Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on March 12, 2008.

With an artist’s eye, Betsy Scheben looked at the photo of her four-year-old grandson taken on a recent vacation trip in the Florida Keys. “That is a painting,” she said immediately.

More accurately, the photo was now on its way to becoming a painting. Scheben saw her task as translating the essence of “this little guy hunched down there looking out at the vastness of the Gulf, wondering what it’s all about, what else is out there.”

Although the compositional elements were already present in the photo, in her watercolor Contemplation, Scheben emphasized the high horizon, its distance juxtaposed with the vulnerable small boy, made larger by his nearness to the viewer’s gaze. She dramatized the wave action on the diagonal. “I took artist’s liberties. Carrying the water out very far makes the Gulf look even deeper, bigger. In contrast, he’s low, at eye level.

“I put the shell in his hand and added details to the sand. You should never center the main part of a painting—it makes for a stagnant composition. On the other hand, you want stability: The shells to the right form a triangle. One places things together that relate to each other, rather than scattering them; it gives you a focal point. Nothing’s flying away.”

Scheben is the youngest of three, from a military family. Her father was a career Army officer, and the family traveled extensively throughout both Europe and the United States as the children were growing up. (Her older sister, psychologist Ann O’Roark, has served as president of and Council Representative from APA’s Division 13, the Society of Consulting Psychology.)

Scheben was influenced by her parents’ involvement in art. Wherever they lived, Scheben’s mother was “always doing something, whether it was painting or sewing or sculpting a bust of my father.” Similarly, Scheben’s father, an avid photographer, continually made space for a darkroom.

At the University of Kentucky, Scheben became adept in sculpture, pottery, printmaking, and painting (both water-soluble and oil). After earning a bachelor’s degree in art, she expressed her love of art through crafts and “creative stuff” while rearing her two sons. The impetus to reengage in art more formally occurred about 30 years ago, when Scheben began studying with a neighbor who taught oil painting.

Although “oils are easier in a way, I like water color better. You can do more with them. You can get into different textures and effects with them. You can be more creative, looser. Sometimes you have happy accidents.” As cartoonist Scott Adams (1997) has commented, “Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep” (p. 324).

Watercolor painting involves considerable planning. Unlike other forms of drawing or painting, with watercolor one cannot entirely undo errors. Instead, one builds, gradually. “With oil, you start with dark colors and build to lighter ones. You can mix your colors on the canvas. With watercolors, you start with light colors, then put darks in.”

Often, this entails a process of layering: “When color is layered, each color is painted on without drying between the layers. Thus, the paint is allowed to mix on the paper. That results in a blending of colors because the previously applied color was not allowed to set” (Moses, 2005, p. 43).

“In Contemplation, I started with a light base color. For the water, I put lighter blues or blue-greens, without details. With wet on wet, you place a darker color so that it bleeds down a bit; it will feather out and give you nice soft edges.”

Although one can “kind of lighten with a lighter color and blotting, you can never go back to the white of the paper.” In planning a painting, a key element thus becomes determining ahead of time where the whites of the painting will go. “You have to plan it out in advance—think about what you’re doing so you can ‘hold your whites.’ It can be challenging if you’re trying to do something loose, quickly. But if you think it out, it’s not that big a problem.”

Often, artists use masking fluid, “a quick-drying liquid latex gum product used to cover a surface on a painting to protect it from receiving broad washes of paint . . . When finished, [the artist] remove[s] the masking fluid by rubbing it off with a fingertip or an eraser” (Moses, 2005, p. 155). For this painting, Scheben used masking fluid for the foam of the waves; the white that the viewer sees is that of the plain paper itself.

Although her artwork has been displayed and sold both in shows and privately, Scheben paints essentially for her own enjoyment. She finds painting relaxing, an opportunity to let go of concerns. Depending on her mood or what she is painting, she will play music in the background that reflects her thoughts and feelings.

Through painting, Scheben says she has met many different people, and notes, “[You] learn something from every artist you work with or study under.” And the future always beckons: “There are still so many paintings! When I finish one painting, I’m thinking about what I’m going to do next.”

REFERENCES
