**Sherrie McGraw**

At age four, Sherrie McGraw made some of the biggest decisions of her life. Growing up as one of the eldest of seven children and having experienced a healthy dose of the less romantic side of motherhood in raising her younger siblings, the idea of getting married and having children held no allure. Before she attended her first day of kindergarten she knew she would neither have children nor marry, and she knew she wanted to be an artist. Although she was too young to really understand what that unusual path would entail, it did not lessen the intensity of her resolve. With precocious insight, she realized that her conservative hometown likely would not sanction this profession, so she kept her passion a secret until she sought higher education at the Oklahoma College of Liberal Arts in Chickasha.

McGraw thought the only way to become an artist was by attending college. But after two years of school and having earned straight A’s in her classes, she found herself no closer to being an artist than when she started. She decided this dictated a different plan of action. Fortuitously, a Ponca City mentor and talented still life painter, E. L. Mount, urged her to quit school and study with two artists in Oklahoma City. She listened, and that decision would alter the course of her life.

Richard and Edith Goetz had almost single-handedly raised Oklahoma’s consciousness about art and had in essence become the face of fine art in the state. They introduced McGraw to an artist’s world, which in short order proved as unorthodox a life as she could have imagined in her 20 sheltered years on earth. Although she was impressed with the Goetzes’ talent and knowledge of painting and drawing, their emphasis on the impressionistic philosophy of Henry Hensche—a noted colorist from the tradition of Charles Hawthorne—and this high-key way of seeing the world, simply did not resonate. Ultimately, she was at a dead end. After three years of treading water, she finally realized it was time to find another teacher, one who could teach her what her heart craved—the dramatic light of chiaroscuro painting.

Richard and Edith had been talking about the Art Students League in New York and one teacher in particular—David A. Leffel—for some time. Finally, McGraw decided to travel to New York to seek a new teacher. She and a friend made the trek, and the two of them not only studied with Leffel but also signed up for two weeks with both Daniel Greene and Frank Mason.

Within the first week, McGraw had found the knowledge she had always been seeking in legendary artist David A. Leffel. So she uprooted herself and moved to New York City, landing a job as a night security guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art so she could study art during the day.

In her initial years at the League, McGraw studied painting and drawing primarily with Leffel, but she also learned anatomy through Robert Beverly Hale’s legendary lecture series. She then continued her studies at the New York Academy with Jon Zahourek, the first artist to pioneer sculpting muscles out of clay and attaching them to a skeleton. In his innovative manner, Zahourek designed his own skeletal system, which he called “Maniken,”so he could more precisely share his vast knowledge of the human body with his eager students. Much later, she studied with one of the art world’s recognized masters of drawing and painting the horse from life, Ned Jacob. By the time she was 30, she was teaching classes at the Art Students League of New York herself, having been asked by the director, Rosina Florio, to take over the classes of recently deceased instructor Thomas Fogarty and another instructor, Gustav Rehberger, whose health was failing. Teaching what she loved was a good fit, and soon she was conducting her own classes in both painting and drawing, attracting students from all over the world.

McGraw started winning awards in art shows in and around New York and had trouble keeping up with the demand for her work in galleries.

Although McGraw and Leffel both loved teaching at the League, in 1992 they decided to leave the Big Apple and relocate to Taos, New Mexico. This momentous change happened by a virtual roll of the dice, as both had been teaching north of Taos for several years at the Fechin Institute in San Cristobal and had fallen under the spell of New Mexico’s mountainous landscape and refreshing lack of humidity.

Currently, McGraw teaches workshops throughout the country, giving lectures and demonstrations for art institutions such as the National Arts Club, the Salmagundi Club, the Portrait Society of America, the American Society of Portrait Artists (ASOPA), Studio Incamminati, Weekend with the Masters, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, Brigham Young University, the Art Students League of New York, the Scottsdale Artists’ School in Arizona, and the Academy of Art University in San Francisco. In 2010 the latter university awarded her an honorary doctorate for her extraordinary accomplishments and influence in the art world.

Her work has been shown in major art institutions throughout the world, such as the traveling exhibition to museums in China of realist artists with the America China Oil Painting Artists League (ACOPAL); the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, the Governor’s Gallery at the State Capitol, and the Gilcrease Museum, all in Oklahoma; the Butler Institute of American Art in Ohio; and the *American Masters Exhibition* at the Salmagundi Club of New York, curated by noted art connoisseur and former Chairman of the Board Tim Newton. She was also the vice president of American Women Artists, an art organization that curated a cultural exchange exhibition in Sorrento, Italy, in 2000.

The director of the Butler Institute of American Art, Dr. Lou Zona, saw her work in a group show with the Portrait Society and was eager to have a showing of her work. In 2014 he mounted a comprehensive retrospective exhibition of her paintings and drawings that is still being talked about by the museum’s visitors. In 2015, Dr. Zona and his board of directors awarded her their Medal of Honor for Lifetime Achievement in American Art, adding her to the ranks of such distinguished awardees as legendary modern art dealer Leo Castelli; avant-garde sculptor Louise Nevelson; and one of the most influential and controversial directors of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, Thomas Hoving.

Her work has found its way into some of the most prestigious collections, including those of Senator John Warner, the Mellon family, the Forbes family, John J. Geraghty, Forrest Fenn, Howard Terpning, Martin and Carol Dickinson, Art and Catherine Nicholas, Tim and Cathi Newton, Lynn Friess, and John Mellencamp, as well as noted artists of our time Sandy Scott, Scott L. Christensen, and George Carlson.

McGraw is the author of the highly acclaimed book *The Language of Drawing: From an Artist’s Viewpoint*, an instructional art book that has drawn worldwide attention for its clear and simple approach to the art of drawing. Her second book, *Then & Now*,shares anecdotes about the journey of creating her one-woman show at the Butler Institute of American Art, and contains an impressive collection of portraits, figures, nightscapes, still lifes, and figure drawings. She edited and wrote the foreword to *The Drawings of Nicolai Fechin* by Russia’s noted authority on this artist, Galina Tuluzakova, and co-edited Tuluzakova’s new scholarly treatise on Fechin’s legacy to the art world, *Nicolai Fechin: The Art and the Life.* She is presently writing an instructional book on painting. Her work has been featured in numerous periodicals including *American Art Collector*, *Art of the West*, and *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

Sherrie McGraw is one of the leading proponents of *abstract realism*—a term coined by Leffel and McGraw—which derives its name from the abstract appeal achieved when beautiful configurations of paint create a recognizable image. In this way, abstract realism combines the best of both worlds—the excitement of abstract painting, plus the satisfaction on a human level when the image is something that can be recognized. The result creates a visual undercurrent that quietly moves the viewer’s eye through a painting. A visual concept, independent of storytelling or literary intent, lends gravitas and visual delight to a painting and is the real reason a work of art captivates viewers for generations to come. It is also what keeps museum visitors riveted to one image longer than others. It is this way of thinking about painting that makes her a kindred spirit with some of the great artists and draftsmen of all time. She teaches both in person and online through a library of instructional videos called *The Artists Guild*, which is found at [www.brighlightfineart.com](http://www.brighlightfineart.com).

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