

Loyola University New Orleans
Digital Humanities Studio

The Louisiana Art Project

Interview with Peg Usner

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Interviewer: Tristin Gaspard

Abstract:

Peg Usner shares her passion for plein-air painting and artistic journey, highlighting her early exposure to art, the transition from abstract watercolors to impressionism, and her love for capturing Louisiana's landscapes and buildings. She emphasizes the importance of family history and cultural identity in South Louisiana and discusses the significance of preserving this heritage through art. Peg discusses her experiences with artistic expression and personal growth, emphasizing the importance of being true to oneself and following one's passion. She demonstrates a deep appreciation for the power of art to transform and inspire individuals.

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Peg Usner (0:0): Hi, I'm Peggy Usner and I'm a plein air artist in Louisiana. I love to paint the scenes of South Louisiana, both the landscape and some of the buildings. It's been a career that I actually started as a young person didn't know it was going to be, work out this way. Well, the way I do plein air, and I believe this is the way it's supposed to be. Because you take your easel, and your paints, and your backpack or whatever, and you haul it out to somewhere that you like, set it up, and you paint what you see. So most of the time, something has to just grab me, you know, ago, well, there's something about that scene that just draws me in. So I'm imagining it'll draw other people into, but it I paint, really for me. And then once I get that scene, in my head, find out the composition that I want, then you just squeeze the tube. You can't do anything till you get the paint out. And then you you start and I paint, usually mornings, and I paint between three and four hours. And I usually finish a painting in that time. So occasionally, if it's a bigger painting, I have to come back but that's how I do it. Yes, my residency, artist in residence at Longue Vue was kind of was a fluke, because I was the first artist in residence. I mean, I've know people who've painted out there but a official artists in residence. So I I was painting with Phil Sandusky, who's a friend and mentor of mine. And I didn't know you could paint out there. But if you're a member or you, you can just you can paint. I didn't know that we were painting out there. And we had a show of the people in our group who had painted for the last three months or whatever it was. And the woman who was in charge said to me afterwards, see, I kept going back. Once I knew they all other people left. I just kept going back. This is great. This is a wonderful place. So I kept going back and she said Would would you be interested in our in a artist in residence. So I said sure. And so for the next the contract was drawn up, and for three years, I was an artist in residence, which involved me teaching classes, plein air classes, occasionally, I might do a still life or a basic design class, in the middle of the summer when I wasn't going to go painting outside. And it was just lovely people were wonderful. Every season, there's something new blooming or growing or changes, you know, the light changes. So it was really, I loved it. And I was actually recently asked by the director of it Landis that would you like to come back and teach a few classes sometimes. So I don't think it would get a sign up for any long term thing. But yeah, I did a workshop in April. And I'm gonna go back I think I think I was born with this. Okay, so yeah, I liked in kindergarten, I liked to

color. My favorite class. But I was always there was a actually show on TV. If you ever looked this up, it's gonna look really old. John Nagy learn to draw. And he did. He sold little kits and little things, pencils and colors and stuff. And I would watch him on Saturday mornings. And I would copy that and my dad you say that's pretty good. I mean, sometimes I was just doing on loose leaf because that's all the paper we had, right? And then he saw how interested I was. And he always encouraged me. So I he got me a little little oil painting kit. So I took those oil paints, and I copied I probably could show it to you at some point, a peacock. And he thought it was just amazing, you know? And I said, Well, I guess I'm on my way, because I was I was already hooked. I mean, I would any opportunity to paint or draw. And then also in at the public schools in New Orleans. They encourage these things they encourage dance and music and art and pictures would always get up on the bulletin board outside the classroom. Oh, yes. And then my high school, junior high school. Art teacher, Raymond Scully was an artist who painted, he taught, but he also painted around Jackson Square. And he encouraged me more than anything, I got straight hundreds on my report card and go, How does that happen? I mean, it wasn't a crip class, you had to do the history, you had to, you know, do well. But he would say that, I should just keep going. So then I thought, all right, I'm gonna do this. But then I realized you really couldn't make a living as an artist, at least that's what I thought. And so I got to went into that a fine arts degree. So I would hit painting and drawing or design every semester. I mean, it was like your background was, was art. And I became an interior designer, so I could use those skills. So I painted a little bit, but I was Oh, and also did renderings of interiors, which are much more stiff than the things I do. Now. These, you know, these are more impressionistic. And people would hire me to do their renderings. So I was, I guess it was good at it. And then I got married and had a child, that relationship didn't work out. So what do you do? Well, you a designer, I was, had been, I had been working as a designer. And then this teaching job came up, and I got to teach for 23 years. So my painting was kind of few and far between. When I was still painting, then when I retired from my professorship, I got to do what I've always wanted to do. And you can see this is it. This is what I do. And this is really I always wanted to be outside. And I always wanted to paint. So that what else can I do? I mean, I got it. I

guess I could have been a mail carrier. And I don't know what but you know, being outside Yeah. I love I love being in nature. It just draws me it draws me in...

Tristin Gaspard (7:27): What class did you teach at Delgado?

Peg Usner (7:30): Oh, every the full range of design classes from basic design. I did the the professional classes where you do the drafting and the floor plans and the space planning. The rendering class, of course, that was me a history class or two, which is what happened I, at Delgado, you needed to have a master's and I only had a bachelor's. And, but they hired me before they had that rule. Anyway, then they tell me I need to get a master's and I'm okay, now I'm a single parent. I've got to go away to get a degree in design, there was no place in New Orleans, there still isn't a you can get a master's degree or an undergraduate degree in design. So what can I do? I'll go to UNO. And I realized that I'm teaching history anyway. It would be okay to have a degree in history. Yes, it would be okay to have. Okay, so I got a degree in history by the hardest, but I did it. So that kind of brought that together. So I have my masters. But I would have rather it in painting. I love history, though. Can't be from New Orleans and not like history. It is now the Impressionists were the ones that I am not a photo realist are though, occasionally, some people tell me that looks like a photograph. But that's not the point. I figure there are some great photographers, just get them to take your picture. But if you want my impression of what I'm seeing, you know, when I'm out there painting, there is the sun, the wind, the smells mean the light, it's all there. Now, I can't paint a smell. But or I can't, I can't paint the wind. So I've tried. But all of that goes into what I'm doing. Because I'm there and I'm experiencing it. And I want you to experience it. If you look at that painting, want you to feel what I felt and see what I saw. And so there's very little of what you call it. It's impressionistic, but it's, it's not meant to just convey, you know, when you look at something, you see things over here, you don't even realize it. But you do. Yeah, they're there. So when you're painting that affects you too. And if you look at a couple of these stacked paintings I've done later, you can do that. I painted the little one first. But the whole time I was there, you can look at the City Park one, the whole time I was there, I kept going. This needs to be a bigger canvas. You know, I can't capture everything I

want. So I'd go back out with my little painting. Actually, that will leave. That's the aim of the stacked canvases is to I just didn't feel like, right. I didn't do original uncaptured it? It did. It was it's a beautiful painting by itself. I think it's fine. And I could do that in one sitting. Now I probably would have had to do two sittings. Anyway, so I bring the painting back and figure out do I want to see this part of the view, or this part of the view, and then I put that painting and kind of draw where it's going to go, might even do a little underpainting of what's there. And then I finish it, and come home and paint the edges. I don't paint the edges out there. But anyway, it to me, it just it just kind of evolved. I've done bigger paintings. And in one sitting actually. But sometimes the thing that caught my eye was the little small.

Tristin Gaspard (11:34): The city park when I mean the bridges obviously drew you in? Yeah, absolutely. You realize the trees also have their own story to tell.

Peg Usner (11:44): Well, yeah, it does. It keeps you. It's I mean, I don't do it as much as I could actually, I think I could take any number of the ones that are up here and expand it. And it's because I'm there and I and I've experienced the whole thing. And it's almost like, what a shame. I guess I could do a triptych or just do several paintings. But that that works for for renewal personnel to do that. It's very, it's very unique. And it also adds depth. Oh, yeah, absolutely. It does. And but like I said, I've sort of like, you know, especially and I didn't want from New Iberia, which is behind you. And I did the house. And that was because I was doing the plein air competition in New Iberia shadows on the Teche and I painted the house on Jefferson Island. That's about all I could have done in that morning. Because once the sun changes, you can't be out there, you gotta go. Or you got to paint a new picture because all the shadows are going the other way. So then I went back and saw that it could be more to it. And you could get a sense of it being in within a bigger space, right, that house really had a lot of land around it. You couldn't tell that from the original picture. So anyway, that kind of thing. And then there's the one of the Tchefuncte River that was about to rain, so I left it before my painting got wet, and then came back and held the painting up and decided that part of the pond would would add to that. And again, that whole expanse becomes a much more to me a much more interesting

and successful painting even though the other ones aren't bad. I have always had to do something creative. And gardening is the other thing I do a lot outside, we'll take a little walk. And right now I've got paintings up for a show tomorrow. That is an art and garden tour. So during COVID go places and people would come right up to me up on the lakefront, what do you paint right in your face and you're like, I hate to wear a mask while I'm outside painting but it seemed to me like I could paint, one of my friends said why don't you just paint around your house? You got some good, Oh, never thought about that. I thought you had to pack up all the whole, hike somewhere and setup. And I just didn't think because I like to do water and reflections. Well, it's not a lot of water and reflections in my backyard. More more scenic than than than close up. I mean, you'll see some things that look more close, but more panoramic. And I just didn't think of that in my back. So I started doing that. So I had about 15 paintings I did. And I'm having a little art and garden tour, you'll see that like everything on the architects, the interior designers, the commercial artists, everybody took the same basic courses. So at first I was I was with everybody, until we branched off and got more specific. I think the history degree didn't really do that. I think history was something I was always interested in it loved history, but didn't want to be a writer. So if I paint something in city park, that's historical, yes, it's because I love the history of the park and the...

Tristin Gaspard(15:45): Rather than write ten pages about it.

Peg Usner (15:47): or more, they'll always be more, it's, it's really hard for me to squeeze words out. But when I squeeze that paint out, I'm gone, you got to squeeze the tube, then you can paint, you can have everything that you want. You can have a canvas, you can have an easel, you have brushes, but until you actually squeeze the pain out on the palate, you probably aren't going to paint, you're going to just think about painting, and what you want to paint and dream about it. But I mean, I've see so many things, I just, I do still take pictures, and I'll go Wow. But it take a picture that I'm going to want to paint that one day. And then I'll go back and I might paint it. And other times I go, I took pictures of this and there's nothing in the what did I see, but what I'm not there, I'm looking at a picture that didn't have any. So I do use that a little bit, or I take a picture. Also, if I'm gonna go back,

like have a mountain, some mountain paintings that I had to go back and do more than one sitting. So the even though the underpaintings there, I'd take a picture to make sure I'm standing right where I want to stand. You'd be surprised how you move a little bit and you go wait a minute, and you start painting again. No, no, no, that tree is not quite there. So it is good to take photography will help you you know, do that. Or if you can't finish a painting, you can finish it by looking at photographs that usually I have an idea. And I do go back go back to City Park. I go back to Fontainebleu, Fairview I go back. So I There are places that I know and that's easy. The Wildlife Refuge. Like almost every year I do something with the azaleas because I know they're gonna be they're blooming and they're great. So you know, I kind of know but if not, you're absolutely right. I have to go. And and check it out and see what I want to paint. And if it's a big enough area, or I want I want to see it from this angle. But what does it look like over here? What does it look like a little later in the day? What does it look like a little earlier in the day? And then settle in? You can't actually say I'm painting that wave right there. But that's a beach picture of another one. Yeah, that one? Yeah, I have. Yeah, the water. Yeah, that takes a little more. Yeah, I take a photograph. And yeah, that particular one. Yeah, I couldn't possibly finish that one all at one time. But there is a pattern to waves. And they do similar things. They're never the same. But they do similar things, the way they're rolling in. And if the wind picks up, they're different. That's the thing about water. When I teach classes, I'll tell the students, you'll like the water right now. Start painting that because the wind picks up, you've got texture, and you've got different colors. You don't have the reflections you thought were so beautiful. So if that's what drew you in, you better paint that first. Or you'll come back the next day and do the water. I mean, look at the colors of water. I mean, there's so many colors in water. And I I love the reflections too. So I do a lot but there's always that South Louisiana yellowish ochre water, but it's water. And you know, it's water when you see it. You say, Oh yeah, that's water. But if you just took that color and you said oh, that's not water. My family's been here since the since the beginning. So you can't get a South Louisiana girl to really move away and be happy. I just don't a New Orleans girl. Oh, gosh. You know, I've lived in North Louisiana. I knew I didn't want to stay there. I don't know how they drink that coffee. Anyway, so yeah, now my husband is from Detroit. So you would think, well, maybe he might want to go to Detroit, but he

moved here. And just like a lot of guys. They just smell that sweet olive or magnolia. And they're here for jazz fest or, or something. And they go, Wow, this, this is great. And you don't have snow and you don't have to shovel snow all winter. It's like, yeah, I don't I might not like the humidity. But I guarantee you I don't like shoveling snow. So yeah, I think that it's family to family keeps me here. Raised you love born and raised. I couldn't, I couldn't do it. I mean, I like to visit places we go to the mountains quite often in the Great Smoky Mountains. And, and I liked that a lot. And I like to paint there. But I wouldn't, I wouldn't want to live there that so it's a great place to visit. But I don't know, you know, the history here. I mean, there's some saint family and family history. I mean, I can go to those cemeteries and I show you some really old tombstones right from, I think, oh, gosh, I can't even remember the oldest one, but 1718 I can't remember that. I'd have to go get that whole thing out again. But yeah, the fact that those the French came here. So somebody in my background came with Iberville and Bienville. And then some came through Canada, but they weren't the Cajuns. They came through Canada and then settled here. So but there's I have most information of the French and my ma mere would tell me about oh, the family, you know, so I was I just feel like it's this is where I belong. I just belong here. South Louisiana. It Yeah, there is a difference. There is a difference. I think it's the the water, the oak trees. I mean, everybody who I know, that comes down here, and they say, I've never seen such magnificent and I'm sure there's some in other places, but the magnificent oaks. They're just amazing. And the history I think that actually, I mean that brings people here, nobody I know will go through the quarter and not say we could be in Europe. I mean, and so why is that it's because of all of our ancestors coming here and making it look like home. So we just have something that there's no other place like it, you know, there really isn't, let's face it, there is no other way. I didn't use palette knife. For the longest time, I just didn't pick it up. And then I said, I'm just not going fast enough. I need to get more paint on my canvas quicker. And I pick up a palette knife and all of a sudden that was good enough, I didn't need to take a brush and go over it. Or I could start out and do the underpainting in a very thin you know watered down paint. And then I would come back with my palette knife or a loaded brush, but sometimes the palette not so you'll you can actually I'm sure tell the ones where I use the palette knife or just got thicker with the pace. I love this painting. I'm surprised nobody's bought it. But

that one was done in July in a summer in July. And I went on one side of the levee it was so hot. I was just dripping. But I wanted to do so I said by the water's got to be cooler. So I'll go over the levee and start to set up this just as hot. And then I stood under the oak tree at the top of the levee. Now I still had my bandana for silhouette. I mean even had a little fan. But I was comfortable and I actually could paint that. And I don't think it just lended itself. It's kind of a the building is it is the building is you know the architecture of it is more sleek and smooth. It's there's nothing rough about it. Yeah, there's, it's amazing what you can do. And you learn that while you're painting that, okay, I'm painting this and painting it quick. And I've got to get this shape or this line in and you just do it. And if it's quick enough, you don't have to go back. You don't have Have to beef it up, you don't have to take it, it's more like getting the values in, you get the values in, and just very lightly put in some little strokes, and they resemble what you what you're looking at. So that was, you know, I had to take my backpack and my husband's in some seminar and I'm gonna go, I'm gonna go take my backpack and set up because I'm not going to sit in a hotel room. And so yeah, and the ones from that you see that are from the you can tell are looking out of a window from high up. There might not be too many in here, but a few when he would say, I'm only going to be a few minutes, and I had been painting all day in city park, and I was going to pick him up. After the first time when he was two hours. I said, I'm going to bring my paintings up. And so I would stand at the windows almost outside, there was no ledge on the 36th floor of one shell square. And I would paint the bridge. I could see the river and the bridge, or I could look another way and and see like the Jesuit church and there's the Westin Hotel if it's still called that. So there are some of those, because I just, I couldn't just be somewhere. I mean, yeah, like to read the love to read. But I had been painting all day I was in my paint clothes. And I had my paints. It was a natural. It's a natural. You know, when you're going to do you're going to paint. That's me. I can't tell you when the first time I sold a painting was it had to be at a show. So St Tammany Art Association would have shows and when I joined them, oh no, actually, it wasn't the first time I sold there were watercolor paintings. I had done some abstract watercolors. And since I was teaching at Delgado, there was a coffee shop across the street. And I was friends with people that owned it. And they said, Well, why don't you have a show here? And I saw quite a few small watercolor abstracts I can show you

one of those. I'm sure I have one or two of those somewhere? Oh, absolutely. Oh, no, no, no, that's not something that I would add that I don't like or wouldn't do. I'm gonna show you one outside, that's kind of half and half is sort of like based on the art, the scene that I'm looking at. But also, it's abstracted. I think actually, impressionism has to abstract a little bit. You can't I mean, that's why I'm saying I'm not doing photo realism. Well, it's representational, I want you just see the thing that I'm painting, or feel the thing that I'm painting. So if it's too abstract, is just a bunch of colors on canvas. And you know, now, not, not at all. But I look at some of my work. And I easily I can look at it and go, Hmm, I could easily make that an abstract, I could take that painting, put it on an easel and abstract everything I've painted. And it would be would work because the colors are good. The composition is great. So yeah, I think that abstraction comes...

Tristin Gaspard(28:24): After you have already created. You create a painting and then you...

Peg Usner (28:30): No, I'm just saying that I think I could do it. I think you can see one down here looks pretty abstract. It's um, but it looked abstract when I was looking at it. So it was that's what it looked like you though, sometimes all those reflections, there's so many colors. You can't hear the bottom half of that painting would make you say, that abstract. And if you do you take a little piece of a painting, and you go, I can't I don't know what that is unless I'm seeing the whole thing. Yeah, well, you wouldn't want to know that when but I'm just saying. Yeah, but you could take a little piece of any of these paintings and look at them. And say, if I just was looking at that, I wouldn't know what the heck I was looking at. But that could be a painting. Because it's a good composition. The colors are good. There's some energy there. Yeah, that's a good painting. So yeah, you I think you can do that. Again, I'm not as far as if it was really trying for extreme realism, then you wouldn't, you wouldn't see that you would say, oh, yeah, that's part of that bridge or part of that tree or part of that ground cover or part of that water? Because it would be so we know it and see those. See those little ones on the wall. I have bigger ones. Those are ones I did last that were smaller. But I was experimenting with color combinations and the movement of the paint on the canvas. And I really wish I could tell you that there was this thing, but I just, it just came to me. If I ever think of it, I'll call you. But I really don't

know what made me do that, except that I thought it was interesting. And again, maybe it was because I started with something small and wanted to expand the whole painting. So even though it wasn't a view, it was the painting that needed something else, or I felt like it. Yeah, I'll show you some. How do you attach the canvases secret secret? No, it's not really trade secret. You don't ever pull those apart and say, Oh, I got two paintings. Because they are attached with nails, screws, and things like that. Oh, no, no, no way. And if it does, you've just ruined something beautiful.