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Light Show
West Fraser in his element,
enjoying the outdoors.

THE

LIGHT

OF



A Quiet Calm, oil on linen

SOUTHERN

With bold strokes, vivid hues, and the authenticity of a true son of the South, West Fraser's brush captures the light and unique colors that illuminate his beloved Lowcountry home.

SON

By SUSAN FRAMPTON Photos by DOTTIE RIZZO

DEEP IN OUR SOULS, we carry the images of places that in some intangible way define us. Whether they float at the forefront of our recall or lie buried beneath the years, they are images that wordlessly speak to our understanding of who we are and give us a sense of our place in the world. For those who know the Lowcountry, the art of plein air impressionist West Fraser takes us home.

Plein air painting, Fraser's preferred method of creating his scenes, refers to painting in the outdoors. Impressionism, a painting style at which he excels, describes an approach to painting that took root in the 1800s that was far different from the fixed stillness of the period's traditional landscapes. Created by thick, loose strokes, an impressionist creates more natural images that suggest movement and the immediacy of the moment through the use of thick, loose brush strokes.

Both the method and style bring authenticity to Fraser's canvases, allowing us to believe he has stood in our place and captured the scenes our minds were too fickle to record accurately. In them, we re-live the dimming of summer days reflected in wandering ribbons of water, changing from gold and rose to violet and silver as dusk falls across the marshes.

We recall colorful vignettes of ordinary days at noonday crossroads, of pocket-sized neighborhood markets, and familiar lamp-lit streets. We soar in dream-like visions of bright red rooftops, past steeples that rise against the sky and distant bridges that sometimes take us away, but just as often bring us home.

For those who have never been geographically privy to the cool relief of a palmetto-shaded coastal hammock, the moist, salty tang of a sea breeze, or the swaying of Spanish moss from ancient oaks, Fraser's work offers the gift of instant passage to those places, and the opportunity to understand and appreciate their aesthetic, cultural, and environmental value.

I met Fraser on a cobblestone street in the heart of Charleston. Through an oddly placed opening in an otherwise nondescript wall, he led the way down a brick-lined walkway to the lush green of an unexpected urban grotto. For over two decades, from his studio on the upper floor of Charleston's historic Confederate Home and College, the artist has built a body of work that has garnered national and international acclaim and earned him a reputation as one of the best American painters of his time.

The door through which we enter his studio is a portal into the soul of an artist who sees beyond the surface of the world around him. It is a lived-in space of soaring ceilings and drunken, tilting floors; of glass-fronted cabinets filled with fossils and artifacts, and tables laden with well-used brushes. Images of the Lowcountry's most celebrated vistas and most intimate moments stand on paint-spattered easels and lean against water-stained walls.

Offering a comfortable chair adjacent to his easel, Fraser is soft-spoken, warm, and unpretentious as we sit down to talk. As he speaks in his slow, measured way, it becomes clear that the Lowcountry

through West Fraser's lens is a reflection of his passion for life under the Southern sun. Born in Savannah, Fraser traces his family's Lowcountry roots to their 1696 arrival on the banks of the upper Ashley River where they established small towns long since lost to time. His early years were spent exploring the woodlands, waterways, and marshes of South Georgia, and summering amidst the maritime forests and marshes of Bluffton and Hilton Head Island.

In 1964, over two hundred years after their arrival in the Lowcountry, his family permanently relocated to Hilton Head, where his uncle and father pioneered a new-concept development called Sea Pines. It was a move that changed the landscape of South Carolina and shaped the future of young Fraser, who watched it change the land around him.

There, Fraser learned to appreciate the natural world and strove to see beyond its exterior to the biology and science of the life within. Naturally artistic, he took note of the depth of its colors and the evolution of the light as it moved across the land.

"I loved science, and I was always reading," he recalls. "As I watched what was happening to the island where I grew up, I became really concerned about the environment. I knew from my early teens that I wanted to be a painter. I saw the changes coming, and it was disturbing. I knew I wanted to capture the wild places."

Graduating with a Fine Arts Degree from the University of Georgia, he began his career by painting in watercolor. His work in the medium gained accolades, but for the artist in him, something was missing.

"I stopped painting in watercolor and working from photographs in the studio right after Hurricane Hugo. I felt I'd gone as far as watercolor could take me."

He began to paint in oil, and immediately recognized that the heavy pigments had been patiently waiting for his brush. "Oil is such a completely different medium," he says of the transition. "It offered the rich colors I was looking for. I also found it easier, and much more forgiving."

He was also ready to get back outside. "The plein air movement was resurging, and I wanted to be out there. I wanted to paint from life."

Influenced by Coby Whitmore and Joe DeMers, Fraser is also an accomplished portraitist and has chronicled three decades of winners of The Heritage Golf Classic. Though forays into portraiture are relatively rare, thirty of his portraits hang in the hallowed halls of Harbor Town Links Clubhouse.

He prefers to paint what he sees and cherishes the quiet of painting in the landscape. His proximity to the city from his downtown studio made it natural for him to take his paints along as he moved through its streets. His rooftop harbor views and city scenes are among the most iconic renderings of both Charleston and Savannah.

"Charleston was hard to paint before Hugo," he says. "You couldn't see it for all the Crepe myrtles and other big trees blocking the buildings."

"The plein air movement was resurging, and I wanted to be out there. I wanted to paint from life."



Oil and Water *A Second Sense*, oil on linen, 24" x 36"; *Exactly Like You*, oil on linen, 36" x 48"



Town and Country *Peregrine's Porch*, oil on linen, 36"x50"; *Alto Tropical*, oil on linen, 32"x44"

Charleston in My Time, The Paintings of West Fraser, published in 2001 by University of South Carolina Press, beautifully collects the decade of his plein air work in the aftermath of the Category Four storm that changed the face of the Lowcountry.

“I began returning to the studio about five years ago because I started wanting to do larger paintings. It’s hard to do that in outdoor conditions that can rapidly change. More and more I find myself painting from memory, sketching in the field and returning to the studio to flesh out a larger canvas. Trudging through the mud and marsh with a 60 lb. backpack is a vigorous endeavor, and at some point, you can’t do as much of that,” he says, laughing at what he calls his ‘old age plan.’ Some of his scenes are composites of the thousands he has viewed in his lifetime. “I’m not a purist in that regard. It doesn’t matter to me how a painting is made; it’s the end result.”

Though his painting has taken him far afield – from his second home and studio in Costa Rica to the fertile farmland of Italy, to New England’s maritime communities and the missions of California, the colors and textures of his homeland pull at him like a lodestone. Lovingly distilling the Lowcountry’s ever-changing palette of light and color to bring its distinctive flavor to his subjects is tribute to the land that is as much a part of him as the blood that runs through his veins.

Inviting his audience to share the details and textures of roads less traveled, he offers vistas known only to those willing to wander, and an opportunity to view everyday moments in the light of a Southern sun. As that sunlight filters through the tall windows of his studio, I ask Fraser



Spring Gold, oil on linen

Studio Sessions
Fraser in his Downtown Charleston studio

what he sees in his future, and what he hopes his legacy will be. His eyes move to the walls, the bookshelves, and the easel before him, pausing on the canvases that represent his life’s work.

“Well, I love to paint. It’s who I am. I’ll paint until the brush falls from my hand.” He nods, as a contemplative smile affirms the thought. “A lot of what I’ve done is to make people aware of these places so that they’ll want to save them. As a son of the South, I can only hope that I have dutifully captured them for the future – so that we will all remember.”

With West Fraser’s gifts so freely given to us from behind the easel, and so sincerely from his heart, how dare we ever forget? ♣

For more information, visit westfraserstudio.com

