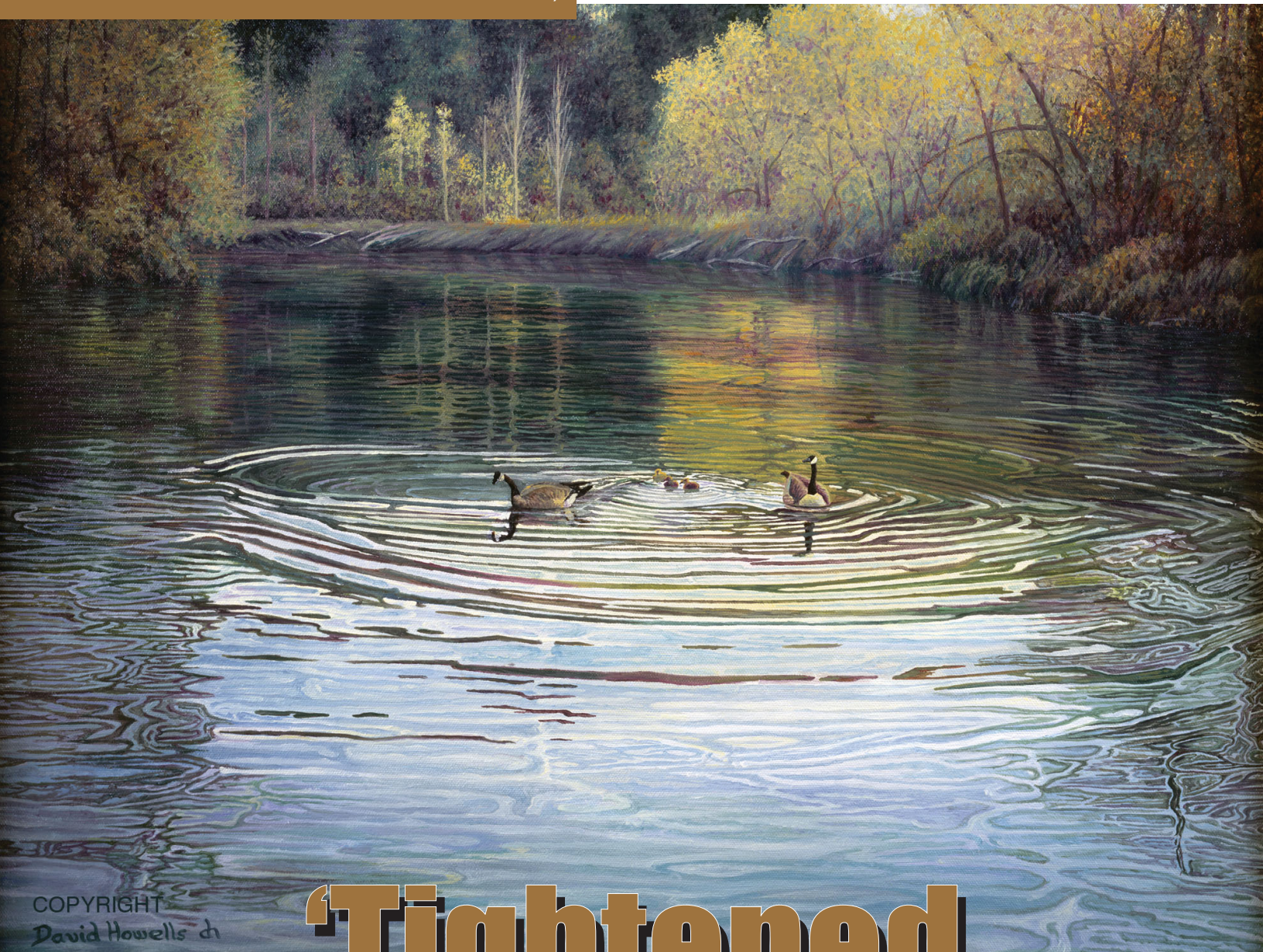




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SPRING ON THE ROUGE
RIVER, Oil, 18 x 24"

'Tightened Impressionism'

**St. Croix, NS realist
artist progressed from
photo-realism to
'tightened
impressionism' but
stays true to his love
of detail and its
beauty in nature.**

Born in England, oil painter David Howells moved to Nova Scotia as a child. "I love Nova Scotia passionately. It's so incredibly beautiful." He says the only thing he might have chosen to do if not paint, would have been to promote the outdoors.

He loves peaceful, natural scenes, and says, "I react most strongly to simple, quiet, pastoral scenes. I love big cities and what they have to offer, but not all the time... and not to paint." He doesn't paint city scenes, though he has painted a few old worldly architectural scenes which he calls architectural landscapes. His paintings are mostly natural landscapes, occasionally inhabited by a person or a man-made object such as a bridge or boat, but are always about the scene, the mood of the place, rather than what's within it.



MORNING MIST, Oil, 18 x 24"

Howells took a meandering route with his education, starting out for a year studying graphic design, then switching to the fine arts program at Mount Allison University in Sackville, NS. He says the education there, at the time, was more geared to abstract art and he was a photorealist then. He says that in his first year at Mount Allison, there was one 10-minute class in basic perspective - how to draw a box. He had studied endless lessons on perspective in his graphic design course. He was extremely disappointed, with the exception of one professor - David Silverberg. "He inspired everybody. It was the one class everyone was excited about."

But the negatives outweighed the positives. "I said I can't do this for another three years. I transferred my credits to a BA (Bachelor of Arts). That year I got an offer to go with Lloyd's Gallery of Canada."

Howells says that the gallery chose one artist at a time to put money behind, and it had an excellent reputation. The

gallery had done this very successfully with Dusan Kadlec, helping to launch his career in Canada.

"I went with this gallery. At that time I trusted everyone, unconditionally. I had nothing in writing."

A short time later someone called Howells to let him know that the gallery doors were locked and the Sheriff's bars were on the doors. It took a while, but Howells did finally get his work back.

After that "baptism by fire" he decided that partial degrees were not going to help him much in life and went back and finished his graphic design program. "I needed to finish something." He later worked as a graphic designer for a time before he started exhibiting at Zwicker's Gallery in Halifax.

Gallery owner/operator Ian Muncaster suggested he explore the art market in one of Canada's larger cities. "Two years later, in 1986, I took his advice and moved to Toronto. My professional career had officially begun."



EVERY RIVER TELLS A STORY, Oil, 24 x 36"

In 1988 he put his work in the Toronto Outdoor Art Show. That was the first show of what was to become eight shows there - near sell-outs every year. The first time there he didn't know what to expect. While others had professional set-ups, he had his work set up on the ground, on clips... "Completely improperly," he says. But he sold two paintings in the first hour. He did well there and had enough money in his pocket to travel for a while.

"In 1989 I backpacked across Europe for just over four and a half months. I got bitten by the bug - I fell in love with travel." That led to another backpacking trip in Asia and other trips.

His love of travel helped him eventually decide to move home to Nova Scotia and live at his family home there so he had more money and was free to travel. Due to his success in the Toronto market, in 1994 he decided to move back to Nova Scotia and "shop my work in Toronto."

Although he often goes driving or hiking, looking for scenes to paint, he does most of his painting in his studio from his reference photographs and says that with most of the photos he uses for paintings, "I wasn't looking for a specific scene at the time." He most often just happens on a

scene that "grabs" him, usually due to the light at the time.

He often painted Nova Scotia scenes while living in Toronto, but his favorite local place to photograph and paint from there was in the Don Valley. Howells says it's a natural regeneration area that meanders, with gardens that the trails pass through. "As a region, it's the closest thing I've ever seen in Canada to England." Another favorite Ontario site that several of his paintings were created from is Georgian Bay.

A ten-day trip there in the 90's resulted in five paintings. "That doesn't sound like a lot, but that's about four months' work for me, so that's really good."

Howells began as a photorealist, spending careful hours creating an exact photo likeness within all of his paintings (using gouache and water colour) with a triple 0 brush. "For two years people had been giving me a message but I didn't get it." He says that he'd listen to people commenting on his work and they went something like this: 'Wow, I can't believe the detail.' ("That made me feel great!"). 'I can't believe you painted that.' ("I thought, I'm a good little technician.'). 'It looks exactly like a photograph.' ("I'm eating this up!")

"At one point it came crashing down. I thought, I can paint anything if I paint it highly realistic, but I feel like I'm on fire. I need to PAINT. I wanted to feel like I was painting."

Howells bought a 1/4" flat bristle brush and his first oil paints. "I wanted to see what would happen. I did the whole painting with it and only went in with a small brush to pick up detail. Someone asked me what was the day I learned to paint - That was the day! I felt like I was painting for the first time."

Howells has never painted anything unless he has a reaction to it. "I've never done anything for the sake of doing it. I have to have a natural reaction. It's the most honest."

"I'm looking for the things that are giving the scene its power."

Although he still does realism, Howells says to understand what he does, one has to look closely at his work. "It's like a tightened form of impressionism - squiggles of color. That's the loosest my paintings get." His paintings average 5-7 layers of color on average.

Howells believes artists should stay true to what they do and who they are. He says a paraphrased quote of Robert Bateman's is a perfect answer for how he feels when asked why he paints realism the way he does and doesn't change the way he paints as time goes on: 'I think, that over time, change has taken place. If you're painting how you feel about what you see and you're loving it, why would you change what you're doing?'

To the question, 'If artists aren't changing, are they developing?', Howells would answer, "I don't believe in change for its own sake or that change itself is a guarantee of development. Meaningful change is most often natural, coming about over time. Even without a great



MEANDER RIVER, Oil, 36 x 24"

degree of stylistic change, artists are always improving and that will be evident in their work. Improvement and development are not defined by stylistic change. The people not changing would have a lot of good company." (Bateman et al).

"If you love seeing things like the

bark of a tree or the form of a rock, you find yourself driven to capture that in a painting. Your most honest reaction to the scene has to be based on that. I like to paint the types of things that Constable would paint. (John Constable, 1776 - 1837)"



AWAKENING OF SPRING, Oil, 24 x 36"

When Howells photographs scenes that he'd like to paint, "I almost always do a color study. I do it really fast - it's not an attempt to paint the scene. What I want is, if the critical thing about the scene is the colors in the sky, or the cool colors in the trees... I'm looking for the things that are giving the scene its power."

He does not do outdoor painting because he takes so much time to complete his paintings that the lighting, mood, etc. will have changed thousands of times before he could complete them. "I'd have to have two hours (of the same lighting) a day for 40-50 days to do outdoor painting."

Years of painting will train artists to see beyond the photograph — "White areas are washing out, dark areas go black. Even in the darkest area you have to see some form to create depth. Often there's very little sky - it's washed out. The feeling of form (the three-dimensionality of things) and sense of atmospheric perspective are often lost in the photo. It is really important to be aware of these losses/changes. When zooming in or (even more importantly) using a wide-angle lens, perspective is being distorted. Replicating lens distortion (where the landscape is compressed and stretched) is a technical error waiting to happen." Three things are very important to learn to see in one's

paintings, he says. One is to paint what you actually see - not what you know. This creates depth in a painting. Some rules of depth that he says to watch for: With distance things get smaller, colors cool down - reducing saturation/intensity, and detail diminishes. The second is perspective. "Look at the vanishing points." He says that he seen street scene paintings where every roof, every window and every floor had different vanishing points. He says a trained eye will easily pick that up. The third is composition. "Really carefully work out your composition." When using photo references, if anything is moved even slightly, every other aspect has to be carefully scrutinized to ensure everything stays in perspective and relates correctly to the rest of the painting.

Another key thing to watch for in paintings is edges, he says. "The edge between rocks and the river bank, the edge of the trees against the sky... Look at edges where things overlap."

"Most of the time, when a painting draws people's eyes in an uncomfortable way, it's because the edges were painted hard; things are too defined and perfect where the edges of things meet or overlap. In nature they're almost always random."



BAXTER'S HARBOUR, Oil, 24 x 36"

"Shadows and reflections are big for me," he adds. "Light is everything. Shadows are always darkest at the base and then get narrower, lighter and the edges softer going away from the base. With reflections, in general, dark objects tend to reflect lighter than they are and light objects reflect darker than they are."

Landscapes should usually be painted from top to bottom and back to front (layers), he says.

To all rules there are exceptions, he says. "But they're generally true most of the time."

He says many artists have "so much going for them. Sometimes they've got one thing holding them back." He says artists looking to better themselves should practice careful observation and, as he did early in his career, listen and analyze what people say about their work so they can honestly evaluate it and make improvements. •



DAVID HOWELLS is an artist/instructor in St. Croix, NS. He has travelled extensively in 40 countries. His work has been featured in several books, and he has self-published the book *Landscape Paintings by David Howells - A Tribute to Nature*, which is available at <http://www.blurb.com/book-store/detail/1843000>. More work can be viewed on his website at www.davidhowellspaintings.com.