

ON THE COVER

Rocky Mountain Sunflowers by Jan Bushart

Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist conducted on March 28, 2025.

Sunflowers. It is hard to imagine anything negative or depressing about sunflowers, even in these troubled times. Jan Bushart was driving through Colorado farmland one day, about 50 miles north of Denver. And suddenly there they were, in a river of gold and brown, lighting the plain like miniature suns, almost as far as the cold, blue Rockies. She was taken with the sight and pulled her car over for a better look. Out came paints and brushes, and an 8" × 10" sketch in oil was done before the light died. Days later, *Rocky Mountain Sunflowers* grew, full-sized on canvas, assisted by a few photographs of the scene to add detail.

Sunflowers are 10 ft tall by late summer, valued for their oil and edible seeds as well as the beauty of their blooms. They are native to Arizona, California, and Nevada and most of Mexico but now occur all over the western states, thriving in fertile soil and long, bright summers. Native Americans cultivated them for thousands of years before seeds were taken to Europe by the Spanish early in the 16th century. They proliferated to grow around the world and captivate artists from van Dyck to van Gogh. Bushart has long admired sunflowers and considers them to be symbols of joy and loyalty because as young plants they literally follow the sun, orienting themselves to its location. This ends with maturation as positioning for pollination becomes primary. The region in and around Denver has fields of sunflowers, especially near the airport, as if to welcome visitors and returning locals to this city on the edge of the High Plains where the mountains begin.

Bushart's first painting, at 7 years of age, depicted a sunflower grown by her father, so they retain a special meaning for her. She grew up in southern California in a family of musicians and artists and was never deflected from pursuing art as a career. Although her mother did say "take a typing class, you can always be a secretary if it [art] doesn't work out." Well, it did work out. She attended the State University of California in Chico and obtained a degree in Fine Arts. Her work was already selling during college years and soon marketed successfully through galleries and, later, exhibitions in Colorado, California, Arizona, and Alaska. Then, she moved to Hawaii with her

jeweler husband, spending winters there and returning to the mainland for the summer. Island life was isolating to Bushart, so she organized artists in groups to meet and paint together outside, in *en plein air* gatherings following the French tradition. This sometimes meant dozens of artists coming together to work and share ideas and methods in mass "paint-outs." Her own media preference inclines to oils, although she spent years as a watercolorist. However, she found working in watercolors harder in Hawaii, whereas oils offered a special richness and intensity of hue and pigment that suited her surroundings and style. Bushart prefers representational subject matter, especially the natural world. A fascination with the fleeting effects of light on form and substance, however, has taken her close to the boundary with abstraction.

Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, she thinks of herself as a contemporary Impressionist, strongly influenced by Claude Monet and by Post-Impressionists like Vincent van Gogh and the Spanish painter Joaquín Sorolla. She visited Sorolla's home and was overwhelmed by the impact of his pictures covering the walls, each one capturing a moment in time lit by the strong Spanish sun. John Cosby's vivid images of the American Southwest are another guiding influence. Bushart notes that the Impressionists broke with the convention of using paintings to tell stories. For centuries, these stories were religious or grounded in history. The Impressionists, by contrast, sought to convey the feeling and, well, *impression*, of a scene. Bushart follows this approach herself in making art.

As for *Rocky Mountain Sunflowers*, she thinks the piece represents hope—sunflowers being so positive and affirming of nature. This is what she wants people to take away from the piece and because "life is too short to paint ugly things." Among Native American traditions is the idea that sunflowers impart courage. Warriors carried sunflower seed cake into battle and sprinkled powdered seed over their clothing. May hope and courage be in attendance as we gather here for our annual convention.

 R. Walter Heinrichs
Art Editor