

Working with and developing all the different surface qualities was Larson's real focus while painting *Leeks* (oil, 20x36). "I used glazing and scumbling in particular areas," he says, "and contrasted those areas with small, pure notes of broken color in other spots to achieve as much variety in surface character and hue as I could."

Jeffrey T. Larson's outdoor figures and still lifes record the progress of the sun as he paints only in natural light.

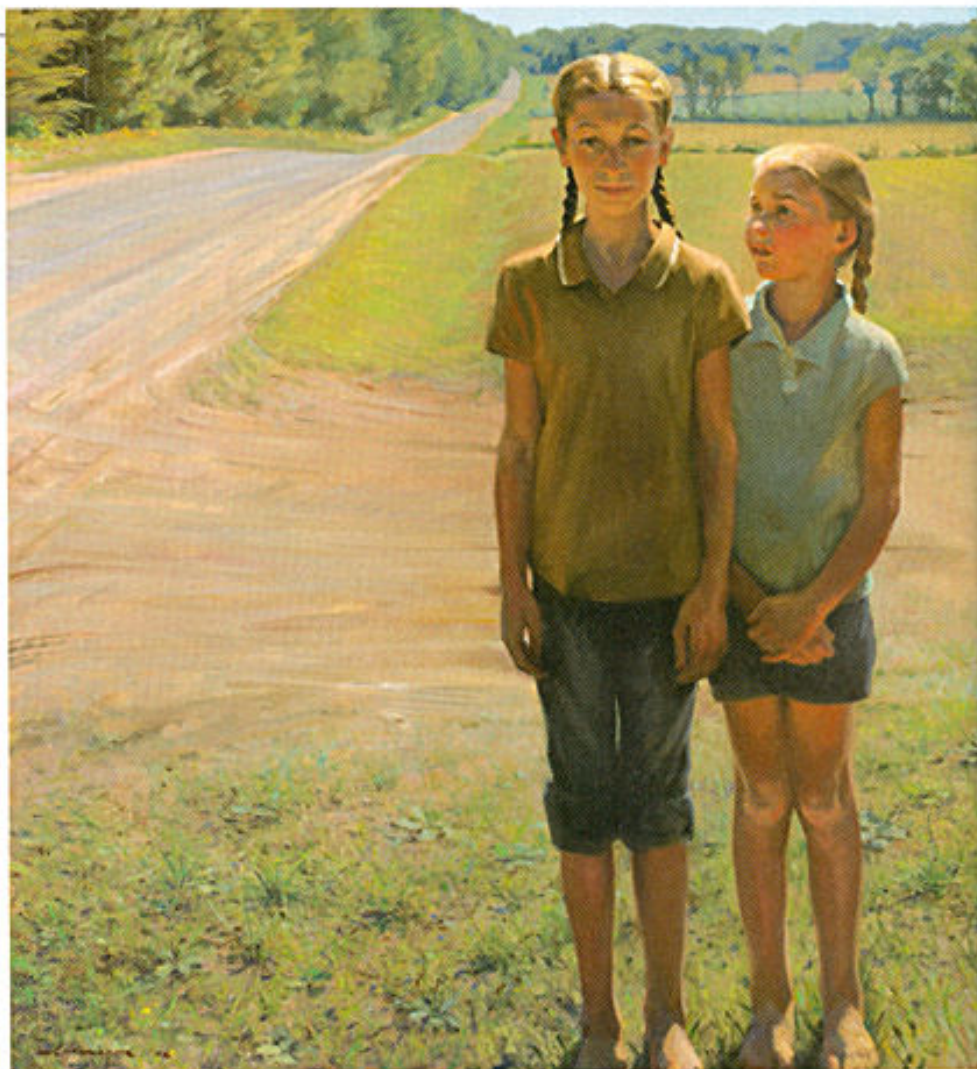


In a Good Light

■ By Louise B. Hafesh



Working on several paintings at set intervals each day allows Larson to capture his subjects in the same light—and also to keep his work fresh. The challenge for *A Moment in Time* (oil, 40x42) was primarily in setting up and securing against the wind a large canvas—and in scheduling and entertaining the two young models who posed throughout the entire summer.



Challenged to capture “slices of life” as he terms his body of work, Larson points out, “It’s the casual moments that I’m after. I believe that all the profound answers are out there for us to discover, and that beauty starts with truth.”

To render what he sees faithfully, Larson paints only from life using natural light and adheres to a daily schedule that literally follows the sun. Winter months find him in his studio/home in a converted 7,500-square-foot schoolhouse in northern Wisconsin, painting meticulously rendered still lifes under cool north light. As the weather warms, his days are spent on location creating painterly, unpretentious vignettes of neighbors and family in sunny outdoor settings, as well as light-flooded landscapes.

“Because the light changes dramatically, I work on various paintings at set intervals throughout the day,” he says. “Rotating this way allows me to move from one setting to the next under fairly consistent conditions and helps me to keep my work vibrant.”

Case in point: *A Moment in Time* (above), the sweet portrayal of two neighborhood children, took Larson about three months to complete, alternating it with five other time slots. Asked how he was able to paint two youngsters day after day and still manage to keep it real, Larson recalls: “After setting up the scene with the girls, thereafter one or both continued the pose at the appointed time each session. Those days when neither model was available, I would address the background landscape and, painting *alla prima*, kept things energized by developing the piece as I went.”

Classically trained in the methods and materials of the old masters, Larson began his formal studies at the prestigious Atelier Lack in Minneapolis, an apprentice environment that traces its lineage back through the Boston School of painters. Originally turned down by the school’s founder, Richard F. Lack, the determined 17-year-old returned every week with fresh additions to his portfolio until Lack relented.

“I later found out that I had actually been accepted

"What intrigued me," Larson says, "about the setup for *Fish & Crackers* (below; oil, 15x20) was the juxtaposition of the transparent glass jar containing the highly reflective fish and the semiopaque wrapper containing the dull crackers."



For links to helpful descriptions of the bistre, Venetian, direct and Impressionist techniques, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/classical-techniques.



that first day," remembers Larson. "Mr. Lack was testing me to see if I would fight to get in." Fight he did and, once accepted, advanced steadily through four years of intensive schooling that stressed drawing skills utilizing plaster-cast busts and traditional French academic techniques.

"At its core, Atelier Lack stressed 'learning the language,' so as to understand what's important and give students the varied skills to 'say it well,'" Larson explains. "I worked hard to develop techniques of different traditions, including bistre (transparent brown washes); Venetian (monochrome underpainting or grisaille); direct (block-in using full palette); and Impressionist (limited palette of six colors: two blue,

two yellow, two red, plus black and white)." (To learn more about these different methods, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/classical-techniques.)

Explaining his eclectic skill set further, he adds: "Often today, as I pick and choose what I believe will work best to capture whatever I'm going after, a painting will have a blend of several styles. I might start

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To see more of Larson's work, go to
[www.artistsnetwork.com/article/
jeffrey-t-larson](http://www.artistsnetwork.com/article/jeffrey-t-larson).



"The lupine takes over in the spring and fills the yard with purple," says Larson. "The challenge in *Amongst Lupine* (above; oil, 32x32) was counterpoising the intense blue shadows in the model's clothes with the strong purple notes of the flowers." He added the cool greens of the chair and table to offset the bright spring greens of the lupine leaves.

"The setting for *August Field* (at right; oil, 20x24)," Larson says, "was a humid day, and the tonality of the atmosphere was beautiful. On a white canvas, I painted the sky first—as light and pure as the paint allowed—and keyed the remaining values and intensities off that." He paid special attention to the way the trees in the distance were stripped of all colors except blue.





Larson's tools of the trade

- **Surface:** The artist uses double-primed #12 or #15 **Claessens**. For 12x16 pieces and smaller, he prefers aluminum panels that are designed for outdoor sign painting and are thus tough, durable and lightweight. To prepare the shiny, slick surface of the panels, Larson first roughens them with sandpaper and then recoats them with gesso. "I was trained on these panels and still believe they're the best," he says.
- **Brushes:** Favorites include various brands of flats and rounds (Nos. 5–25); sables and flats (Nos. 2–16).
- **Palette:** Depending on the subject, Larson chooses from a variety of colors: **Maimeri Puro**—ivory black, raw umber, cobalt blue deep, cadmium lemon, cadmium yellow light, yellow ochre, raw sienna, deep cadmium green light; **Winsor & Newton**—cadmium yellow deep, phthalo turquoise, cadmium red deep, permanent rose, permanent alizarin crimson, viridian, sap green, Vandyke brown; **Gamblin**—dioxazine purple, Indian red; **Blockx**—French ultramarine; **Sennelier**—Naples yellow

Striving to see beyond the surface colors for *Three Rutabagas* (oil, 12x20), Larson took a dull vegetable and worked in subtle intensities to bring it to life. "That was one of the reasons I placed it on cardboard," he says, "which is duller still. On the rutabagas I used transparent glazes of pure color with broken color in key spots. I first painted the cardboard darker and then scumbled it with opaque glazes, which inherently lighten and dull the surface."



alla prima and, within that, underpaint a particular passage, do a series of glazes, then finish with a few notes of broken color floating in the glaze.”

Larson's still lifes are a clear testament to his academic training. Masterfully executed and grounded in the methods of the old masters, his still lifes are, nonetheless, simple and straightforward and current in his choice of subject matter and composition; yet, they succeed in elevating the design and function of mundane items to that of captivating *objets d'art*.

“On major pieces such as *Leeks* (pages 28 and 29), I usually do composition, color and value studies,” says Larson, “then draw on canvas with charcoal before laying in paint directly with a full palette. I next work the elements of value, color and intensity, placing as much importance on the negative spaces as on the objects themselves.”

Ever exploring new genres and techniques, in 1987 Larson embarked on an 18-hour car trip to St. Louis to see an exhibition of Spanish painter Joaquin Sorolla's work. It was a profound, career-altering experience. “Up to that point, as one of the students in an atelier environment that stressed craftsmanship and directed us how we should paint, I had little experience with outdoor figure painting, nor had I been encouraged to use expressive brushstrokes,” offers Larson. Mesmerized by the show, he stood a long while in front of one huge painting, *Sewing the Sail* (view at www.joaquin-sorolla-y-bastida.org), until a woman gently tapped him on the shoulder and suggested that he close his mouth.



Recalling the incident, he laughs sheepishly and explains: “It was such a revelation to see this master's crisp, clear drawing and sun-drenched compositions. His values were so perfect, and I was taken by how he let honesty trump his craft by allowing patches of bare canvas to show through.” As if a light bulb had been switched on, Larson came away from the show with a new direction for his work and a spurred interest in painting figures out of doors.

Of his plein air figure paintings, his intriguing laundry series (see two of these paintings above) demonstrates an inherent understanding of reflected and refracted light and atmosphere. In contrast to his process for painting his more tightly-rendered, in-studio still lifes, while working *en plein air*, the artist takes a much looser approach as he captures the exquisite luminescent qualities of clotheslines hung with sun-dappled sheets painted in a delicious, creamy pastel palette.

Pointing out that keeping his work honest and leaving it alone when it's truthful—whether it's painted well or not—is always a concern, Larson is mindful not to let himself fall back on what has worked in the past or what he's already done. “If I do continue to create paintings with a similar theme—say, the Laundry Series—it's only because I haven't finished exploring aspects that fascinate or challenge me. There are subjects that I've worked until I felt I couldn't do it any better, and now I have no interest in painting similar objects, despite people's requests. So it's the search for bigger challenges and then striking out in new directions that are important.”

Larson painted *Yellow and Blue* (at left; oil, 40x56) over the course of a month, whenever the morning light was consistent and clear. "My goal," he explains, "was to capture the intense interplay between the backlit yellow sheet and its blue shadows." For *Over the Line* (at far left; oil, 32x48), he challenged himself with insistent patterns and backlit figures—and spent two years working from life to get the piece right.



View a step-by-step demonstration by this artist at www.artistsnetwork.com/article/larson-demo.



Meet Jeffrey T. Larson

The first-place still life winner in our 2008 annual competition with his painting *Electrolux* (see www.artistsnetwork.com/article/2008-StillLifeFloral). Larson is a well-respected instructor who counsels budding artists to train their eyes to see both honestly and correctly: "Since paint is so limited compared to light and nature, learn to push it to its boundaries so that you can better re-create what you see." Larson's work is represented by Tree's Place Gallery in Orleans, Massachusetts, and every two years the artist hosts his own show in the Twin Cities. To learn about this year's show, November 6–22, and to see more of his work, visit his website, www.jeffreytlarson.com.



"Developing form within a very limited value and color range," explains Larson, "pushes your ability to capture subtle nuances. I had to work with warms and cools more than lights and darks in *Rolled Cloth*" (above; oil, 15x20).