

the landscape
PAINTINGS
 OF MALCOLM HUGHES

Article by Heather Ferngren Morton

A large window on the **NORTH SIDE** of Malcolm Hughes's art studio looks out on the Virginia countryside. Its gently sloping green meadow, framed by a **FOREST** of gorgeously unkempt trees and, beyond that, a **DISTANT VIEW** of the Blue Ridge mountains, is as perfect a pastoral scene as any landscape painter could hope for.

Hughes says he produces some sketch of this view every two or three months. "It's the perfect way to reignite the landscape painting flame—to set the portable easel just out the door and catch some angle toward Tom Mountain [a nearby hill], the current sky, and season, and sun-light angle."

During the roughly forty years he's been painting, Hughes has always been attracted to nature. Fields of Texas wildflowers in low light were an early favorite subject, and decades later, he can still see them in his mind's eye. In recent years, however, his interests have broadened to include the urban—the historic architecture at the nearby University of Virginia, Manhattan skylines, and scenes from Central Park. Regardless of the subject matter, Hughes says his inspiration to paint a subject usually flows from some small visual detail that catches his eye: "The way shadow and light interact in a view, the way a brilliant highlight on something reveals a lovely contour set in relief, the way reflected light illumines a form, the way atmosphere affects subjects distant and far away, or the way a range of subtle colors affects a mood."

Hughes, who painted his first picture at age nine, inherited his creative impulse from his parents and grandparents. Their love of beauty and creativity shaped everything from home décor to meal preparation to family outings, and it was inextricably bound up with their view of family life. "Homes

were not places to drop your keys and cell phone. They were places where you entertained and had family gatherings. You wanted to have an environment of beauty and quality."

It was in his father and grandfather's home furnishings gallery in Amarillo, Texas, that Hughes received some of his first inspiration and training, studying the work of local Texas painters on display and occasionally taking one of these paintings home to copy.

He began as a watercolorist, but by his late teens, he had moved into oils, preferring the versatility they offered both in color and texture. As a young man, Hughes toured art museums in Europe, where the approach of the French Impressionists took hold of him. He was particularly captivated by their achievement of outdoor light, color, and atmosphere.

"They looked across the color wheel for complementarian elements to enhance their paintings," he explains. "They consciously looked for oppositional colors—like orange and blue, for example—which adds a sense of completeness, rest, and beauty to your painting. In a way, it's kind of an exploration of the diversity of nature, a constant eye to the unity of the whole sphere. I saw that more in the Impressionists—particularly in Monet—than in any other period or school."

For Hughes, like his parents and grandparents before him, the home remains central to his

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life and work. He and his wife Anne, a Realtor, enjoy family life at their spacious house outside Charlottesville, Virginia—especially when their two grown children come home to visit. They take walks through their neighborhood's winding rural roads, harvest vegetables in their garden, and host frequent dinner parties and overnight guests. And when it's time to work, Hughes descends one flight of stairs to his walk-out basement studio.

This sixteen-by-twenty-foot room looks like an artist's workspace—bright and cluttered. His large easel stands at one end of the room. Nearby tools—a color wheel, a computer monitor, mirrors angled at the easel—assist him

with color and perspective. Around the room, small, full-color oil sketches stand propped up on every available surface, providing the basis for Hughes's larger landscape paintings. Their blunt forms, thick brush strokes, and sharp colors hint at the bigger, fuller paintings to come.

Some of these finished pieces hang from the taupe-colored walls, large framed canvases depicting a mountain in poignant late-afternoon sunlight, a fast-flowing river, a brilliant blue sky filled with sun-tinged cumulus clouds, all rendered in breathtaking detail—a result of Hughes's keen eye for color and light and his remarkable technical precision.

Hughes aims to spend eight hours a day, six days a week at work in his studio, though not all of this time is in front of the easel. He handles the marketing and sale of his art, prepares canvases, and even builds frames.

As for the paintings themselves, he usually begins outdoors. He's been known to take his palette and easel with him on family vacations and claims he's painted from the cockpit of a kayak, while wedged between two rocks in a river. On ski trips, he's taken his paint box with him on the chairlift to paint the view from the top of the mountain.

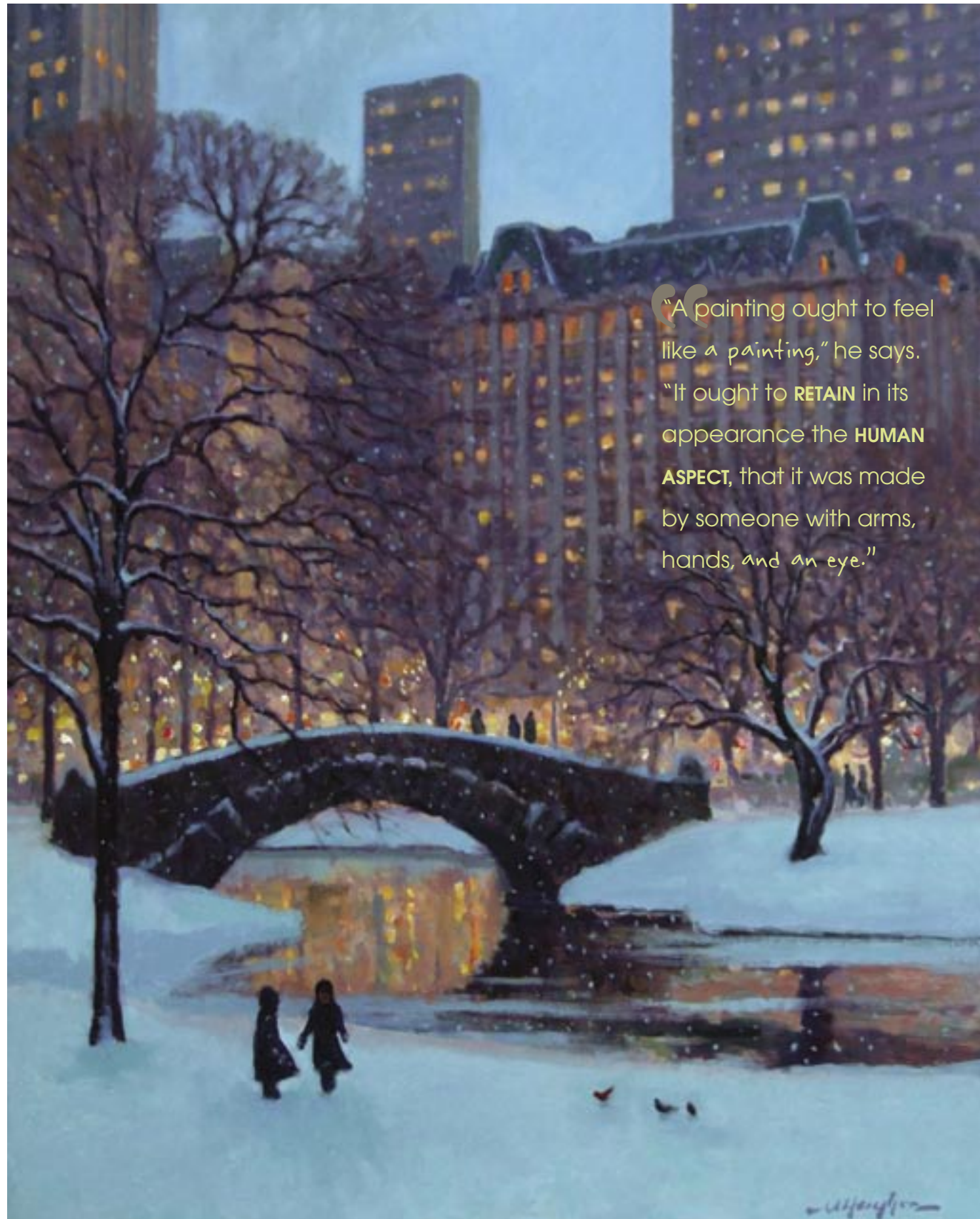
He begins with preliminary studies of his subject, selecting the colors that interest him and painting them onto the smooth, white surface of a small panel. All the while, he's mindful of the overall effect he is trying to achieve in terms of color, emphasis, contrast, and general composition. Once he's captured the subject's essential visual



components on the sketch panels, he paints it on a larger canvas, often combining several sketches for the final finished work.

Occasionally, Hughes admits, he'll rethink an entire painting, scraping and sanding and redoing sections of it—even months or years after he's initially completed it. (Another benefit of painting with oils: they're easier to rework.) But generally speaking, he knows a painting is finished when "it is properly unified in regard to color and value ordering, when it contains brilliant light and color—nothing dead or lifeless—and when it just feels like it has arrived at the place of achieving what I set out to do with it."





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Hughes says it’s possible for an artist to tire of a particular subject or piece. When he reaches such an impasse, he does something new—he takes a break, or sometimes he takes a trip. But most importantly, he steps outdoors with the easel and starts painting directly from nature.

“Nature is so full of sensory excitement that one can never be ‘blocked’ for long in her presence. It never fails. I step outdoors to do one painting of some subject, and after I begin it, I see two or three other things that I’m dying to capture too.”

His work is representational, but he doesn’t aim to emulate the quality or precision of a photograph. “A painting ought to feel like a painting,” he says. “It ought to retain in its appearance the human aspect, that it was made by someone with arms, hands, and an eye. The human eye sees differently from a camera—quite differently—and no two human brains or personalities process the information in the exact same way.”

Indeed, the human element is important to Hughes, who sees a kind of symbiosis between the

human body and nature. “Since nature includes our bodies, and our bodies draw their very life and nourishment from nature, there is a kind of natural correspondence,” he says. He often depicts humans or human-made elements, like dwellings, in a natural landscape, and some aspect of nature—a tree, for instance—in an urban landscape to illustrate this relationship.

For Hughes, nature is also a place of peace, inviting human wonder and delight. Despite the occasional sublime mountain vista or rushing river, his work reveals

a pervasive tranquility. He says he views nature as the result of divine intention and, “like our very bodies, a place of marvelous order and interest.” [AL]

Hughes’s paintings are on display at galleries in Texas and New Mexico, and he sells much of his work out of his studio.

www.mhughesart.com

