

# Go Figure

Van Hart "On Art" Newsletter    Issue 4    January 2009

Dear Art Friends,

I hope you're having a great start to the new year!

Over the last month, our family has been super-busy with moving to a new house (which was lots of work), and hosting my family from NY for the holidays (which was lots of fun). Now it's back to painting in full force.

This issue of my newsletter about Figure Painting. Hope you have as much fun reading it as I had writing it.

Best wishes for a healthy and fun 2009,  
Holly

## Go Figure

There's nothing more visually compelling to us humans than other humans. Whether we're in a cafe, stadium, shopping mall, or art gallery, what we look at most is other people. There are all sorts of reasons for this, but there's no denying that we keep on doing it.

So it comes as no surprise that people are such a popular subject in artwork. In art-speak, a painting of a person or people is called a "**Figure Painting**".

Being interested in people is only part of what inspires an artist to invest many hours or weeks or even months in creating a particular figure painting. Some other passion is a critical part of the mix, too.

In this newsletter, we'll look at examples of Figure Paintings and the passions that fueled them.

### **Figure Painting #1: "The Scream"**



"The Scream" by Edvard Munch, 1893

Let's start with a figure painting we've all seen before, "The Scream" by Edvard Munch (pronounced "Moonk"). What inspired Munch to paint this disturbing piece?

Munch had a passion for exploring themes of fear and death in his artwork. This was a deep, internal passion stemming in part from his sad childhood. Munch wrote, "From (my father) I inherited the seeds of madness. The angles of fear, sorrow, and death stood by my side since the day I was born."

With this painting, Munch met his stated goal of "the study of the soul, that is to say the study of my own self". You could say that Munch was a prototypical anguished artist.

## Figure Painting #2: "The Dance Class"



"The Dance Class" by Edgar Degas, 1874

Well, you don't have to be mad or sad to be a great figure painter. Edgar Degas (pronounced duh-GAH) was one of the best. He had a passion for capturing people's characteristic movements and gestures, as evidenced in his painting "The Dance Class".

Degas was amazingly creative in finding all sorts of contemporary settings and subjects to fulfill his passion - cafe scenes, racecourse scenes, women at work, female bathers, and (his favorite by far, accounting for over half his paintings) ballet dancers.

## Figure Painting #3: "Mark McGwire"



"Mark McGwire" by LeRoy Nieman, 1999

Another artist with a passion for people in movement is an 80-something American painter named LeRoy Nieman. Perhaps you've heard of him. By his own account, Nieman is "probably the most popular artist living in the United States". Nieman is inspired by athletes and sporting events, and (as you can see above) he uses brilliant colors in a semi-abstract style. His original paintings can command prices of over \$100,000; this is a steep price for a living painter.

Nieman has the dubious privilege of being called "the highest paid and most belittled artist of our time". That's because the art critics have never ever taken him seriously. Why? It seems that Nieman's art is so popular that the critics don't consider it fine art. Hmmm. Go figure!

#### Figure Painting #4: "Shopping"



"Shopping (Vietnamese Woman)" by Holly Van Hart, 2009

Lately I've come to have a passion for painting people in action too, and (humbly putting my work after the others) "Shopping" is part of this series. Why did I choose to paint this Vietnamese woman at a market?

Well, my husband Ike and I have a great passion for learning about other cultures, and we've traveled to dozens of countries over the years. This painting was inspired by a 3-week trip we took to China to see the ethnic minorities in the Yunnan province, and by a photo taken by my good friend Veronique Gillard. (Thank you Veronique!) For me, it is a symbol of our passion for travel.

This painting was awarded 1st place in a local art contest last week. You can read more about it on [my blog](#), and see more [People in Action](#) on my website.

In closing, it takes a great passion for people, a great passion for painting, and some other significant passions to create great figure paintings (or in my case, to aspire to create great figure paintings). It's been a tremendous joy for me to have the time to chase these passions, and to share them with you. Thanks so much for your interest, and I hope 2009 brings all of us plenty of time to chase our passions!

All the best,  
Holly

Related links: [Edvard Munch](#), [Edgar Degas](#), [LeRoy Nieman](#), [Paintings by Holly Van Hart](#),  
[My Painting Blog](#)

Quote of the Day: "Art is not what you see, but what you make others see." Edgar Degas

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