

*Amsterdam Canal, Pedestrian Bridge, pastel on hand-made paper, 24" x 18"*

*written by* Lorie Lee Steiner

You'll be hard pressed to find a straight line in the creations of Alan Stein. A painter and printmaker by trade, Stein's works are alive with whimsy and off-kilter images moving at the speed of colour. Even his charcoal landscapes are active; subtle shades of grey travelling in whorls and rivers, they sweep us right along for the ride.

Prolific Canadian artist Alan Stein is a master of creative pursuits and readily admits he enjoys every minute of it. From stained glass designs to hand-illustrated books to pastel paintings, Alan's artistry and imagination know no bounds. "The hardest thing," he says, "is to learn how to do something properly and then find a way to have your own vision once you have mastered the technique – but that is what I love most."



above,  
Amsterdam Canals #2,  
pastel on hand-made  
paper, 18" x 24"



below,  
Amsterdam Canals #1,  
pastel on hand-made  
paper, 18" x 24"



Amsterdam Canals, White Bridge, pastel on hand-made paper, 30" x 22"

He was born in Toronto in 1951 and spent his high school years in Ottawa. In the evenings, he attended Ottawa School of Art and studied life drawing and oil painting. After graduating, Alan was accepted at Toronto's Humber College, where he focused on printmaking, life drawing and painting. Humber had a visiting artist program and each semester a different artist would come in and teach. "In my 3rd year, I studied stained glass and was hooked. It was also during my 3rd year at college that I met my wife, Charlotte. After

Humber I received a grant from the Ontario Arts Council to study in England with Patrick Reyntiens at Burleighfield School, which he ran with his wife, the painter Anne Bruce. Patrick has had to this day, a lasting and great influence on how I approach my life as an artist."

After returning from England, Alan and Charlotte moved to Grimsby, Ontario where he set up a small glass studio and learned letterpress printing, while sharing a studio space with OCA teacher Bill Poole. Two years later, the Steins



Amsterdam Canal with Orange Barge, pastel on hand-made paper, 24" x 18"

moved to Toronto and Alan spent the next twenty years doing commissioned stained glass windows, sometimes working as a designer in several glass studios at one time and restoring many church windows.

After two decades, Alan decided he'd had enough. So in 1988, they moved to the northern Ontario tourist town of Parry Sound. There Charlotte established Parry Sound Books and Alan set up his own painting studio and private press, The Church Street Press.

"I spent many years printing and illustrating my own limited edition books," Alan muses, "all the while I was discovering what would inspire me as a painter. Of course it was the scenery north of Parry Sound that did it and the dramatic landscape of Georgian Bay. We bought an old cottage on an island in Bayfield Inlet, where we live for as much of the spring, summer and fall as possible. From here I have spent years exploring this landscape in my artwork. Really I never looked back. Georgian Bay is my centre, but when travelling I also find artistic inspiration in cities around the world. This has led to an ongoing series of cityscapes."

For the past twenty years, Alan has acted as Art Director for the Festival of the Sound, an annual classical summer music festival in Parry Sound, and has been inspired by the many musicians he worked with during this time.

He also learned a lot from some of the older artists he met as a member of the Ontario Society of Artists, the Canadian Society of Painters in Watercolour and the Arts and Letters Club of Toronto. Doris McCarthy was one who became an important friend.

All these relationships helped Alan develop his own style. Today, he acknowledges his unique interpretation and personal vision of the world around him is what differentiates him from other artists.

"Advice," he admits, "is hard to give. Only those who are really driven probably ever survive as an artist. Most important is to develop your own vision, and not get caught up in trends or fashion or clever ideas. Learn your craft and how to use your materials. I love working on handmade paper, preferably St. Armand from Montreal or Japanese paper from the Japanese Paper Place. It is important to use good quality materials. I care about the fact that my work will last and not decompose because of inattention to the material used."

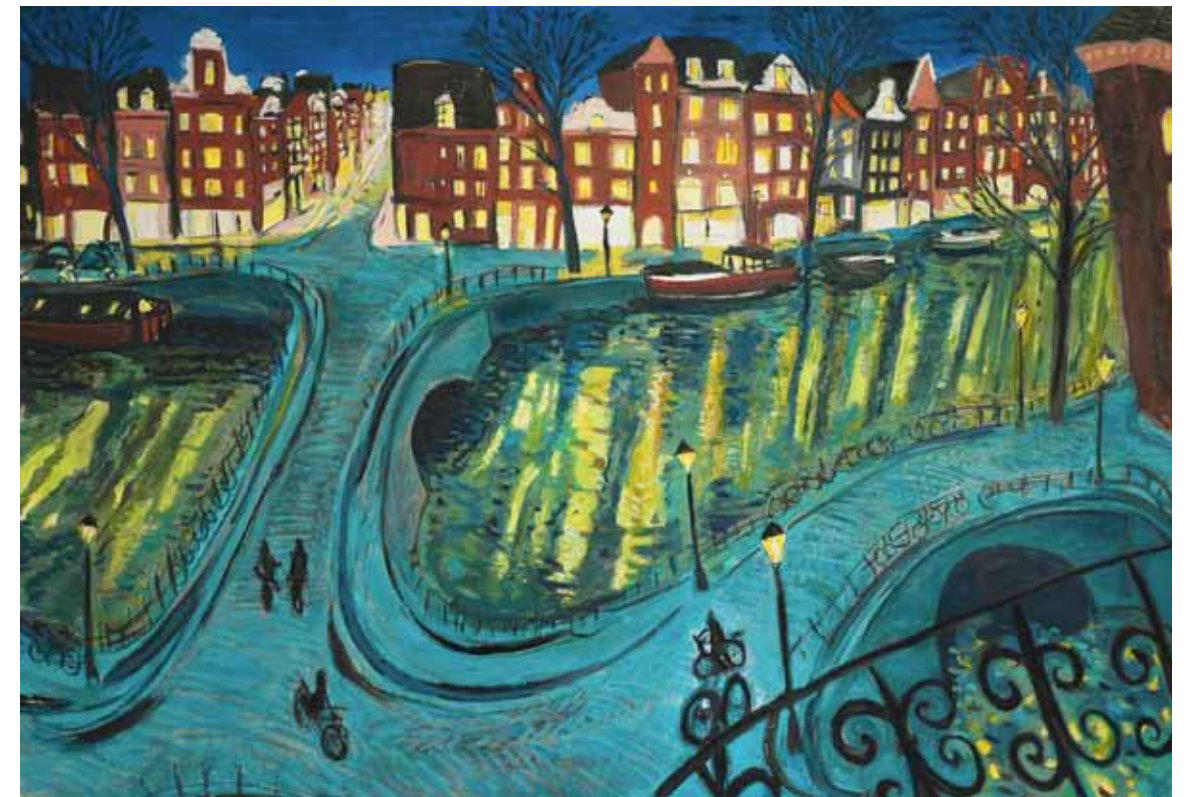
Alan always sketches on-site, making compositional decisions and then developing paintings from the drawings, sometimes using photographs as a reference. He sketches in both watercolour and charcoals and in the studio uses chalk pastels on handmade paper to create larger works.

"I create an underpainting in charcoal and India inks, and work over that in handmade soft chalk pastel. I have recently been working in oils on linen, which involves priming the linen with rabbit skin glue and using oil paints and simple linseed oil and turps as a medium. I am also a printmaker, I engrave end grain wood blocks to illustrate my own hand-printed books."

This is a very involved process, each book takes nearly two years to develop, print and



Amsterdam, Prinsengracht Canal, pastel on hand-made paper, 22" x 30"



Amsterdam Canal Night View, pastel on hand-made paper, 22" x 30"



Amsterdam Canal Rooftop View, pastel on hand-made paper, 18" x 24"



Amsterdam Canal with Steam Launch, pastel on hand-made paper, 22" x 30"

illustrate. Alan has received many awards for his efforts and worked with well-known Canadian poets – his most recent book "The Golden Lilies" by PK Page, contains eight of her final poems, illustrated with ten wood engravings and printed in a limited edition of only 49 copies. He also works in stone lithography, another complicated printing process.

Alan works with all these techniques at the same time, often taking an image and reworking it as a charcoal or pastel or a wood engraving. He finds the process exhilarating, as his ideas change and develop when he works in a different medium.

To explain the process, Alan uses as an example

his recent series of paintings 'The Quiet Snow' to be shown this fall at the Roberts Gallery.

"I had been working with James Campbell, Artistic Director at the Festival of the Sound, on a series of concerts integrating visual art into the live performance of music. Jim told me he was programming a 1958 jazz/classical composition about the connection between Scandinavia and Canada in the winter and asked me to create some visuals to accompany the performance.

I chose several movements with the theme of falling snow to illustrate with images. Every day there was a big snow storm predicted I went out and took photographs and tried to understand



*The Quiet Snow, High Trestle #1, pastel on hand-made paper, 18" x 24"*

the emotions I felt; the snow falling, the quiet, the isolation, the shades of grey and white, and my feeling of being closed in and open at the same time. I then created a series of images based on this experience, working from one image to the next until I had a dozen or so pastels.

Then, with the help of a technician, I created a six minute video titled "The Quiet Snow" with images alternating and dissolving into the video. This was shown on a thirty foot screen above the musicians during a live performance and was very well received. I kept the series going the next winter, this time taking photographs at the edge of Hangdog Reef. The Bay was frozen over as far



*The Quiet Snow, Heron Pond #1, pastel on hand-made paper, 18" x 24"*

as you could see, and where normally there would be the sound of waves on the rocks there was only white silence and the sound of wind."

This year Alan travelled to Amsterdam in early spring, after which he worked for two months on Amsterdam paintings before moving to the cottage studio to finish his winter images. Through the summer he continued working in pastel then switched to rework some ideas in oil on linen – a series of work almost finished now.

"I moved from Toronto to establish a studio in the landscape that inspired me," Alan says. "Here I am constantly inspired by nature, especially the rocks and water of Georgian Bay and the natural world around me."

The artist is a self-proclaimed collector of everything; ephemera, old cameras, Mexican sculpture, postcards, art books, poetry, and keeps much of it in his studio – but he admits there is more. "During the winter, we still live in the large home where we raised our family, perhaps because we can't imagine moving all the things we have collected."

When not working, Alan loves to go to the opera. "I've been a member and subscriber at the Canadian Opera Company for over 15 years – and attend opera every chance I get in cities



*The Quiet Snow #3, pastel on hand-made paper, 18" x 24"*

around the world."

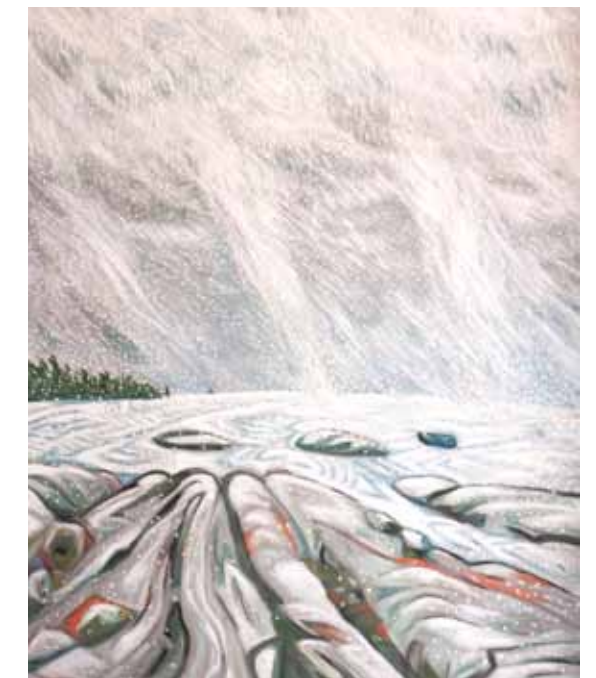
A delicious steak cooked on charcoal with rosemary and olive oil makes his day complete. "I do all the cooking around our house and every night I take the time to create something really good. Cooking is much the same for me as good art – a creative process based on fundamentals that are adapted as I go along."

His favourite wines are Italian reds, like the one discovered in a café last year in Florence. "We were wandering the side streets looking for a hole in the wall type of place to eat, and Charlotte found just the right one. In a small room at the back opposite the open kitchen was a place where workers and storekeepers from the neighborhood came to eat. We passed the olive oil back and forth, and a bottle of red wine – in typical Chianti-style with raffia wrapping the bottom half of the bottle, no label and no date, but it was very good! After an excellent lunch, there was no bill, we just went to the front counter, told them what we had eaten and how many glasses of wine we'd had and were then told what to pay, perfect."

As much as he enjoys red wine, Alan says Scotch is even better. "I spent a bit of time on Islay a few years ago, working in the Bruichladdich distillery – I've got a barrel there aging in the salt air that

I'm looking forward to enjoying in my old age."

Old age seems a long way off for this on-the-go artist. But when the day comes that Alan Stein does kick back with a glass of fine Islay Scotch in one hand, you can bet he'll be sketching the scenery with his other.



*Snow Squalls at The Open, pastel on hand-made paper, 29" x 39"*