

LONDON GRIP
 online exhibition
 a new direction
JAMES N. BUTCHER
 2011
 from watercolour to oil painting



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Just a few years ago, James N. Butcher, Professor Emeritus at the University of Minnesota, had already reached world-famous professional heights in his long career in several fields of academic psychology (see text box, right). Then, when most people would be settling into retirement, he found himself adding a completely new string to his bow. He embarked on what he calls "a late-life adventure" and started painting in watercolour.

Very quickly an astonishing talent revealed itself. Needless to say, Professor Butcher is as surprised as anyone but also professionally curious about the phenomenon of a person's manifestation late in life of a previously unrevealed creative gift.

Recently James N. Butcher began painting in oils. His first works in this medium are shown to the right of this column.

Below he writes about the process of taking up oil painting after first discovering his affection for painting in watercolour.

For an exhibition of his watercolour work,



Water Lilies
 16x20", oil on canvas, 2011



View of Dubrovnik
 16x20", oil on canvas, 2011

James N. Butcher was born in 1933. When he was a boy, his father, a coal-miner, was killed in a mining accident and two years later his mother died of a heart attack. Unassisted, the five young children brought themselves up determined not to be separated or sent to an orphanage. Butcher went to work at the age of 11 to help support his siblings. He joined the army at 18, seeing action in Korea. Slowly, taking odd jobs, he found ways to fund an education, beginning at an all-black university where he was the only white student, and later discovering that academia suited him. In 1964 he joined the clinical psychology department at the University of Minnesota, contributing to its magnification on the academic map when he led research radically to improve the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. In the world of psychology the MMPI is now a ubiquitous assessment tool reliably used to describe mental health symptoms and personality and to direct treatment across a wide range of settings. Butcher was instrumental in its 20 year long revision and in 1989 MMPI-2 appeared followed in 1991 by the adolescent version of the test, the MMPI-A. Butcher's training workshops took him around the world, augmenting his further research into cross-cultural personality assessment. He also devised the Butcher Treatment Planning Inventory (BTPI), a self-reporting tool to detect problems in patients in psychological therapy. Interested in aviation since childhood, and a qualified pilot, he also specialises in aviation psychology, developing programmes for airline disaster

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A Fall View of Minnehaha Creek
18x24", oil on canvas, 2011



Arboretum Walk in the Fall
18x24", oil on canvas, 2010

A New Direction

by

James N. Butcher

When I took up painting as I approached retirement from my career as a university professor, I became enthralled with the medium of watercolor. Watercolor materials travel well and allow one to paint complex scenery in a spur of the moment context (like the kitchen table or front porch) without being trapped in a studio with a lot of equipment. This flexibility of the watercolor medium suited my travel style and yet allowed me to mix up interesting combinations of color without a lot of hassles.

Many people with whom I have discussed painting have asked me, "Have you tried oil painting?" I think they ask this because this medium is so prominent among professional artists that watercolors might be considered a bit amateurish. So why not change? I think I hesitated because I have enjoyed watercolors so much that I was reluctant to switch over. Or could it be that "changes in life become more difficult" as one grows older? In other areas of life, I have usually found that taking on new challenges and adapting to new circumstances are an important pathway in life. Churchill once pointed out, "...change is an essential element in diversions of all kinds..." (1932, p. 9).

I finally concluded that my favorite painting theme – landscapes – would transfer well and not let me down in a new medium. After all, Cennini, the early Renaissance painter and teacher from Florence, pointed out in his craftsman's handbook, "Mind you, the most perfect steersman that you can have, and the best helm, lie in the triumphal gateway of copying from nature. And this outdoes all other models; and always rely on this with a stout heart, especially as you begin to gain some judgment in draftsmanship. Do not fail, as you go on, to draw something every day, for no matter how little it is it will be well worthwhile, and will do you a world of good" (trans. 1933, p. 15).

After considerable encouragement from friends and family I chose to experiment a bit with oil painting.

response management and for airline pilot selection. Butcher has also pioneered research into computer modeling and computerised assessment of psychological processes. He has written or edited 50 books and some 185 articles and continues to publish.

How has it worked out? I have found so far that oil painting is both different and similar - many of the things I have learned about watercolor painting carried over to oils. Oil painting is generally a more friendly medium than watercolors although it takes some effort to get used to oil brushes which are so different from watercolor brushes and also one needs to recognize the importance of under-painting before the painting process can begin.

Oils "run wet" for a considerable time and this enables newly applied colors to blend well. In many ways painting with oils is much easier (and predictable) than watercolors. The oil-based medium allows changing and tweaking the color and for correcting those fear-inducing accidents that sometime happen in painting. There are fewer unpleasant surprises in oil painting. With watercolors I found that it is always interesting and sometimes very surprising when mixing different watercolor paints on paper and that the final painting is not always easy to predict. (But, sometimes the paint combination turns out to be unplanned but often pleasantly attractive.)

In oils, colors and shades can be developed to vividly portray the way the world is seen. Sunsets and colors of diverse skies can be easily mixed and tweaked without the element of "greenness" that can sneak into the sky-coloring in watercolors. (The color green can emerge in a watercolor of a sky as a result of mixing blue and yellow in order to get a fabulous sunset.) Another valuable difference between oil painting and watercolors is that mistakes or newly conceived alterations are more easily fixed or implemented in oils - a valuable addition for many of us.

There are also some disadvantages to oil painting that are not particularly problematic in water coloring. Oil paint seems to wind up in places it was not intended and has a tenacious desire for permanence. My clothes and shoes look neater when I do watercolor than they do with oils - and I have experienced a number of these messy paint blotches (and tossed clothing items) following oil painting sessions. Splotches of red paint on one's head can also appear strange and troublesome to others.

Although I am enjoying my new direction in oil painting, I have not forsaken watercolors and still do them when time permits. For me, as a non-professional artist, the enjoyment of the process is a key variable in painting. I am happy to say that oil painting has added a new dimension to my experience and one that I am happy to share with others.

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Coal mining tippie, Bergoo, West Virginia,
Joan Hissom,
oil on canvas

Landscape,
Rev. Jerry Butcher,
oil on canvas.



The article below is from the London Grip archive 2007 -
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NEW PATHS

by

James N. Butcher

Professor Emeritus of Psychology
University of Minnesota

Many people possess unrecognized or dormant abilities that are never expressed in our fast moving and task-oriented society. Given a chance, or an accident of fate, new areas of functioning can emerge. With a receptive and encouraging environment, a different and unexpected direction in life can unfold.

This situation occurred with me around the year 2000. After a 35 year career as an academic clinical psychologist, I found myself with a strange object in my hand moving paints along a blank paper - with surprising results.

There had been few hints of artistic ability or particular interests in the creative arts in my life prior to this time. I recall only one time, when I was in the third grade, my teacher appeared to like my drawing effort and encouraged me to draw more. I did not follow through on this plan. My own artistic expression for most of my life was limited to mindless doodling in long faculty meetings.

In the past, some members of my family showed artistic ability. One of my sisters and my brother have had stints at painting and both were excellent. My sister, Joan Hissom, painted animal figures onto driftwood and old saws, and for a time her work was sold in a little tourist shop in West Virginia. She gave me this picture of a coal-mining tippie from Bergoo, West Virginia, the small town in which I was born (see left). My

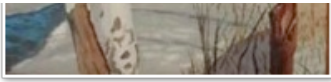


Earliest watercolours:
Tulips, James N. Butcher, 2000

and

Still Life, James N. Butcher, 2000.





brother, Rev. Jerry Butcher, a Methodist minister, went through a period of oil painting that resulted in a number of outstanding pictures (see his landscape below left).

There has been some research to suggest that genetics plays a role in creativity (Reuter, Roth, Holve, & Henning, 2004) although research in this area is only beginning to make connections and negative findings are also reported (Rothenberg & Wyshak, 2004).

In 2000, during a sabbatical leave in London, my wife, Carolyn Williams, was concerned that I'd get bored after I'd finished the work I'd brought with me. She persuaded me to take a watercolour class at the Hampstead School of Art. This was certainly a new direction for me. I concluded, "What do I have to lose? No one knows me here. If I make a fool out of myself, what difference does it really make?" On the right are examples of those first paintings of 2000, a vase of tulips and a still-life (see right).

How does one go from a blank space to a complex web of colour and form on a canvas? Finding captivating subject matter is essential. However, something more is needed - a willingness to experiment with life, go out on a limb, to do things differently.

Receiving encouragement is important and three people have played an important role in this. My wife has been a major force in encouraging my painting. In addition, she is an excellent photographer who took the pictures on which some of my paintings are based. Second, one of my instructors at Hampstead, John Crossland, has been particularly helpful. I have had another mentor, Linda Bennion of Queensgate Studios, who has been a very strong supporter.

My ideal topics have been flowers, because of the color, and landscapes, because of their peacefulness: a nice commodity in these trying times. I paint for enjoyment when I can . . . and enjoy the surprises. There are a number of things I can see that for me, my watercolour painting is *not*:

It is not a question of lifestyle. This new form of expression does not represent a new mode of living.

It is not a replacement for a life-active career direction that has been terminated. Being a college professor has some advantages - a flexible life-style. Some retire early in life; others never do. But, the well-kept secret is that no one ever knows whether a professor is retired or not! I am still involved in psychology - writing, consulting, and lecturing but now I take a paint set along with my Powerpoint files!

For some people painting can be a distraction from unpleasant life circumstances. Winston Churchill, a notable artist among his many talents, wrote in his little book about painting as a pastime, "Painting is complete as a distraction. I know of nothing which, without exhausting the body, more entirely absorbs the mind. Whatever the worries of the hour or the threats of the future, once the picture has begun to flow along, there is no room for them in the mental screen. They pass out into shadow and darkness." (pp.44-45.)

For some people, painting can serve as a buffer against emotional pain. It does not work for me that way. For me, watercolour painting is neither a distraction, nor an escape, nor a pain-killer; but it is somewhat of a cage against the intrusions of the real world. When I am involved in a painting, time stops - until the process itself requires a break, for example, for the paint to dry. I use that time to work on an article! I have always been a sort of multi-tasker.

For some successful people painting can be an expression of a lifelong interest and fulfillment, a secondary but extremely rewarding additional career. This is not so for me.

What has my new found artistic expression meant to me? It has been an interesting glimpse of an unexplored avenue of my early life. I look back at a street untravelling - not with a sense of regret but with a sense of amazement that it could happen now at all. I only wish I had discovered this path sooner in my life. Who knows what would have happened if I had?

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