

Todd Baxter Dawson

Figure, Portrait, and Landscape Paintings

JUROR'S COMMENTS

The Miniature Painters, Sculptors and Gravers Society of Washington, DC
73rd International Exhibition of Fine Art in Miniature
Strathmore Hall, North Bethesda, MD
November 19 through December 29, 2006

Every year I look forward to this show, feeling that piece for piece, it offers the greatest variety of any show in this area. And not just variety, but amazing and masterful works of art, made even more impressive by their limited size. In looking at some of these works, you cannot escape the feeling that creating such a piece by hand is, quite simply, impossible. More than in any other show I see on a regular basis, the skill level in this organization is absolutely extraordinary. And so when I was asked to jury this show, I was at once thrilled, and at the same time powerfully humbled to find myself in a position of having to evaluate such impressive works of art. It was a genuine delight and honor to jury this exhibition.

As with other shows I've juried recently, I found that the variety in media required judging "across disciplines", which is no easy task. The criteria I use to evaluate art alleviates some of the difficulties, but it is always a challenge. I will do my best to describe why I chose the work I did for awards and recognition, and hope you will at least understand my point of view, even if you disagree with my choices.

In evaluating a work of art, I look to see how the content is depicted (the subject matter, and its point of view or mood), and then I evaluate the execution, which (for two-dimensional works) includes the composition or 'design' of the piece, and an effective use of what I call "pictorial particulars". Those would include:

- drawing (proportions and relationships)
- color
- value
- edges, and
- proficiency in the use of the medium chosen

In the case of sculpture, I evaluate the composition of the piece (an important consideration in any work of art), the effective use of three dimensional space, the effective expression of the subject in the style in which it was rendered, and the proficiency in the use of the medium chosen.

Where appropriate, consideration was given to the technical aspects of the art and/or craft.

With miniatures, there is the temptation to consider technical proficiency on the smallest of scaled pieces to be worthy of greater recognition than a piece that may be slightly larger, and therefore

less challenging. My decision was to evaluate each piece as a work of visual art, and how well it succeeded as such, and not just as a technical marvel. The bottom line of all art is the creation of an effective visual image, and that seemed to be the most egalitarian way to jury the show. Obviously scale presents its own set of problems to overcome, but I maintain that the goal needs to remain the creation of effective visual art, and not just technical mastery.

And I suppose I should also address another issue that I am sure must always come up when jurying works on this scale, and that is the “cuteness” factor. What can I say? Yes, there were some really cute pieces in the show. It’s hard to avoid. And don’t get me wrong—I LOVE cute! Maybe you could make it a separate category in future shows? But call me a hard nose, I stuck to my guns and went for the “best visual image” I could find. Now if, as was the case with one entry, the combination of image, skilled rendering, and presentation combined to create a great piece of art which also happened to be cute, I simply couldn’t resist recognizing the piece. There, I felt skill and scale came together in a unique way to create a great piece of art, as simple as it was. It also helped to underscore that in works of this scale in particular, presentation counts.

And speaking of transcending the mere technical, in other shows I’ve juried I’ve felt the need to discuss that issue at some length. Not so here. In this show, the level of mastery in almost all categories makes such discussion moot. Particularly in the Watercolor and Oil and Acrylic categories, the number of paintings that could have been singled out for recognition was far greater than the number of awards we had to give. The fact is that there were many more “award level” artists than we could recognize. The extraordinary level of talent in this show made the judging that much more difficult.

Probably the single most difficult category to judge was the International category. Included were traditional media, ivories, scrimshaw, and other decorative arts that defied categorization. The uniqueness of some of those entries, coupled with their extraordinary skill level, quickly pushed them to the top. Again, there were many, many “award level” works, that in any given show would have easily taken home a prize.

For the Best in Show, I chose from among the very best in all of the categories, and then judged which work, in my considered opinion, was both the most successful and the richest visual experience in the show. Again, I must state that the skill level in this show was such that technical mastery was a given; the richness of the visual experience was outstanding, and in the case of the winner in this show, that richness captured a depth, a spirit and an emotion that I felt was unequaled in any other work I saw, as good as they were. And while there were close runners-up, I felt the winning entry was strong enough to stand above the others on a plane all its own.

I would like to thank John Thompson for inviting me to jury this show, and I would like to thank all who entered and made this the magnificent exhibition that it is. My congratulations to the winners for their exceptional entries, and to the Society as a whole for keeping “the bar” of excellence raised so high.

Todd Baxter Dawson
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