

The Trouble with Boats

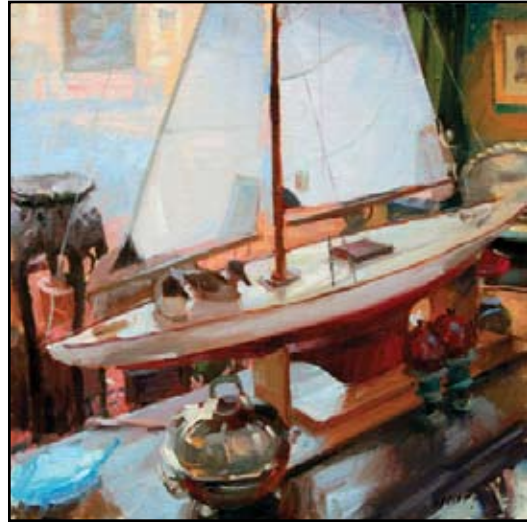
by **Larry Moore**

I don't keep a diary, but if I did, probably eighty percent of my entries would be about painting boats. To me, painting marine scenes is pure joy: the calming water, the interesting patterns and angles, and the inherent narrative of the paintings. I love the entire event of rendering the beauty of boats on canvas.

Just about every time I end up at a marina something noteworthy happens. Sometimes it's the usual joys and frustrations of painting compound curves swaying to and fro; other times it's interacting with the unique locals who work the boats. So if I did keep a diary, it might sound something like this:

Dear diary: Today I discovered the purpose of those long, low and flat concrete sea walls that jut out into the water, and why they might be a bad place to paint. It's the first day of the 2005 Carmel Art Festival competition and I have to turn in one painting at the end of the day. Just one good painting. No pressure. I had set up my easel at the crack of dawn at the Moss Point marina and was working on a painting of a trawler boat up on stanchions. About then, a dock worker points out that I was standing on the rails of the boat loader that lifts up and returns boats to the water. They were very busy that day because every half hour I had to move my easel off the sea wall while dockworkers moved a boat. I was too far along to quit, so the painting took an extra hour and a half to complete. Luckily, my determination paid off and I received an Honorable Mention for my painting "Workin' the Boats."

Dear diary: I learned a valuable lesson about painting boats today: always ask if



the boat you are about to paint is going to stay put. I was halfway through a pretty complicated piece with three boats side by side when a boater walks down the dock, jumps into the "centerpiece" of my painting, gives it the throttle and takes off. The painting was a scraper. Next time, if I can I'll ask.

Dear diary: Never believe a boater. I'm in Maryland for the Easton Plein Air event and I can't wait to paint some boats at the local marina. I found a beautiful skipjack, gleaming white and low in the water with its sails all wadded up on the deck. An old deck hand was sitting there, contemplating a generator he was trying to start. So I asked him, "This boat going anywhere soon?" And he said, "In three hours," then he asked for my help in starting the generator. I tried a few times with no luck and returned to my easel to set up. A half hour into this piece he walks up and says, "We're leaving in 30 minutes, and by the way, mind helping me with the generator again?" I had to paint at 30 knots to get the painting done before the boat took off. I called the painting "One Hour to Launch."

Dear diary: Just because the boat is up on stanchions and immobile doesn't mean

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it's an easy subject to paint. It's the first day of the 2006 Carmel Art Festival and I'm in the marina as before. I'm actually painting the same boat that was the focal point of the previous year's painting, which won the award; only this time the boat is on land. It's early and foggy, and I'm tucked back in a corner of the marina. I'm not standing in front of any movable objects so I'm good to go. The fog is thick, adding an element of intrigue to the composition. I was really struggling with capturing the mood when, poof, the fog lifted. I decided to come back the next morning to finish. I arrive at the marina at sunrise to find a Lay's Potato Chip truck parked between the very spot where I was painting and where the boat sat. It seemed to have been airlifted into this cramped little space. The only way to finish my painting was to alternate my easel on either side of the truck. Despite the fickle weather and obtrusive vehicle, I finished "Emily's Rest" in about three hours.

As if the marina environment doesn't provide enough challenges for an artist to overcome, painting boats presents some interesting technical challenges too. Boats are loaded with compound curves and angles that can really confound an artist. Even though the hull is symmetrical, a boat is rarely in symmetry unless you are looking at it dead on. I often start with a framework that emanates from a centerline to help me see the curves. As I paint, I lose edges in order to keep the boats from looking "cut out," and I don't try to paint every line and tackle rig. Too much of a good thing is just that: too much. Simplify, simplify, simplify, and let the lyrical lines, the bright colors and the bold designs of boats dominate.

And while you can't always control your subject or environment, I've learned a few tricks over the years, which can save time and headaches for other artists with a passion for painting boats:

- Always ask the dock master or marina owner if it's okay to paint in the marina before you set up. They really appreciate it.
- Make sure you pick a low-traffic spot to paint. Marina people typically don't appreciate artists crowding the docks or standing in the way of loaders.
- If you think your subject matter could take off mid-painting, map in the general shapes and shadow lines before you do anything. If need be, finish the boat and it's reflection first—the background isn't going anywhere.
- Consider your boat's relationship to the sun. Nothing is worse than starting a painting with the subject front lit, then have it go into shadow before finishing.
- Remember that a moored boat isn't stationary; stick to your original drawing and don't chase it around its anchor line.
- Most boats you encounter are white-hulled, so the trick to giving them life is to play up the color reflected into the shadows and to add warm hues into the light side. Save the pure white for the smallest glints of light on the chrome hardware.
- Make sure you have lots of bug spray for painting at dusk.
- Finally, never back your car into those upright things that the boats sit on, that's troublesome too, but that's another story.