

Bringing BEAUTY to LIGHT



WHILE SOME MIGHT LOOK AROUND AND SEE AN ORDINARY FIELD, TREE OR FENCE ROW, FRENCH ARTIST **SOPHIE AMAUGER** LOOKS AT HER LOCAL LANDSCAPE AND SEES NOTHING BUT POTENTIAL.

By Ani Kodjabasheva



ABOVE
**L'Herbe bleue/Blue
Grass** (27½x27½)

OPPOSITE
**Matin à Saillagol/
Morning in
Saillagol** (27½x27½)

Sophie Amauger's studio, located in the south of France, near Toulouse, is a converted barn with windows on all sides. Located near a hiking trail, the studio also doubles as a gallery where visitors can stop by to see the artist's work. Step outside the studio into the garden, and you'll find a small pond and an old French farmhouse. Beyond the picket fence stretch rolling hills covered in ripe, ochre-colored wheat. "Next week, they'll turn the ground, and it will be all grays and violets," Amauger says. Since the local crops rotate, the surrounding fields offer

an ever-changing palette; the previous year, for instance, the field was planted with sunflowers—"big yellow flowers all around," she says.

Observing changes in the natural world is at the heart of Amauger's artistic practice, and she spends much of her time walking or driving in the area in search of that perfect scene—the moment when, as she describes it, "the landscape jumps out to me."



Learning by Doing

Even though she attended a fine arts school, became further specialized in graphic arts and worked in advertising for five years, Amauger maintains that her education was of no real use to her. “I didn’t learn how to be an artist in art school,” she says. In her case, the real training came outside of the classroom.

Amauger started on her path as a pastelist almost by chance, when she won a box of pastels as a prize in a competition. She’d painted in oil previously, but pastel captivated her because of the spontaneity it allows. “I tried them for the first time, on my own, and it was so wonderful to have colors in a box—not waiting to be mixed. Everything is ready,” she says. “I immediately started to paint nature. I never tried anything else.”

Amauger believes that skill is acquired naturally through regular practice, and that focusing too much on technique can be counterproductive. In the courses she teaches in her studio, she advises her pupils to seek that unmediated connection to the landscape. She shares what she has learned over her 20 years of practice: “In the beginning, I couldn’t find my subject in the landscape,” she says. “Now I know that my subject is the light. I don’t want to paint a postcard. So, I concentrate on noticing the light when I go outside.” When she finds a lighting situation that pleases her, she wants to be able to speak about this light and the emotion it produces when she’s there in the midst of it.

The masters of art whom Amauger admires most—the French Impressionists Camille Pissarro and Pierre Bonnard, for example, as well as British landscape painter John Constable—are favorites because of the response their work produces. “When you see Constable’s paintings, the greens appear wet. I want to be able to paint this—to show that the green is wet. It’s why, when I see his paintings, I’m touched. He was able to create more than an image of the landscape. He captures the essence of the day.” Likewise, Amauger makes it her goal to paint that momentary truth, she says, “of the light, of the day, of the season, of the colors.”

“When I paint a field, I am in the wheat. I am inside. I am in the grass.”

CLOCKWISE
FROM ABOVE
**Juillet à Roumieu/
July at Roumieu**
(7¾x11¾)

**Printemps Humide/
Wet Spring**
(19¾x19¾)

**Printemps Humide II/
Wet Spring II**
(19¾x19¾)



Becoming an Artist

If technique comes naturally to Amauger, what she has devoted much of her effort to is structuring her daily life to allow for moments of artistic spontaneity. This has involved significant life decisions, as well as constant adjustments to her schedule and working methods.

In her first decade as an artist, Amauger worked part-time jobs to help sustain her family of five, but she continued to spend significant amounts of time painting. Then, 10 years ago, she and her husband purchased the farmhouse with the barn that became her studio, and Amauger was able to focus her efforts entirely on her art.

Over time, she has devised effective methods for finding subjects in the fields around her home and developing them into finished works. About three times per week, weather permitting, she goes out in the morning to explore—with no particular goal in mind. “Sometimes I’ll be out for two or three hours, and at 11 o’clock, I’ve found nothing. Other times, I find a nice subject directly,” Amauger says. After decades of practice, the artist is able to see potential in an everyday scene that may not at once appear interesting or beautiful. “It could be just a big shade tree—something very simple jumps to my eyes,” she says. “The simplest subjects, I see now, are better for me.”

Sometimes, Amauger may even return to the subject of an earlier work. Over two consecutive winters, she painted a ditch running along a row of trees in an empty field. One painting was done in the morning (see *Printemps Humide* or *Wet Spring*, above), and the other in the afternoon (see *Printemps Humide II* or *Wet Spring II*, at left). She hadn’t planned to revisit the scene, but one day, as she was driving by, she was captured by the familiar spot, and she knew she had to paint it again. “My interest is in how the color changes between the morning and the afternoon,” she

explains. “It becomes orange. You can see that you can paint the same subject perhaps 10 times, and it’s never the same.”

It’s this talent—of seeing beauty in the familiar—that her collectors appreciate. She magnifies the landscape that others may quickly walk by without interest. As a client has told her, “With your eyes, we see it differently.”

“I am in the Wheat”

When she has found a view she wants to paint, Amauger takes a photograph for reference before she begins. She also takes one at the end of a plein air session, to

document how the light and colors have changed. Although she has the photos, she relies primarily on the field study she paints on the spot. This is the key moment of her creative process—the point at which she develops what she thinks of as empathy for her subject. “When I paint a field, I am in the wheat. I am inside. I am in the grass,” she says.

Photographs offer support, but they’re a last resort for the artist should a part of the preparatory study be unclear. Once you have photos in

CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW
Verger à Donneville/Orchard Springtime
(11¼x11¼)

Chaumes à Labryère/Labryère Culms
(7¾x11¼)

Le Viel Arbre Chez Marcel/The Old Tree at Marcel’s
(19¼x19¼)



front of you, Amauger says, “the danger is that you fall into the details,” so she uses them only sparingly.

Amauger often returns to a location more than once to make a preparatory painting. “I prefer to go on two separate days,” she says. “One morning I go and I take my time to mostly feel the subject. I start to paint. When the light turns, perhaps one hour later, I stop. Then I come back the day after.” The maximum time she paints outside is two hours, and so returning to paint allows her to use the time fully, because she has already had the chance to connect with the subject.

There’s a spontaneous nature to those first paintings that requires a selection process later. Amauger discards about two out of every five plein air pastels that she does. “Not exactly half of my work, but I try not to keep everything.” She says it’s not hard to do it, as it helps her grow. The pastels that are “good enough” for her she then re-creates in a larger format, depicting trees more carefully and enhancing some of the details.

LEARNING NEVER ENDS

No matter your experience level, the opportunity for learning never ends. For Amauger, she continues to learn during her frequent travels and from her friends, who spark ideas and help her set new goals. An 83-year-old artist friend Marcel Moulin, for example, showed her around France's Atlantic coast in Brittany. For the first time, Amauger started painting sand dunes and the sea. Now, two or three times each year, she and Moulin rent a house in a quiet area along that coast and work together for a week. As a result, seascapes have become a recurring motif in her latest work.



Sophie Amauger (at left, bottom) and her friend, Marcel Moulin (at left, top) are seen here painting in the Lot in southern France.

Oléron la Cotinière (19¾x19¾)



Accepting New Challenges

Although this approach has worked for the artist for some time, lately she has been challenging herself to paint only outside, and to omit the studio stage altogether. She hopes that, in this way, she can more directly capture “the essence of the day.”

She's especially proud of a painting she made as a demonstration for students—a wheat field with boldly mixed yellows and oranges, a dark grove in the middle ground, and a pale, distant mountain range (See *Chaumes à Labruyère* on page 23). The painting contains a sweeping open space and took just 30 minutes to complete. “It was very, very quick. No details, and nothing touched afterward in my studio,” she says.

Amauger has learned that being open to new challenges is important. Take the precise rendering of grass and ferns in *Le Nez Dans l'Herbe* (*Nose in the Grass*), on the opposite page, that won her an honorable mention in the 20th Annual Pastel 100 last year. For it, the artist

worked more closely with a photograph. Even though it's not her favorite approach, she takes pride in mastering an ambitious task and using her skills. “It's a very difficult color—green,” she says. “Normally, if you have another color, like the sky, you can balance the green. But with just grass alone ... Painters are afraid of that.”

Amauger advises aspiring painters to persist in pursuing their goals. She remembers one rainy day during an artist-in-residency when she could only stay indoors, in a cramped space with other painters. Being more accustomed to moving freely in the landscape, she could only look at a small patch of the garden through a window. She was struggling to produce anything. “Really, my stomach hurt; it was painful. I thought I wasn't going to be able to paint anything good in those conditions,” she recalls. She challenged herself to keep trying, however, and even though it was an unpleasant experience, she painted a pastel with which she was satisfied, and it sold immediately.



LEFT
*Le Nez Dans l'Herbe/
Nose in the Grass*
(27½x27½)

BOTTOM
Vert Avril/Green April
(23½x23½)

“Always tell yourself that you can do it,” Amauger suggests. “And you will do it. Even if it's difficult. I'm not saying that it's not difficult ... and perhaps you won't paint your best work, but those challenges always help you grow.” (See “Learning Never Ends” on page 24.)

Amauger values the humility that comes along with trying new things. “It's not good to be happy with your work,” she says. “I tell my pupils this all the time: Don't frame your work right away. Wait, wait, wait. I know you're very happy, but wait, because if you're happy with what you paint, you can't progress anymore.”

The potential for discovery is there again each morning. “You don't know everything when you're a painter,” she says. “You're always a pupil in front of the landscape.” **PJ**

Ani Kodjabasheva is a freelance writer living in Sofia, Bulgaria.



Artist **Sophie Amauger** (sophieamauger.com) lives in the countryside of southern France. She earned a degree in fine art at Beaux Arts of Rennes, followed by coursework at the Brassart Graphic Arts at Tours. A member of the French Pastel Society, Pastel Arts in France and the Italian Pastel Society, her work is represented in France by galleries in Bordeaux and Saint Émilion, and in Hooghalen, in the Netherlands. Her pastels have been exhibited at the Mall Galleries in London, and in many venues across France, including the annual Pastellistes de France Exhibition, in Feytiat.