

Transitioning Into Fine Art

James M. Lawless loved drawing as a child, but he didn't learn to paint until he began to shift his career from veterinary medicine to fine art. His experiences can help others who want to devote more time to creating art.

by **M. Stephen Doherty**

It's understood that a career in the visual arts can be personally fulfilling and professionally risky. That's why most people work secure 9-to-5 jobs and enjoy drawing and painting during evenings and weekends. But those limited hours just aren't enough for many people, especially those who need more time for training and practice. James M. Lawless was in that predicament 10 years ago when he wanted to expand his love of drawing into painting, perhaps making it possible to support himself and his family through the sale of artwork.

"I have been drawing all my life," Lawless explains. "I worked mostly in graphite and ink on architectural drawings, political cartoons, and medical illustrations, but only began painting seriously in oils in 1986 after discovering internationally renowned marine artist John Stobart's historical marine prints in a Nantucket gallery. I decided then and there I wanted to paint like that, and I set out to reproduce images of my latest passion: sailboats and harbor scenes. I had no idea at the time just

how complicated that might be."

Lawless now admits that the steps he took to teach himself to paint were logical but misguided. "For about 12 years I struggled through a process of trial and error, working mostly at night from photographs while maintaining a busy veterinary career during the day. I had some limited success but mostly was dissatisfied with the flatness and lifelessness of my paintings," he explains.

"Then, during a visit to The John Stobart Gallery, in Edgartown, Massachusetts, I had the rare opportunity to spend hours examining a stack of 12 or more Stobart originals in an upstairs corner of the gallery. I marveled at John's ability to create the illusion of light and reflection and how that seemed to bring his paintings to life. And his incredible attention to detail and historical accuracy did not diffuse my emotional response to his work."

Thirsty for professional advice on understanding how Stobart achieved those visual qualities, Lawless began reading books and magazine articles on painting. Then Stobart published a video series on plein air painting that



OPPOSITE PAGE
James M. Lawless painting at his French half-easel along State Beach on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

ABOVE
South Beach Path
2001, oil, 18 x 24.
Private collection.



1



2



3



Step 1

A view of Lawless' studio showing his laptop computer, paints, brushes, and toned canvas as he prepared to paint *Baguette*.

Step 2

After drawing his subject in graphite on the toned canvas, Lawless established the dark cast shadows inside and around the boat.

Step 3

Shifting his attention to the water, the artist used a wet-in-wet technique to blend one shade of blue into the next, creating a seamless transition of colors and values in the water.

THE COMPLETED PAINTING:
Baguette
2004, oil, 11 x 14.
Collection the artist.



**Dinghy Alley—
Edgartown**
2003, oil, 8 x 10.
Collection the artist.

“I marveled at John Stobart’s ability to create the illusion of light and reflection and how that seemed to bring his paintings to life.”

emphasized the value of working directly from nature. “That was when I finally got a look at the process behind a Stobart painting and began to understand the important role that painting from life would play in the improvement of my art. I purchased a French easel, packed up my oils and an armful of canvases, and went off to Martha’s Vineyard for a four-week summer vacation with my family,” he remembers. “My first painting during that summer of 1998 was a three-hour study of the Edgartown lighthouse. I showed it to the director of The John Stobart Gallery,

who liked it, put it on display, and sold it for \$1,900. Encouraged by that initial response, I spent the rest of the vacation painting on location, and the gallery sold eight more pictures.”

Early success can spoil an artist, but while Lawless continued to sell his marine paintings, he also made a concerted effort to learn more about the best oil painting materials and techniques. He participated in a plein air workshop with Donald Demers and joined a local oil-painting group instructed by Hudson Valley artist Dominique Rickard, who organized

outings and critiques. “I continue to participate in weekly sessions of painting from life,” he explains. “The professional artists in the group have helped me gain a better understanding of the fundamental aspects of oil painting and have made me aware of the importance of working directly from nature.

“For one thing, plein air painting helps sharpen my memory of a scene and makes me less dependent on photographic references,” Lawless explains. “After concentrating on a scene for a few hours one is bound to walk away with a better understanding of how colors and forms appear in nature. Likewise, one will have better control over the nuances that come from value changes and edges. All that helps an artist create the believable illusion of a

three-dimensional scene on a two-dimensional surface.”

In addition to painting from nature, Lawless recommends the studio practice of making quick gesture drawings of posed models. “Being a scientist and a sailor, I have a tendency to get bogged down in detail when I’m painting,” he admits. “Making one- or two-minute gesture drawings of people helps me focus on the essential elements of a subject. I’ve also found it valuable to use large brushes for as long as possible when painting so I am forced to develop the big shapes before I break them up with smaller brushstrokes of paint.”

Using a limited palette of only six or eight tube colors has also proven helpful to Lawless. “Not having the benefit of an instructor when I began painting,

I had to learn about pigments by trying each one separately,” he explains. “That’s not the best way to understand how colors perform by themselves and in combination with other pigments. Reading about the ways other artists select and mix colors, as well as actually seeing demonstrations, was tremendously beneficial. I now follow the advice of limiting my color selections and taking full advantage of those pigments. When I’m painting outdoors, I work with ultramarine blue, cadmium red, cadmium yellow, permanent green, burnt sienna, and titanium white. In the studio I add Naples yellow and Old Holland bright violet to that selection along with phthalocyanine blue and rose madder for skies.”

In addition to working from life,

Lawless takes digital photographs of potential painting subjects. When he is ready to begin work on a new picture, he sorts through that inventory and manipulates the best shots in his computer using Photoshop software. He may combine the best elements from two or more photographs, eliminate unwanted objects, or change the cropping of the picture. He enlarges the final image on the screen of his laptop computer and refers to that image while painting.

Lawless also uses computer technology to produce his own giclée prints that are sold through print galleries, gift shops, and his wife’s coffeehouse. “One of the newsletters published by the American Society of Marine Artists suggested an Epson Stylus Photo 2200 printer as being excellent for generating



LEFT ABOVE
12 Meter Off Chappy
 2004, oil, 14 x 20.
 Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE
North Water Street
 2002, oil, 8 x 10.
 Private collection.

LEFT BELOW
Red & Green Otego Barns
 2002, oil, 11 x 14.
 Private collection.

About the Artist

James M. Lawless was born in 1949 and spent his childhood among sailboats and garveys on the waters of Toms River and Barnegat Bay, in New Jersey. His three principal interests were music, art, and science; but he decided to focus on science in school and earned a degree in veterinary medicine from Cornell University in 1976. Today he balances his renewed interest in art with part-time work as a veterinarian. He is an artist-member

of the American Society of Marine Artists and exhibits his paintings and prints in Massachusetts at The Granary Gallery, in West Tisbury; the J. Todd Galleries, in Wellesley; Kennedy Studios, in Vineyard Haven; Nantucket Lite Candle & Soap Company, in Nantucket; Abode, in Oak Bluffs; and in New York at Amy's Coffee Gallery, in Cornwall. For more information on Lawless, visit his website: www.lawlessgallery.com.

high-quality, archival limited-edition giclée prints, so I bought one," he explains. "I now use it for making prints up to 13" x 19". If I want larger versions, I order Iris giclée prints from the Highland Studio, in Beacon, New York. In all cases I have the prints done on archival cotton-rag paper and establish a limit to the edition size."

In 2005 Lawless received the People's Choice Award in the Wet Paint Auction, in Naples, Florida. Fifty-one local, national, and international artists were invited to paint in designated locations in the Naples area for two days while potential buyers had

the opportunity to watch them produce their pictures. Then their framed paintings were placed in a fund-raising auction at a gala party the final night. "Not having ever done this event before, I came prepared to execute the painting entirely in the two days allotted, in the true fashion of plein air," he explains. "I started my painting of the inner harbor after arriving in Naples, worked on it day and night, and completed it by the deadline. When I turned in the relatively small (12" x 16") canvas, it was dwarfed by many of the other paintings—one of which was over five feet tall! I wasn't aware the paintings could

have been started in the studio ahead of time and that the subject did not necessarily have to be painted from life.

"I didn't expect to do as well as the other artists given that there were so many large, colorful, polished paintings available to the 300 patrons who paid \$95 each to attend the auction," Lawless remembers. "There were 27 high-profile artists whose paintings were included in a live auction, while the rest of the pictures were made available in a silent auction. Each patron received a ballot and was asked to vote for his or her favorite painting.

"Much to my surprise, there was an

\$800 bid on my painting as soon as the silent auction began," Lawless explains. "Two hours later when the bidding ended, the price was up to \$1,400. With a guarantee that I wouldn't have to take my painting home, my wife and I were about to leave early when a member of the organizing committee told us there had been so much interest in my picture that it was being moved to the live auction so patrons would have the opportunity to keep bidding. We settled back into our seats and listened as the auctioneers announced that my painting had received the greatest number of ballots, thus winning the People's Choice Award, and that it was being entered in the live auction. By the time the bidding was over it sold for \$3,000."

Although Lawless has been remarkably successful with his first effort at gallery sales and plein air events, he has also learned that the art market can be fickle. Galleries that once sold a lot of his paintings and prints have either gone out of business or softened their sales, and the total volume of sales through several galleries has fluctuated from year to year. "Like most artists, I experienced a downturn in sales immediately after the events of September 11th," he remembers. "And since then sales have fluctuated from one season to the next, often for no apparent reason. As a consequence, I continue to work part time as a veterinarian while pursuing my art career." ■

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