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## Denise LaRue Mahlke: Art as a Calling

by M. Stephen Doherty

**Denise LaRue Mahlke** believes that being an artist is a calling that involves preserving, celebrating, and sharing in God's creation. That's one of the reasons she challenges herself to strive for excellence as a pastel painter and a teacher.

I sincerely believe that being an artist is my God-given job and that I need to honor and glorify God in every painting I create and every class I teach," says Texas artist Denise LaRue Mahlke. It's clear from talking to the artist and viewing her paintings that her mission to serve God is a source of motivation and direction, and that the spiritual message implied in her paintings is subtle but clear. Titles such as *Morning Promise* and *Morning Peace* suggest a state of mind rather than a scriptural reference; and the absence of asphalt roads, buildings, automobiles, or people allows Mahlke to focus completely on the wonder of nature.

Mahlke's sense of having a calling challenges her to sharpen her skills, understanding, and dedication. "I have a responsibility to put forth my best efforts, and I remind myself there is always more to learn," she says. "I've been blessed to study with some outstanding artists and to have the opportunity to share what I've learned with others."

Mahlke showed a very early interest in drawing, which her parents supported. By the age of 10, she was attending painting classes at a local community center. In high school, she gravitated back to drawing and largely monochromatic images. Mahlke's ultimate move to pastel makes sense—it mixed her love of color with her familiarity with drawing. "I was more comfortable with a pencil in hand than a brush, so when I discovered pastels, it felt very natural to me, like an extension of what I already loved to do," she says. "Looking back, I think the years of working in black and white helped me when I finally did return to color. But even after I felt secure enough to introduce color, I was more comfortable working in my home with pastels rather than oils. It was later that I began working outdoors with both pastels and oil paints."

Like many people whose time is limited because of family and professional obligations, Mahlke relied on the occasional three- or five-day workshop to expand the knowledge she gained from reading books and magazines. "I was fortunate that the Fredericksburg Artists' School was within a reasonable driving distance from my home in Georgetown, Texas," she explains. "I was able to study with some outstanding nationally known artists, such as Bob Rohm, Lorenzo Chavez, and Matt Smith. Later I won a scholarship



**Morning Peace**

2006, pastel, 12 x 15. All artwork this article private collection unless otherwise indicated.



**Morning Promise**

2007, pastel, 12 x 18.

to study at the Scottsdale Artists' School, where I participated in workshops with Ned Mueller and T. Allen Lawson."

Mahlke made a decision about 10 years ago to focus on landscape painting, especially in the region near her home and in the Hill Country west of Austin. "I love painting the landscape in a lot of different parts of the country—Colorado, Maine, New Mexico, and Utah—but my favorite place to paint is the area of Texas where I live," she explains. "I am drawn to the quiet side of the landscape and gravitate to more tonal or intimate scenes in all location, but I love the subtle, grayed tones found in the Texas landscape." Mahlke keeps two boxes of pastels, small sheets of sanded paper taped to Gatorboard, and her French easel ready so she can paint outside whenever possible. The smaller box is filled with hard pastels she uses for the initial block-in of shapes; and the larger box is packed with softer pastels manufactured by Unison, Winsor & Newton, Terry Ludwig, Schmincke, and Rembrandt.



**Morning Visitors**  
2007, pastel, 20 x 16.

"I usually do several quick compositional sketches in graphite or charcoal to figure out what I want to include in the scene, where to place the horizon line, and how I will arrange the values; and then I select the sketch that seems to offer the best plan," Mahlke says. "Along with these small thumbnail sketches, I include my thoughts on the scene—what the weather is like, how I'm feeling at the time, the overall effect of the light. These written notes help clarify my vision for the painting and play an important role later in the studio. Then I try to capture my first impression of the location—the center of interest and overall composition that best captures my feeling about being at a particular location—in a quick reference study on small surfaces ranging from 6" x 8" to 9" x 12". As I begin blocking in the major shapes with hard pastel, I try to maintain a sense of immediacy and freshness. I limit myself to no more than an hour and a half on-site, and I strive for correct values and pleasantly arranged shapes of color."

Back in her studio, Mahlke sets up her easel so she can easily see her thumbnail sketches, the color study, her handwritten notes, and digital reference photos displayed on her computer monitor. She takes some time to evaluate these resources and consider how she might change or rearrange elements in her studio painting. With more time to develop the images in this controlled environment, the artist can start with an underpainting by dissolving the first layers of pastel with mineral spirits, or by applying watercolor washes in complementary colors. When this underpainting is dry, Mahlke tackles the darks with hard pastel sticks, working her way toward medium values and finally lights in softer pastels. "I don't necessarily work from hard pastels to soft on every painting I do," she comments. "Sometimes, if the value and color is right but the stick happens to be a very soft pastel, I will apply it early on in a work, but I will use a very light touch so as not to fill the tooth of the paper too quickly." Mahlke says if the underpainting is done well, sometimes all she needs to do is develop the focal point or center of interest, with the underpainting showing through in the rest of the piece. Other paintings may get 10 to 12 layers of pastel. "I like to drag a bristle brush through areas of my work to indicate more texture, or use the side of my little finger to soften an edge or blend a portion of the sky," she adds.



**Moonrise**  
2006, pastel, 11¾ x 11¾.

The artist continues to develop an understanding of her color sense by studying art books and attending workshops. "I took a workshop with John Pototschnik in 2007, and he really helped me with selecting and mixing colors," Mahlke says. "He worked with several different palettes of colors and always achieved the kind of clarity and clean color I wanted in my own work. He encouraged students to make color charts and practice using a number of different color combinations to achieve specific visual effects. All of that was very helpful to me."

"I also took a 10-day workshop in Maine with T. Allen Lawson, and he helped me understand the usefulness of working in different value ranges—high key, low contrast, and the like," the artist continues. "Tim is so articulate, and he challenges students to consider new approaches to content, design, and color. I've remained in touch with him, and he is very generous in looking at my new paintings and offering suggestions."

The advice Mahlke received about compositional schemes persuaded her to consider different formats for her paintings other than the standard 9" x 12", 11" x 14", and 18" x 24". For example, her painting *Moonrise* uses a square format, and *Summer Storm* is one of several the artist painted in which the width is twice the height. "There's nothing wrong with working on standard-size pieces of paper or canvases, but sometimes it's worth considering whether a landscape might be more interesting as a vertical rather than a horizontal, or if it were painted within a square or an elongated format," the artist says.



**Storm Light**  
2006, pastel, 16 x 12.

Mahlke tries to spend as much time as possible painting directly from nature and believes this is where we learn to see the value, color, and subtle nuances of nature that are not always expressed in photos. "You can then apply what you've discovered by observing nature, and use the photos as more of a jumping off point in creating a work and not slavishly copy them," she says. "I really enjoy painting outdoors in the company of other artists, and I've joined a couple of plein air-painting groups and hooked up with friends who share my enthusiasm for outdoor painting," she explains. "I don't mind working by myself, but I like sharing the experience with other artists and getting their comments about my work. That's why I joined a group that meets once a month for fellowship, an exchange of information and ideas, and critiques of one another's latest work."

Although Mahlke has focused primarily on pastels, she has been studying oil painting and hopes to become equally skilled in handling that medium. "I'm attracted to the physical appearance of bold strokes of juicy oil color," she says, "and as my skills and confidence level increase, I will exhibit more of them." Her goal is to include a number of oil paintings along with her pastels in her upcoming two-person show at Whistle Pik Galleries, in Fredericksburg, Texas, this fall.



**Twilight**  
2007, pastel, 9 x 12.

### **About the Artist**

**Denise LaRue Mahlke** is a board member and former president of the Central Texas Pastel Society, and a member of Plein Air Austin and the Rocky Mountain Plein Air Painters. Her paintings have been exhibited in competitions sponsored by the Greenhouse Gallery's Salon International 2008, the Maynard Dixon Country Invitational Fine Art Show and Sale, *The Pastel Journal*, and Gilcrease the Museum of the Americas, in Tulsa. She is represented by Whistle Pik Galleries, in Fredericksburg, Texas, and Bingham Gallery in Mount Carmel, Utah. Mahlke teaches at the Fredericksburg Artists' School, in Fredericksburg, Texas, and at the Art Center of Williamson County, in Round Rock, Texas. For more information on the artist, visit her website at <http://www.myamericanartist.com/2008/06/denise-larue-ma.html#>.

*M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief and publisher of American Artist.*

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