

Poetry on Panel

Rich textures, colors and symbols in Nicholas Wilton's paintings have universal appeal

By Emily Van Cleve

The organic forms that Nicholas Wilton places in his oil on panel paintings seem to float in a timeless space. They're familiar to the viewer, but that familiarity is not always recognized on a conscious level. Some shapes are bird-like; others refer to flowers. We know we've seen these forms, but where?

"I'm interested in universal images," Wilton explains. "When I paint a bird, for example, I'm not trying to paint a specific type of bird. I'm painting from my experience of the natural world. My paintings in a sense are giving that world a voice."

Wilton's fascination with creating forms that have universal appeal began many years ago when he first traveled throughout Asia and India. He spent hours looking at the art and architecture of these cultures and noticing how some images reach deep into the human psyche regardless of a person's background and country of origin. He studied the complex and simple shapes, colors and composition in these historic pieces of art that invigorated his soul and touched his heart.

Wilton generates a personal vocabulary of forms, patterns and designs on panel that excite collectors around the world. Marks and scratches in the surface of the wood are purposeful, while undulations in texture create a visual illusion of depth. These modern works with a weathered and timeless appearance seem to live in the past, present and future. "The many layers and worn surfaces in my paintings reveal a history and give evidence of the passage of time in their creation."

Although the finished painting is extremely important to Wilton, the process of creating it is of equal importance. Looking closely at some of the works, it's possible to see hints of layers of paint hidden deep beneath the surface. Each application of paint represents a conversation between Wilton and his work. "When I paint, I try to balance intelligent decision making with spontaneity. The risk of experimentation and of not always having a clear sense of where I'm going keeps me engaged."

Wilton's approach to painting is so inspiring to other painters that he and his wife, artist Jennie Oppenheimer, are invited to present their Artplane workshops throughout the United States and Europe. Their insightful and illuminating sessions playfully explore the creativity of the image-making process through practical principles of painting coupled with a fresh approach to working more freely and intuitively. "We begin by talking about the basic principles of art making; design, composition and color. We then delve into the more abstract ideas of risk, authenticity and soul," Wilton says.

Born in Marin County, California in 1961, Wilton grew up in a creative environment with a father who was an artist. During high school he took stained glass workshops, where he was instructed to find organic forms in broken pieces of stained glass, and started his own stained glass company. When he looks back to those early experiences, he realizes that his passion for working with his hands and discovering the myriad of organic forms around him is still alive and well in his current work.

After attending the College of Creative Studies at the University of Santa Barbara, Wilton enrolled in a four-year course of study at the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles. This intense program provided a solid foundation in painting and drawing, although the emphasis was on creating realistic landscapes and still life works. While he appreciates his formal education, life experiences have fueled the creation of the work for which he is known.

The freshness and exuberance of Wilton's artwork have been noticed and appreciated by the literary community. His paintings have appeared on the covers of numerous books including the national best seller "The Four Agreements" by Don Miguel Ruiz.

Wilton's paintings are included in many private and corporate collections including Birkenstock, Berringer Wine, Celebrity Cruise Line and the Shinsei Bank in Japan. He has received many awards from groups and organizations such as the Marin Arts Council and the American Institute of Graphic Arts. In 2002 his work was selected for the cover of the international design annual Communication Arts. Two years later the publication wrote about his life and work in a feature article.

"My paintings are like visual poems inviting the viewers' own inquiry and interpretation," Wilton says. "My experiences in the natural world inspire me to make these paintings. When others find resonance with my work it is deeply satisfying."