



Loving Nature & Animals

Lesley Heathcote

A deep connection and appreciation of animals and the natural world is felt in Lesley Heathcote's pastels. An eastern blue bird sits on a tree branch at dusk while warm light bathes the trees around her, revealing her delicacy and strength. Snow covers each tree branch after a storm creating a display of nature's magic. A peregrine falcon gazes upward at the sky where it longs to soar. These are some of the images in her work that convey the spirit and soul of the animals and landscapes of her Vermont home. Through skillful drawing and close attention to detail Heathcote brings a life like quality to her work. Textures invite one to touch and evoke

the physical tactile presence of her subject. Her use of color is soft and rich, with harmonies that are enhanced to convey poetry and emotion as she tells a story of animal and place.

Heathcote's interest in nature and in art began early in life. Growing up in Connecticut, she was often outside playing and exploring the woods and stream near her house. Her mother had a strong interest in art and encouraged creativity by making art materials available as well as having art books and reproductions in the house. When her family started spending vacations and

weekends at a small cabin in the mountains of Vermont, she spent even more time outdoors. Without electricity or running water, she and her sister spent many hours outside in the woods, developing an intimate connection to the natural world.

This appreciation of nature has always been a part of what inspires her work. She recalls seeing the autumn foliage in Vermont for the first time, and painting the mountains on a large piece of brown kraft paper in kindergarten. The painting hangs in her studio and she remembers the feelings of joy that she experienced creating it.

Heathcote also remembers her mother taking her to the Metropolitan museum of art as a child, where she saw Van Gogh's apple orchard and other Impressionist and post impressionist paintings. The color, movement, and light in these works were magical and made a lasting impression. The experience of seeing these paintings is part of what sparked her desire to paint.

She has also had a long love of animals, both domestic and in the wild. During a career day in Junior High School, she wondered if she wanted to be an artist or a veterinarian. The pull to art won out and she took as many art classes as possible in high school and then continued her education at Rhode Island School of Design. Realizing that she would need to earn a living after graduating, she majored in photography while taking many classes in drawing, and developing a strong foundation in design and color theory.

After graduating, she began working in New York City as an assistant to an architectural photographer and went on to work for many other professional photographers an assistant and studio manager. Her time in New York was interrupted when she returned to Vermont to care for her parents who both died from cancer. After their estates were settled, she returned to New York knowing that she wanted to try painting full time. She describes a sense of knowing life was short and wanting to develop her art as fully as possible.

Though she found she could not support herself through her fine art alone, she began showing in alternative spaces and art centers in New York. Her style of work at this time was symbolic and narrative, influenced by magical realism. To earn money, she began working as a baker and private chef.



Peregrine Falcon, pastel, 10"x9"

Her love of animals and nature found expression through involvement in New York City's community gardens, adopting stray cats, and raising orphaned baby pigeons. After the community garden she had helped to found was bulldozed to make way for a condominium project, she began planning a move to a more rural environment. She returned to Vermont, a place she had loved as a child, moving to the small town of Brattleboro.



Mother and Child, pastel, 13"x12"

Knowing no one there, she joined a cooperative gallery where she met other artists and developed friendships. She also met her partner, a painter and sculptor while

keeping the gallery open. Through the people she met, she was offered her a job in the design department of a local stuffed animal company. Despite having no training in the field, she decided to take the job and found herself designing stuffed animals and creating specification drawings. This work further developed her design and drawing skills.

Living with daily inspiration from the natural world brought about a transformation in her style of painting. Over a period of time, she shifted from symbolic and dream like imagery to a more traditional realism that connected her to the world around her. Heathcote describes being moved by animals and wanting to honor their beauty and intelligence by depicting them in their natural environments.

When she returned to a more traditional realistic style, she began a process of refining her skills through studying at home and taking workshops. She studied with Diane Rath, who visited Vermont to teach with Richard Schmid. A Color

Workshop given at Bennington college helped her learn how to mix the subtle colors of nature. Being accepted into a residency program at Vermont Studio Center gave her time away from job and home responsibilities

and was instrumental in helping her shift into a new way of working.

Having spent many years as an oil painter, another big shift in her work occurred with her first pastel workshop. She felt an immediate affinity with the medium, finding that it allowed her to combine her love of painting and drawing. It also furthered the development of a high degree of detail in her work. She studied the new medium by taking workshops with Robert Carsten, PSA, as well as reading the Pastel Journal, and studying the work of other contemporary pastel masters, like Richard McKinley, Cindy House and Elizabeth Mowry.

She works from her own reference photographs and loves spending time outdoors exploring, and photographing nature and animals. For many years her work focused exclusively on animals. Finding herself enjoying working on the animals' environment led to painting landscapes.

Lesley Heathcote's work combines accurate rendering with deep feeling for the natural world. Colors are heightened, light and composition adjusted, to reveal a poetic vision. The work conveys her love and sense of wonder for nature and the animal kingdom. The beauty and wisdom of animals and the earth are portrayed with sensitivity and grace.



Winter Fields, pastel, 11"x14"