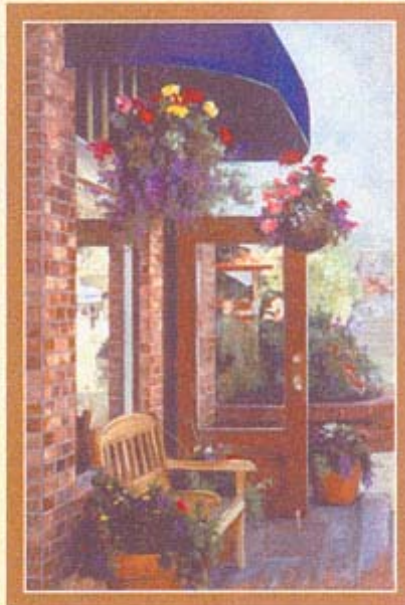
"The pastel medium allows you to finish a painting with two, three or four intermissions, suitable to your own tempo of painting. Even though you may be using the longer process in the beginning, you will become faster and more spontaneous with practice."

Herman urges budding artists to nurture any artistic abilities they possess. "Give the creative mind every opportunity to expand and explore, let this artistic talent of yours grow with you regardless of where your talent is expressed. Treasure it, for you will never know when you may use its resources for your own survival."

Each painting he completes is an affirmation of his life, he says. "Every day I spend in the studio is ecstasy and agony but the rewards from it are the completed painting. Each painting is one more legacy that I will leave, with my name on the bottom left of the painting. My name will always be there even though it was almost erased by the Holocaust."

■ Elizabeth Wilson is an artist and writer who lives in Waterbury, Connecticut.

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