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Animal Allusion

Ewoud de Groot paints representations of wildlife

BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF

Winter Lake, oil, 55 x 55.

PAINTER EWOUT DE GROOT lives atop a sand dune in the small coastal town of Egmond aan Zee, perched on the Wadden Sea in the Netherlands. De Groot grew up the son and grandson of architects, watching his father draw and design houses in the manner his profession demanded. And soon young Ewoud was relishing his drawing time, too. But this budding young artist was more interested in portraying the creatures outside his door than the manmade structures on the horizon. "Already as a little boy I was out in nature catching toads and frogs, fishing for perch, and collecting bird eggs," de Groot says.

The Wadden Sea region is well known for its rich flora and fauna and especially for its birds. Thousands of shorebirds,

ducks, and geese make the area their home in winter, a regular migratory stop-over for them. Gulls and terns abound in this region that is so rich in wildlife, culture, and physical significance that UNESCO added it to the World Heritage List in 2009. Among other things, the Wadden Sea is the largest unbroken system of intertidal sand and mudflats in the world, with natural resources undisturbed through most of the area. So it comes as little surprise that, early on, the winged creatures captured de Groot's attention and imagination. He filled sketchbook after sketchbook with his visions of the native birds.

De Groot's interest in drawing and art continued through his teen years, and he eventually went on to study art

at Academie Minerva, a respected art academy founded in 1798 in Groningen, Netherlands. Today de Groot, 44, is known in both the Netherlands and the United States for his contemporary wildlife works ranging from portrayals of lumbering moose resting in calm water to birds of prey soaring ominously toward the viewer. As this story was going to press, de Groot had four paintings on display in the juried Coors Western Art Exhibit and Sale in Denver, CO, and was looking forward to two shows in Jackson, WY, later this year—a solo show in July at Astoria Fine Art and the annual Western Visions Show & Sale at the National Museum of Wildlife Art, where he is the featured artist.

While in Denver for the Coors show, de Groot had time to reflect on the evolution of his career in the United States. He doesn't have to think too long when he says there was one major turning point in his art life. In 2005 he was juried into the prestigious *Birds in Art* exhibition at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, WI. Soon he also received a call from Gerald Peters Gallery in Santa Fe with an offer he couldn't refuse:



Terns in Blue, oil, 43 x 43.



Great Grey Owl, oil, 28 x 55.



Wading Moose, oil, 48 x 48.

gallery representation in the United States. The collision of these two fateful events, he says, set in motion his growing success in this country.

Since then his career has continued to flourish, with additional invitations to prestigious shows and more gallery representation. These days the painter travels from his home in the Netherlands

to the United States two or three times a year. While stateside, de Groot makes color sketches on location or takes reference photos in scenic settings, such as the Grand Tetons that tower over Jackson. Depending on the season, he may also relax and go fly-fishing, another great passion in his life.

Back home in the Netherlands, when

he searches for subject matter, he may take to the sea in his 38-foot boat, an old shrimp trawler named Eems. He often heads north to pristine open spaces and a chain of islands sprinkled with sand dunes. In his studio, the reference material he has gathered in North America and the Netherlands slowly evolves into depictions of the landscape and the creatures that inhabit it, which he often paints on a large scale. "In general I can say I'm interested in the animal world of the Northern Hemisphere," de Groot says. "You will not see me drawing lions and tigers or tropical birds."

Although de Groot paints animals, he doesn't like to be pigeonholed as strictly a wildlife artist. He would rather be described as an artist who paints a representation of wildlife and who conveys mood and atmosphere through color. In fact, one of his favorite artists—in addition to European masters such as Johannes Vermeer and Gustav Klimt—is the American color-field painter Mark Rothko. Reminiscent of Rothko, de Groot often creates luminous bands of color as backdrops for his subjects, making the backgrounds just as eye-catching as the birds and bison themselves.

De Groot may work on 10 or more paintings at a time because his creative process involves multiple layers of paint, often cold, bluish grays set against warm, brownish grays. Each layer has to dry before the next one is applied. He



Sanderlings, oil, 20 x 59.

doesn't sketch an animal on the canvas but focuses on the shapes and expressive brush strokes that will eventually emerge as a creature or part of the background. At some point during the creative process, de Groot may also place a canvas on the floor of the studio and drip paint onto it, in the tradition of the legendary abstract-expressionist painter Jackson Pollock. But de Groot is quick to point out that while Pollock used a random dripping technique, his is more purposeful.

The end result is the animal set against a layered, abstracted background, sometimes with an explosion of multicolored circles, bands of colors, and shapes that create a whirlpool of energy on the canvas. In *WINTER LAKE* [see page 68], on view in the recent Coors show, he displays his signature use of circles. In the painting, he captures a trumpeter swan on a frozen lake in Friesland in the Netherlands, not too far from his home. The painting is an exploration of a boyhood fascination—the air bubbles formed on a frozen lake. The abstract patterns of the bubbles provide a sense of depth in the ice, de Groot says, particularly when the ice is clear after a few nights of frost without much wind. In the Netherlands this is becoming a rarer occurrence because, de Groot points out, there isn't as much freezing-cold weather. But several years ago, when he was skating on the lake and saw the phenomenon, he knew immediately that he wanted to capture it on canvas.

RUDI BROSCHOFSKY, owner of Broschofsky Galleries in Ketchum, ID, says that in 2012 he was looking for new artists who incorporated a more contemporary style with a western theme when he spotted de Groot's work in a magazine article. "His work was so unconventional and different from any wildlife artist I've ever come across. It was exactly the type of work that I've been hoping to find and represent at the gallery," Broschofsky says. "Ewoud's progressive style sets his paintings apart. His abstract backgrounds provide an engaging atmosphere that matches his subject matter perfectly, while adding an element of modern art into a wildlife painting."

Greg Fulton, owner of Astoria Fine



Resting Plover Number 1, oil, 32 x 32.

Art in Jackson, WY, agrees, saying de Groot's work is fresh, unique, and "a great mix of traditional and contemporary." The gallery has represented him for four years, and Fulton reports that de Groot is one of his best-selling painters. "I fell in love with his work the minute I saw it and actually bought one for my personal collection from a gallery in Santa Fe," Fulton says. "I looked at it every day in my house and said to myself, someday I want to represent him in the gallery."

De Groot welcomes the enthusiastic reception and accolades from American gallery owners and art collectors that have come his way over the past decade or so. Often in Europe, he says, the emphasis is on conceptual art as opposed to paintings created in more traditional

genres and styles. "People in English-speaking countries like Canada and the western United States are just more accepting of wildlife art," de Groot says. He can only speculate as to why this is the case and thinks that the answer may be related to the dramatic landscapes, wide-open spaces, and big skies of the West. Those of us who inhabit this terrain may have more appreciation for paintings like de Groot's that convey the dazzling beauty in nature. ♦

Bonnie Gangelhoff is senior editor at *Southwest Art*.



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