



Helen L. Rietz

NEW LIFE IN THE OLD WEST

From her studio in Helena, Montana, Helen Rietz can look north, across the tranquil Prickly Pear Valley. This valley, full of wildlife, was inhabited by Native Americans more than 12,000 years ago and now is ranchland sprinkled with the homes of new settlers. In the distance, she can see the Gates of the Mountains, those “most remarkable cliffs” discovered by Lewis & Clark as they passed through in 1805 on their Voyage of Discovery. To the East are the stately old mansions built with the wealth of the 1864 gold strike that established this small city.

Here, Rietz’ love of American lands and history and her artistic creativity come together. She is a painter primarily of the sites, scenes, and icons of the disappearing West.

Art is a second career for Rietz. Raised in rural Michigan, she was always an avid reader, interested in history and in seeing the world. “My nose was always buried in a book, and my room was plastered with bright posters of exotic places.”

Rietz dabbled in art as a child and in college, but her career goal was to become a foreign correspondent. Part of her undergraduate schooling took place in Beirut, Lebanon, and she traveled in Turkey, Egypt, and Iran. After graduate school and marriage, she began a career with a global firm known for being intensely competitive and challenging. From a home base in northern California, Rietz lived and worked in the major cities of the U.S. and Europe.

Her love of open lands and wildlife also led to membership on the board of directors of the San Francisco Zoological Society, and a founding role in its Conservation

Committee. She and her husband then traveled extensively in Africa, South and Central America, Australia, and India.

Rietz's childhood dream of seeing the world was certainly coming true. Life was exhilarating—but also stressful. Work hours were long, with commutes growing longer too. And their once-quiet home in California was being swallowed up by the intense urban growth of Silicon Valley.

One afternoon in East Africa proved to be a turning point. It happened, Rietz recalls, on a hiking safari on remote Maasi lands in Tanzania. In equatorial Africa most activity takes place at dawn and dusk; midday is for reading or napping. But she was restless, and her guide suggested

she simply go sit alone on a *kopje*, which is a rock outcropping, and watch.

"I climbed up, found a comfortable niche, and settled in. At first my mind was racing, full of odd bits of music, thoughts about work, plans for what I might do later. I looked out on the savannah, where nothing seemed to be moving. I waited. As the sun rose higher and it got hotter, my restless mind slowed down. My legs were stiff, so I shifted to stretch them. The open, baking landscape seemed empty. I was getting bored.

I looked out yet again across the savannah—and suddenly, I really saw it. Subtleties and details I'd

overlooked leaped out at me. I grabbed my binoculars and studied every inch of the scene before me. There was so much out there. How had I missed all this? How had I not noticed?"

At home and back at work, Rietz began to wonder what price she was paying for her fast-paced career and whether she was blazing through the world without really seeing and savoring it.

About then, Rietz and her husband began spending their free time exploring America. "It occurred to us that we had visited most of the rest of the world, but given too little attention to all that our own continent, our own

country, had to offer. We'd seen more of Paris than we had of Philadelphia. We'd spent more time in Namibia than in Nevada. People from around the world came to visit our country, and we had barely explored it at all."

Each year they spent more time in the intermountain west, especially Montana. Those open spaces, the natural beauty and colorful history, and the strong, independent people all nourished something in her, Rietz says. Then, on one trip, they found a home with a commanding view. "We walked through that house, then went down to a local wine bar, shared a bottle of Cabernet, looked at one another, and decided this just felt right. The next morning we signed the papers and changed our lives."

Moving to Montana meant leaving her first career behind. Only then did Rietz begin exploring art in earnest. She took courses in pen and ink drawing, then in painting.

Rietz drifted into watercolor, she remembers with a laugh, because it was the first painting course available,



Above: Random Rockers



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and it sounded easy. "Water plus color—it seems so benign." Only later did Rietz discover that it is possibly the most challenging and unforgiving painting medium. "To get the effect you want, you have to really plan—yet also be ready to embrace the unexpected when it turns out serendipitously. But I'm tenacious and stuck with it."

Unlike most who paint in watercolor, Rietz adopted a richly detailed, realistic style. That experience on the Savannah was just so powerful, she remembers, that she never wanted to see the world in a blurred, impressionistic way again. She also recalls, from her time in Europe, seeing the medieval tapestries that covered the walls in noble houses. "They were intricate and contained so many stories. They were meant to be absorbed over time. I love the idea of art that slows you down and rewards a long, close look."

Her style was also shaped by the many visits she made to great museums while traveling and working in major U.S. and European cities. Rietz admired the drama of Baroque art, with its strong contrasts of dark and light



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- Clockwise from top left:
- Rose Hips in September;
- Please Mr. Postman;
- Lily;
- Porch in Summer, Late Afternoon





Above: Old Leather – A Convolution of Boots

and its bold compositions that brought a viewer right into the picture. She also appreciated the Pre-Raphaelites for their rich use of color.

As she became a serious painter, Rietz developed her skills through collaboration with other artists. She joined The Art Center, a consortium of about 75 regional artists who paint together and sponsor a variety of courses and workshops. She regularly attended regional art critiques.

And, as in her corporate career, Rietz reached out to influential mentors. She especially credits artists Carol Novotne for her sense of value and color; Ian Roberts for his guidance on composition; and Alan Shuptrine for his skill in bringing realism to watercolor. “These artists taught me so much, and they also let me use watercolor in my own way. So many artists say that, in watercolor, you have to be loose, let it all flow. But why can’t I paint in detail? The medium doesn’t have to define the style.”

While her painting style has remained consistent, her subject matter has evolved. Originally a traditional landscape painter, Rietz began taking a different angle on the land. “I wanted to capture not only the beauty, but that

sense I had of the land being so all-encompassing, and that as a person in this landscape I was really small.” She often paints from a low angle, to emphasize the immensity of nature in the West.

She also began paying tribute to the history of her home region, and to the traces left by those who settled the land or live there still. “All around me there are ranchers whose families are three, four, or even five generations on their land. And there are ghost towns, where people came, maybe thrived, maybe failed, but ultimately moved on. All this is part of the spirit of the West that I want to capture so that it never completely disappears.”

While there are human traces in many of her works, there are no people—and that’s intentional. “I love solitude, being by myself in a beautiful or interesting place. And in the modern world, it’s often hard to find that sense of quiet aloneness. I want to offer that solitude to those who look at my paintings.”

Rietz is a dedicated painter who works in her studio nearly every day. It’s fashionable to say you paint *plein aire*, she says, but she doesn’t. Her style is too intricate and intense to finish a work one afternoon in a field, she says. Many of her paintings take a week or more to complete. Rietz does, though, sketch in the field and takes hundreds of photographs to use for inspiration. Every painting is

based on her personal experience and the emotion it evoked.

Outside her studio, Rietz finds time to take in what her home in the West offers. She and her husband continue to travel, especially to intriguing and historic places in and around Montana. She also loves baking bread and riding her favorite horse, Jill.

Savoring every moment is the new way of life for Rietz. It’s a quality she also brings to her art. “A sense of quiet and an appreciation for what we have all around us—that’s what I hope others will find in my work.” ■

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