

BRADLEY STEVENS

Museum Studies

In the spring of 1977, I remember walking with some trepidation from my studio in downtown D.C. to the National Gallery of Art. I had signed up to copy my first painting in this venerable museum, and was hesitant at the prospect of working in front of throngs of onlookers. Nevertheless, I was determined to follow the long tradition of art students reproducing the masters as a means to unravel some of the mystery of painting.

For my first copy, I chose a small Monet landscape titled *Argenteuil*, from 1872. I always loved this painting. With luscious oil paint on a flat canvas, Monet somehow captures the feeling and spirit of a particular time and place. One can sense the stillness of a warm summer evening, as he stood painting on the bank of the Seine. A tall row of trees on the right edge of the canvas blocks the setting sun, casting the foreground into shadow—except where a few bold streaks of sunlight pierce the adjacent road. On the low horizon below a luminous sky, two sailboats lazily head home, their sails mirrored in the calm waters. In the distance, façades of the local village catch the last rays of fleeting light. To me it was pure magic. The scene was real, but it was more than reality. It was art. Every brushstroke, every note was perfect, like a Mozart divertimento. It took my breath away.

Needless to say, I was hooked. From that moment on, it became my mission to learn as much as I could from history's great artists. For the next five years, two to three days a week, I copied paintings from a wide spectrum of styles and time periods. I learned something different from every artist. For example, Corot simplified the subject into large masses and shapes, then skillfully added touches and accents to enliven the paint surface. Degas used gestural lines to emphasize human movement. Rembrandt deepened shadows with transparent glazes to give physical and psychological depth to his subjects. Gilbert Stuart varied the focus in his paintings, delineating some parts and leaving others indistinct. Sargent—the ultimate master of bravura brushwork—expressed so much with an economy of strokes. Cezanne stressed structural form to give his subjects magnitude and gravity. Without exception, every artist taught me that a well-conceived and balanced composition is absolutely essential.

Now many years later, with *Museum Studies*, I return to where it all began. Art is born of personal experience. Given the countless hours I have spent in art museums and in particular, the National Gallery of Art, perhaps it was inevitable I should choose this theme. These paintings are my tribute to the great artists who have inspired me and to the magnificent museums that honor them.