

Art Books for a Desert Island

BY NANCY BEA MILLER



It arose during an artist-friend's dinner party, as the guests sat toying with the remains of dessert and enjoying a final glass of wine. Relaxed and well fed, I asked lazily, "So which art books would you want if you were marooned on a desert island?" At first this was greeted with good-natured jibes about survival guides. "Okay, okay," I persisted, "but which books are important to you? Which do you turn to again and again, or keep at hand even if you don't open them regularly?"

My friends started sitting up straight and shaking off their post-prandial stupor, and their passionate conversation carried on long into the night. Some presented very surprising titles, while others almost apologized with titles "too obvious, I guess, but I'm just being honest!" Soon this compelling topic had all of us reaching for pen and paper. The next morning I unfolded my own notes, then wondered which books other art-world denizens might choose. Ultimately I invited 30 people to participate, and here's what I learned.

BOOKS ABOUT THE BIG PICTURE

One of the titles mentioned frequently as crucial to developing art awareness was Robert Henri's *The Art Spirit* (1923). Though many first encounter it as students, this is not an instructional book so much as a call to arms for artists, a passionate explanation of the creative process. Henri wrote the way he painted — boldly, colorfully, and concisely. "I would tell students that if they get stranded on a desert island, this is the one art book they need," says Mary Whyte, a watercolorist and instructor (see page 45). "I read *The Art Spirit* many years ago, but it influenced me enough to write *Art & Soul* (1986)," notes the painter Audrey Flack, whose own book I remember fondly from art school.

A book many people wish they had encountered early is *Art & Fear* by David Bayles and Ted Orland (1993). Considered one of the best "self-help" books for artists ever written, it addresses the causes of the angst that can inhibit creativity, and offers practical advice for dealing with doubt. The painter Frances Galante observes, "One helpful insight here is that you're not always going to create great art, but you must be working at it regularly in order to achieve the occasional piece that soars."

Another artist agrees: "When I read that, it was like I had permission to sometimes just be ordinary, even lousy. What a relief! Ironically, this led to a huge leap in the quality of my work." The painter-teacher Paul DuSold also recommends Rollo May's *The Courage to Cre-*

ate (1975). "I had been feeling ambivalent about a lot of things, and this book helped me out. It explained to me who I was and helped me to recognize myself," DuSold says. "Artists are different and I am an artist; hence I am different. I still remember one line where May says that if you put most artists in a 9-to-5 job, they will become catatonic. I definitely recognized myself in that!"

A Life in the Arts by Eric Maisel (1994) also floated to the top. "This self-help book for artists helped me realize I was part of a community," says Matthew Innis, a painter and blogger. "So many of the burdens which

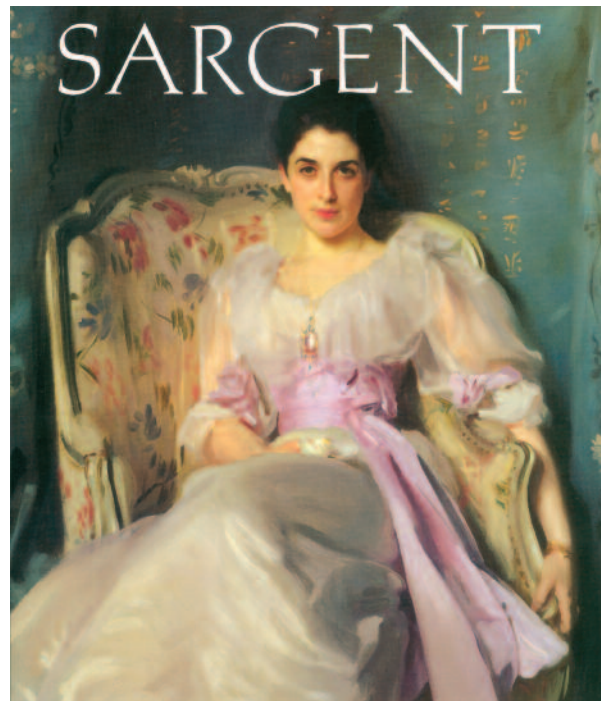
weighed on me were, in Maisel's explanation, problems that nearly always define an artist." Interestingly, two books about the process of writing are helpful to visual artists: Annie Lamott's *Bird by Bird* (1994) and Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* (1986). According to the plein air painter Valerie Craig, "Lamott states that the most difficult thing for the writer to do, as well as the most important, is to show up at the typewriter, pushing through all the tempting distractions and tasks that call for attention. When I lament about 'not painting,' the key step is simply to face my easel." Truly words of wisdom for all creative types!

Several respondents mentioned Lewis Hyde's *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (1983). Connie Hayes, a painter, author, and professor, explains, "*The Gift* is an inquiry into the place of creativity in our market-oriented society. Starting with the premise that the work of art is a gift and not a commodity, Hyde ranges across

anthropology, literature, economics, and psychology to show how the 'commerce of the creative spirit' functions in the lives of artists and in the culture as a whole."

The painter Bill Scott always points his students toward Siri Hustvedt's *Mysteries of the Rectangle* (2005), a series of essays on a wide range of artists from Goya to Guston. "Hustvedt focuses on how she feels when looking at artworks — both her emotional and intellectual responses. It doesn't get better than this," says Scott. The painter and professor Margaret Bowland adds, "The writer who has meant more to me than any other is Siri Hustvedt. She cares about art and also cares to communicate in equal measure. The only book on my syllabus is *Mysteries of the Rectangle*."

A top contender for Favorite "How-To" Title is *Alla Prima: Everything I Know About Painting* by Richard Schmid (1998). Matthew Innis



comments, “A brilliant artist shares his techniques and philosophies — what more does one need? I remember lying in a tent as a heavy down-pour pelted the canvas, devouring Schmid’s book and hoping I might meet him someday.” Kim Lordier, a plein air pastelist, says this is the first art book she read cover to cover. For intelligent commentary on life and the creative process, *Alla Prima* cannot be beat. Moreover, it is profusely illustrated, for those who prefer browsing to reading.

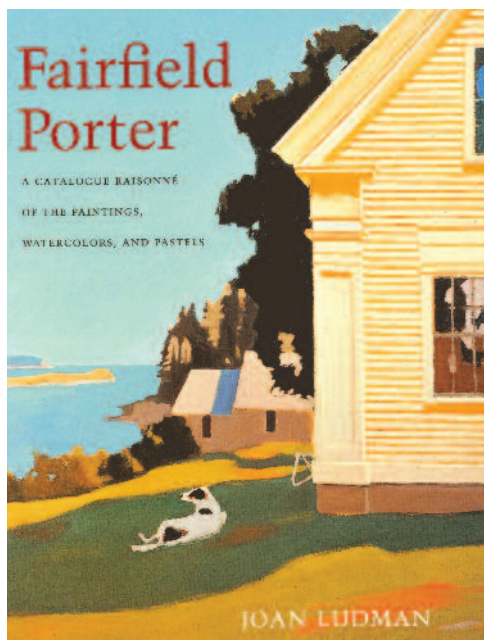
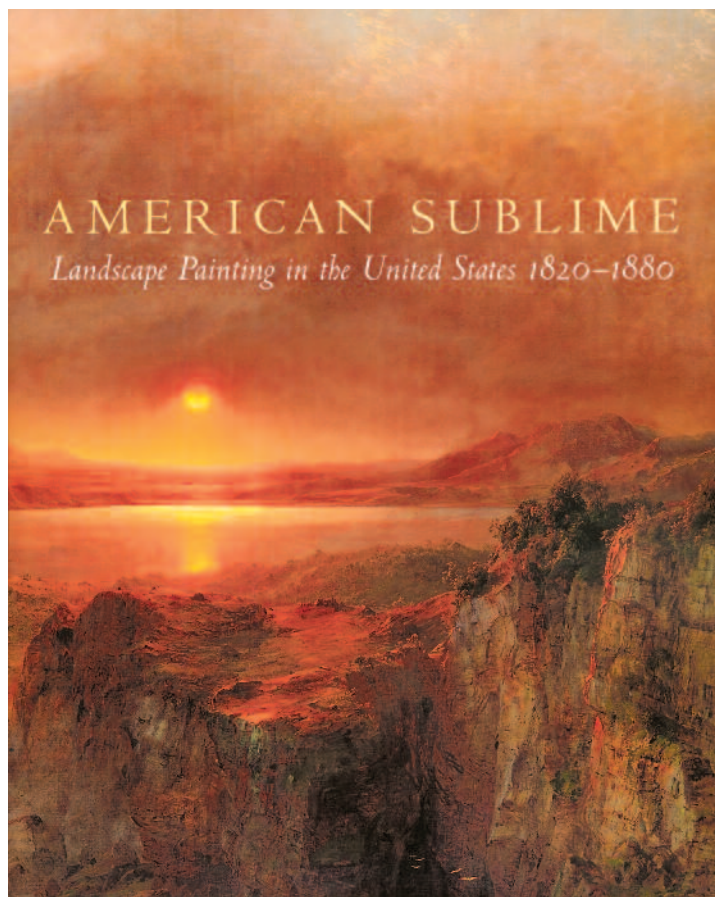
INDIVIDUAL HEROES

Many respondents noted that different books have been important to them at different times. Audrey Flack says, “There was a book from Phaidon Press of Rembrandt self-portraits that I once carried around with me. But now it’s Bernini. We gravitate to the artists we love and need *at the time*.” The painter Odd Nerdrum makes the excellent point that artists go through phases of being forgotten and then re-discovered by society at large, which naturally affects which books are available. “Today I am buying one book about Raphael and 20 about Rembrandt,” Nerdrum says. “There’s someone in history you need, and someone else you just pass by. Had I lived in 1750, I would probably not have even heard of Rembrandt, only a lot of guys no one cares about anymore.”

Nerdrum’s point stuck with me as I wondered why there are fewer mentions of Vermeer today. In the early 1990s, Vermeer’s name was on everyone’s lips: exhibitions, books, novels, and even movies were inspired by this amazing painter with the remarkably small oeuvre. As a society, we absolutely *needed* Vermeer. Now, 20 years later, only one person put Vermeer on her desert-island list. The painter-professor Phyllis Purves-Smith writes, “I keep going back to my little *Classici dell’Arte* book on Vermeer, published by Rizzoli in 1993. It is lightweight, and it was very cheap at a bazaar in Florence. This book not only has many good close-ups, but reminds me of my time at the Galleria degli Uffizi. To open it is like a blast of art air, one that makes me think straight!”

“During my first art classes, John Singer Sargent was mentioned frequently,” comments the painter Scott Bartner. “Soon I had several Sargent books, the foremost of which was written by Carter Ratcliff (1982). Inside it are telltale stains and smudges on the illustrations of the Ana-Capri Girl and the detail of Lady Agnew.” My experience was similar: my parents gave me Ratcliff’s beautiful book, and even today its many bookmarks and page markers demonstrate how thoroughly I have re-read its text and sunk into blissful contemplation of its gorgeous plates. Indeed, I still keep it near me in my studio.

Andrew Wyeth’s name came up often as people cited the artists and shows that have influenced them most. Publications about the Wyeths are legion, so there was no consensus on the best titles. The painter Alexandra Tyng favors Richard Meryman’s *Andrew Wyeth: A Secret Life* (1996), which examines the artist’s personality and creative



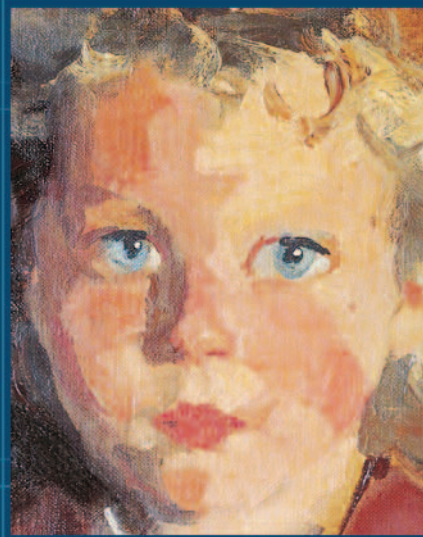
process. “Reading it helped me understand many things in myself, and when I’m sorting out priorities I go back to it,” Tyng says. “Wyeth’s need to keep the Helga paintings private was an eye-opener; for the first time I ‘allowed’ myself to express very private things in my work, because I realized I had to, if I wanted to express myself fully.” The touring exhibition catalogue *Andrew Wyeth: Memory and Magic* (2005) was cited by Sarah Lamb, who says Wyeth is “one of the reasons I’m a painter, having seen the Helga exhibition when I was about 12.”

A show I saw early on was the Whitney Museum’s *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist* (1980). Curator Gail Levin’s catalogue was enormously important to me, and as an adolescent I pored over my parents’ copy for hours. I recently asked Professor Levin about her favorite titles, and she replied with an art book which is itself a work of art, *La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France*, by Sonia Delaunay and Blaise Cendrars (1913). An illustrated poem, the book folds into a tiny cover you can hold in one hand, and also expands to a great length. Levin admires it “for its beauty and for my memories of meeting, interviewing, and photographing the elderly Sonia Delaunay in Paris in 1975, when I was a student.”

Books on the Renaissance were mentioned frequently. Jeanne-Marie Musto, a professor of art history at Sewanee: The University of the South, treasures *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice*, “the 2009 exhibition catalogue from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, that keeps the vibrancy of Venetian color alive for me in the Tennessee woods.” Musto continues, “I am still moved by its final image,

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THE ART SPIRIT



ROBERT HENRI

Tintoretto's *Self-Portrait in Old Age*, which reflects the inner collapse he experienced after the death of his rivals. Surely no palette has had a more dramatic history." Painter Elizabeth Wilson enthuses over the British catalogue *Dürer to Veronese: Sixteenth-Century Painting in the National Gallery* (1999). "I refer often to this comprehensive book, which has fine reproductions, details on panel preparations and artists' growing use of canvas, x-rays of particular works, and much more."

A book written in the early 15th century, Cennino Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte*, is recommended by the landscape painter Lli Wilburn. "It was assigned in an undergraduate class called *History of Painting Technology*, which gave me a whole new understanding of painting at a time when few art departments offered technical instruction. I turn to Cennini when I'm working with paints that use traditional pigments, and simply for an enjoyable glimpse into Renaissance craftsmanship."

Norbert Wolf's *Dürer* (2010) was mentioned by several excited people who have just come into possession of the 304-page tome. The painter Eliza Auth feels that "the enlarged drawings almost give you the sense that you can feel Albrecht Dürer's hand moving." Collector Janet Wilson Smith says, "It's my new treasure! It has a long, readable essay arguing that Dürer is the greatest graphic artist in history, and that, yes, his paintings aren't bad either. I return to the Renaissance for inspiration over and over again, Northern or otherwise."

Smith also praises the 2008 catalogue for *George Tooker: A Retrospective*, noting that this touring exhibition was one of the best to reach Philadelphia in recent years. I also treasure a Tooker book, but mine is Thomas Garver's *George Tooker* (1985). When I bought it at Ursus Books & Prints in New York City years ago, the clerk asked why I wanted it. "Um, because I love his work?" I quavered. Apparently this was the right answer, so I was allowed to hand over my money. (I have never quite understood what that was about, but some things must remain a mystery.)

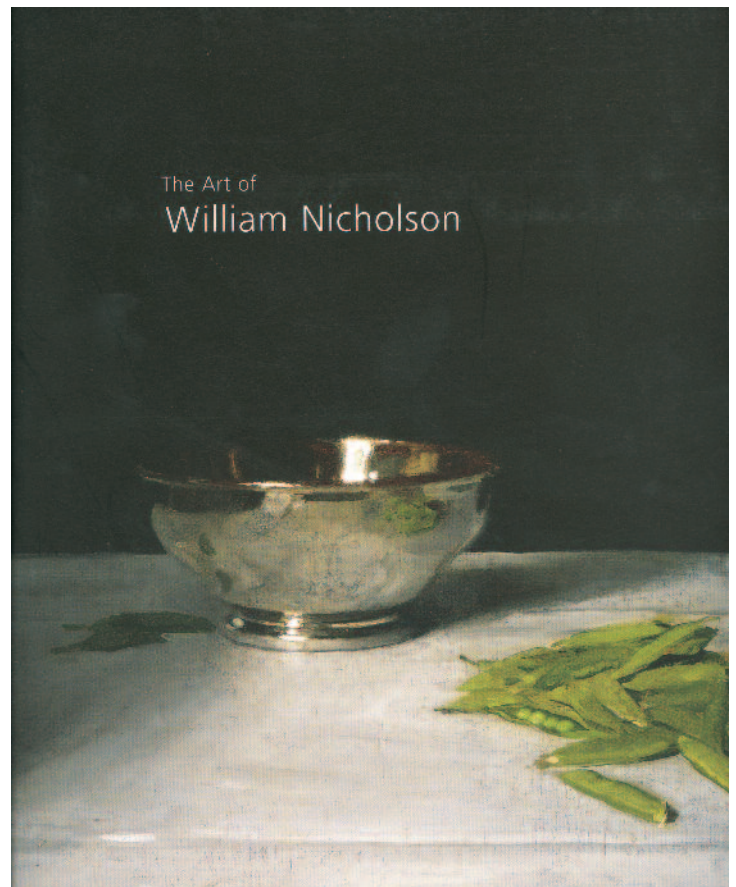
The painter Alan Feltus says that beside his easel are "two cases of books I look at almost every day, even if only for a few minutes." Among these are Claude Roy's *Balthus* (1996), along with titles about Edgar Degas and Edwin Dickinson. *The Journal of Delacroix* gets an enthusiastic plug from the painter-instructor Juliette Aristides: "I go to it as I would to an old friend. You get a picture of the real person behind the masterpieces. I can so clearly relate to some of the things he says: the disappointment over wasted time, the trouble with money, the wrestling with ideas, and the frustrations of growing older. He's a great source of quotes such as, 'When I am at my easel I forget all the worries and cares that beset mankind.' I think we can all agree with that one."

One of my desert-island books is Elena Nesterova's *The Itinerants: The Masters of Russian Realism* (1997). As it happens, books on other masters from this school (such as Ilya Repin and Isaac Levitan) were singled out by others. Painter Nancy Guzik echoes her colleagues' ever-shifting interests when she prioritizes "all of my Sargent books,

but that's today." She says, "Yesterday it was Bruno Liljefors [the Swedish naturalist], tomorrow Ilya Repin." A related title on my short list was passionately endorsed by Matthew Innis, *Beyond Impressionism: The Naturalist Impulse* by Gabriel P. Weisberg (1992). Innis says, "The images here enthralled me, and I eventually slipped into debt in order to purchase it. These were the paintings I had hoped I would learn to paint in art school. To this day, *Beyond Impressionism* is probably the book I turn to most often."

Fairfield Porter's name arose several times in his dual roles as artist and writer. My favorite is Joan Ludman's *Fairfield Porter: A Catalogue Raisonné* (1981). This giant tome is long out of print, and it is nearly impossible to buy a used copy for any reasonable sum, so the painter Mary Walsh and I have long taken turns borrowing it from our local library. The Philadelphia artist John Sevcik prioritizes Porter's *Art in Its Own Terms* (1979): "He made possible in me the complete opening to art, without which nothing else would be possible." And the painter Catherine Prescott points to Justin Spring's *Fairfield Porter: A Life in Art* (2000) as her favorite.

The Art of William Nicholson

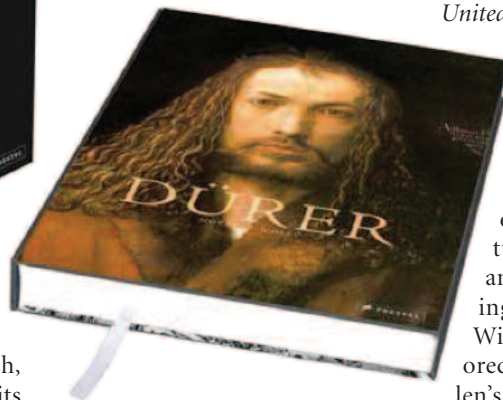
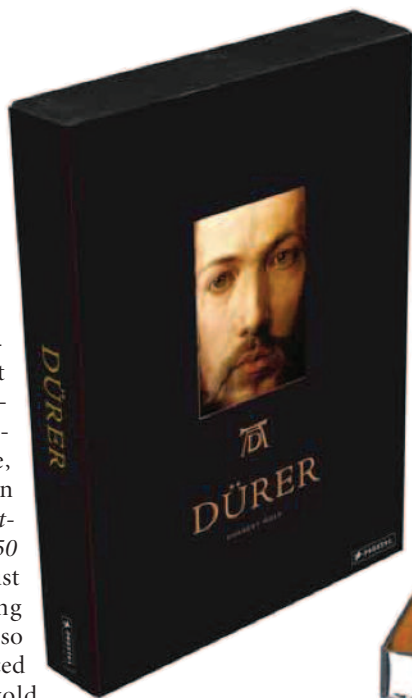


GENRES FOR ALL TIME

Many still life books were recommended, of course. Sarah Lamb praises Colin Campbell's *The Art of William Nicholson* (2004): "A relatively new discovery for me. Interesting light effects, and I love his paint application." Several colleagues seconded my personal favorite, William B. Jordan's exhibition catalogue *Spanish Still Life Painting in the Golden Age: 1600-1650* (1985). Paul DuSold notes, "I just wouldn't be me without having discovered it. The profundity of so many of the paintings reproduced in that book — it was like a gold mine to my imagination." Painter Amy Weiskopf suggests Charles Sterling's *Still Life Painting* (1981), which, she says, "helped me see the endless possibilities in still life from its Greek and Roman origins through the 20th century." She also finds inspiration in Norman Bryson's *Looking at the Overlooked* (1990), of which Frances Galante says, "I refer to it for intellectual defense of this most humble genre [still life], of which I am so fond." She notes, "Bryson points out that major events in the world generally happen without your involvement, while humble objects play large roles in everyone's lives."

Quite a few colleagues cited the artist Giorgio Morandi as inspirational, and thus also the surprisingly large number of Morandi books and catalogues currently in print. His tranquil still lifes are strangely suited to reproduction, losing little of their power when transferred to the printed page. Weiskopf says, "For visual inspiration, I have three or four Morandi books published in the 1980s by Rizzoli, which I never tire of admiring. They always remind me why I paint."

There were also several mentions of John F. Carlson's *Guide to Landscape Painting* (1953). Valerie Craig confesses that her copy is



"dog-eared, and I take it out whenever I am in a slump." She says, "It serves as both comfort food and a kick in the pants!" Kim Lordier agrees, adding, "I always come away with something new that I missed in prior readings."

Two landscape books were flagged for their breathtaking images. One is the catalogue accompanying the 2002 touring exhibition *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880*, co-

authored by Tim Barringer and Andrew Wilton. The painter Fred Danziger recalls that "seeing this exhibition had a huge impact on my work." He says, "I turn to its catalogue again and again to relive the feelings of awe it inspired." Lli Wilburn is currently enamored with Ariane van Suchtelen's *Holland Frozen in Time:*

The Dutch Winter Landscape in the Golden Age (2001). She says wryly, "If you ever see the successful return of figures to my landscape work, you can credit this book."

For those who love both art and books, listing your favorites can be almost painful: what to choose, what to let go? Fortunately, none of us are actually headed to desert islands with small suitcases, so we can keep exploring and adding to our visual libraries. Finding an art book that speaks to your heart is one of life's great joys, offering a feeling of spiritual expansion somewhat like falling in love. We want to clasp it close and regale our friends with its virtues. Small wonder, then, that so many kindred spirits could not wait to reveal their best loved books. ■

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Quoted (in alphabetical order by surname)

- **Juliette Aristides**, Seattle, aristidesarts.com
- **Eliza Auth**, Wynnewood, PA, elizaaauth.com
- **Scott Bartner**, Maastricht (Netherlands), bartner.nl
- **Margaret Bowland**, Brooklyn, margaretbowland.com
- **Valerie Craig**, Wayne, PA, valeriecraig.com
- **Fred Danziger**, Pittsburgh, freddanziger.com
- **Paul DuSold**, Philadelphia, pauldusold.com
- **Alan Feltus**, Assisi (Italy), alanfeltus.com
- **Audrey Flack**, New York City, audreyflack.com
- **Frances Galante**, Philadelphia, francesgalante.com
- **Nancy Guzik**, New Hampshire, nancyguzik.com
- **Connie Hayes**, Rockland, ME, conniehayes.com
- **Matthew Innis**, High Bridge, NJ, innisfineart.com
- **Sarah Lamb**, Brandywine, PA, sarahlamb.net

- **Gail Levin**, New York City, baruch.cuny.edu/wsas/academics/performing_arts/GLevin.htm
- **Kim Lordier**, Millbrae, CA, kimfancherlordier.com
- **Jeanne-Marie Musto**, Sewanee, TN, www2.sewanee.edu/academics/catalog/admin/faculty_of_arts_and_sciences
- **Odd Nerdrum**, Norway, nerdruminstitute.com
- **Catherine Prescott**, Harrisburg, PA, prescottpaintings.com
- **Phyllis Purves-Smith**, Philadelphia, purves-smith.com
- **Bill Scott**, Philadelphia, hollistaggart.com/artists/exhibitions/bill_scott
- **John Sevcik**, Philadelphia, tothestudio.com
- **Janet Wilson Smith**, Devon, PA, janetsmith87@comcast.net
- **Alexandra Tyng**, Narberth, PA, alexandratyng.com
- **Mary Walsh**, Haverford, PA, marywalshpainting.com
- **Amy Weiskopf**, Brooklyn, hirschlandadler.com/view_1.html?type=MO&id=122
- **Mary Whyte**, Charleston, colemanfineart.com/2010-flash.asp?artID=7
- **Lli Wilburn**, Portland, OR, pernoctalian.com
- **Elizabeth Wilson**, Philadelphia, elizabethwilson.com