

THE ARTFUL EYE



The Essence of Nature

The Paintings of Susan Swartz

• • • BY CAROLL MCKANNA SHREEVE • • •

With studios in Princeton, N.J., and Deer Valley, nature painter Susan Swartz takes more than delight in her natural surroundings. The mountains of Utah and southern France and the gardens of San Francisco and Princeton lend their unique inspirations to Ms. Swartz' paintings. But there is more.

Each of her paintings bears GTG, an acronym for Glory to God. In a world gone coarse, such a tribute right on the canvas may seem curious or commendable to some, old-fashioned or fanatical to others. Ms. Swartz' work is not bizarre, nor hokey in theme or subject matter; it is her tribute to nature and to a higher power. The utter simplicity of her intentions is disarming.

Above Deer Valley, her studio is flooded with natural northern light, offers breathtaking views and is a short hike to wildlife in the raw. Aspens quake at the driveway entrance and rugged boulders offer their solid forms all about the grounds; she doesn't have to go far for nature's input. With her mind set on "absorb" and her camera in hand, collecting images for her paintings is a continual passion. World travels enrich the blend of nature's beautiful forms, colors and textures found close to both her homes.

Trained in oil painting and portraiture at Edinburgh University in Erie, Pa., Ms. Swartz taught art for kindergarten through 12th grade in Princeton, where she was head of the high school art department for 12 years. Her extreme sensitivity to turpentine and oil fumes forced her to find other media that offered similar satisfactions. Working in watercolor ("too quick a dry") and acrylics over a 15-year period, she has perfected overlay techniques with thin acrylic glazes to create the misty moods typical of her style. Sometimes an individual painting flows, but most often she has two or three paintings going at a time. Each takes 40 or

50 hours, while the larger canvases may take a month to complete. Ms. Swartz paints eight to 12 hours a day, usually to classical music or hymns, and "simply loves it."

She wants her work to be peaceful, restful and strong; the goal is to elicit the feeling of taking a spiritual nature walk. "My work is usually purchased and displayed by people who are tuned into nature, especially if they have to work in an urban office environment. So many people are trapped away from nature. Utahns are ... fortunate to be surrounded by the beauty of these mountains." With works of various sizes and shapes to choose from, a Susan Swartz painting can be purchased as a limited edition print for \$350 to \$850 or as an original canvas for \$1,000 to \$18,000. A series of small prints is also in the works, with a projected price of \$60 to \$200.

Recently, her *Aspens and*

Wildflowers graced the cover of the program for the Utah Symphony's gala dinner and season opener. Another of her paintings will be featured later in the season. Prints and cards of her artwork are available to benefit the symphony.

"I go through stages," says Ms. Swartz. "I've been through my wildlife animals — small birds, mallards, Canadian geese, chipmunks and fish periods. Now I'm in my aspen period." Exclusively represented in Utah by the Richard Thomas Gallery in Park City, paintings starring aspens are her signature works. A favorite of mine is *Winter Enchantment*, in which a curiously achieved warm breeze moves gently through an aspen wood. The bare trees reaching heavenward from the snow-blanketed forest floor give a Gothic-church effect, softened by splatters of blown snowflakes and wisps of

mysterious, beautiful mist, creat-

ing a soothing, meditative mood. "When a picture of mine means something to the person viewing it, it's an extra blessing to me," she says.

I found myself drawn to a horizontal painting of life-size orange and green pumpkins tumbled among curling leaves on the ground. The pumpkin-toned frame and unusual "extra box" in the mat added a spunky relief dimension to the bountiful theme. The colors were powerful, cheerful, and accented with stronger value patterns than her forest and meadow landscapes. The textural dry-brush accents create excitement against her simple forms and the overlay glazes of rich, iridescent greens and purples.

Her aspen paintings splashed with wildflowers are found in corporate, hospital, church and private collections, which the Swartz home reflects. "Each room was created as a painting," she says; their architect was a supportive partner in the process. The natural stone walls, set at arresting angles and levels and pierced with floor-to-ceiling windows, make viewing art and nature as exciting from the exterior as from inside the home. A ski lift stretching above a patio sweeps your eye to the slopes and the valley below. Nature activities, art and home lifestyle are inextricably integrated for the Swartz family. Having wilderness nearby and "performance art available in Park City and Salt Lake City makes living in Utah a blessing," she says.

Ms. Swartz, her husband and their three children enjoy their too-brief Utah ski visits together. This is the first time that Ms. Swartz has been able to devote herself to painting every day now that the children are grown and out of the house. The opportunity has brought her a growing international reputation. "I feel like God's honoring me for putting my children first," she says. "I get up every morning eager to return to my studio and take nature which He created and put into my paintings something of my love for it."



MORNING LIGHT, BY SUSAN SWARTZ.