



SPEAKING OF ART

By Patricia J. Bruno

GAGNON MAKES HER POINT WITH COLORED PENCILS

To most artists, acceptance into the society of galleries and museums provides a sense of validity. And while the art world is always open to new and innovative means of expression, any medium beyond traditional painting and sculpting has taken decades, sometimes even centuries, to be elevated to fine-art status.

Take photography, for example. While these days it is considered a respected form of fine art, not so long ago photographers were not invited to join art associations or to exhibit their work alongside "real artists," such as painters.

A recent exhibit of artist-in-residence Tina Gagnon at The Switchboard gallery in Haverhill, Mass., showcased an art form that is gradually but steadily gaining recognition. Gagnon created all of her hyper-realistic and expertly executed images of "nature and nostalgia" using a humble set of colored pencils.

When the adult coloring book craze took on momentum a few years ago, amateur artists realized the versatility of colored pencils. Their sharp points enable precision; pencils are clean and portable, and they come in a variety of colors, perfect for filling in the lines of pre-drawn designs in a coloring book. But in the hands of a skilled artist, pencils become valuable tools that rival any paintbrush.

Although wax-based art materials have been used throughout history, it was not until the early twentieth century that artist-quality colored pencils were produced. And while the art world has been slow to embrace the medium, the Colored Pencil Society of America, founded in 1990, has been educating the public, creating awareness, and setting standards for pencil man-



Many of colored-pencil artist Tina Gagnon's works feature nostalgic items, such as the cat's eye marbles in this drawing. Courtesy photos

ufacturers. These efforts have contributed to the acceptance of colored-pencil art by serious collectors and curators.

Gagnon worked in the printing industry for many years and dabbled on the side in acrylic and watercolor.

"Nothing was really doing it for me," she says. "I am a detail person, and I couldn't seem to reach the desired level of precision with a brush."

One day, she stumbled across a set of colored pencils in a drawer, and 12 years and hundreds of pencils later she is still hooked. Now a member of several artists groups — including the Colored Pencil Society of America, the Greater Salem Artists Association and the Arts Institute of the Merrimack Valley — Gagnon feels blessed that the art world is opening up to this medium.

Still, she finds that some people need convincing about the validity of colored-pencil art.

"It is still emerging as a serious art form in the fine-arts community," she says. "Very often my work ends up in the 'other' category in an exhibit. But things are changing."

Gagnon works in her home studio, a spare room that her husband converted into a workspace. She says that patience is the key to her art, and that in other areas of her life she is anything but patient.

"In the studio, the rest of the world melts away," she says.

It takes her an average of an hour to complete one square inch of a drawing, as she first sketches it out before gradually layering the colors until she achieves the

desired effect. Using artist-grade pencils that contain a higher degree of pigment than student-grade pencils, Gagnon meticulously creates detailed and vivid drawings that cannot be hurried.

"I work on an area as small as 1/16th of an inch at a time. That is my portrait at that moment," she says. "When that is finished, I move on. Some people would call my technique tedious. I call it intricate."

Gagnon prefers to draw the natural world of animals and botanicals instead of landscapes and people. She also enjoys creating nostalgic studies of inanimate objects such as cat's eye marbles, old keys and rusted gears.

"People respond to the nostalgia," she says. "They see my work and it brings back memories for them, of playing marbles with their grandfather, perhaps. I love when they make that connection with my work."

Currently Gagnon is working on a study of antique brooches.

"The reflections are a challenge," she says. "Each type of metal and each stone has a different intricate texture."

While she enjoys sharing her skills by teaching workshops and loves sitting at art exhibits and drawing for hours as she displays her work, Gagnon says that she mainly creates her art for herself. As to why she sticks with colored pencil as her form of fine art, her standard answer is, "Because someone has to."

As they say in the pencil world, good point.

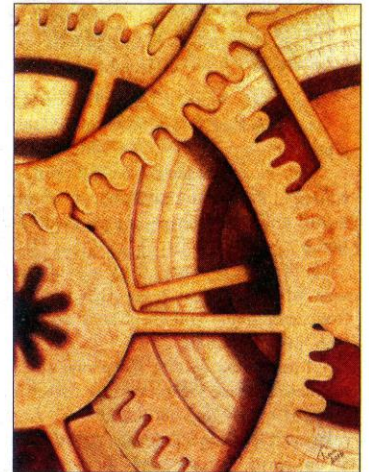
To view more of Gagnon's drawings, visit tinagagnon.com.



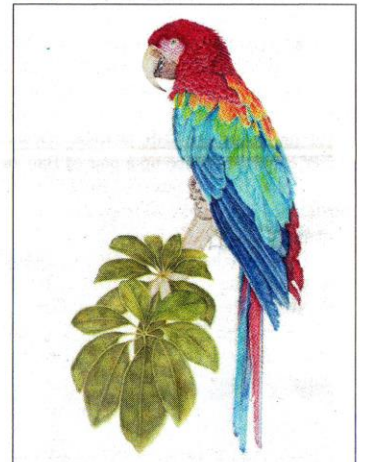
Gagnon applies multiple layers of color over one another to create rich hues like those in this fish drawing.



The artist is currently working on a study of antique brooches.



This image of rusty gears is a popular seller as a print at art shows.



Pencils lend themselves very well to creating feathers and other details.



Gagnon's work often includes botanicals.



Gagnon says that some might call her drawing technique tedious, but she calls it intricate.