

# Fred Wessel

[www.fredwessel.com](http://www.fredwessel.com)



"I look to the early Renaissance as a source of inspiration that I can use along with contemporary content and image making. I look to the Renaissance as the artists of that time looked back to early Greek and Roman art — not as a reactionary but as one who rediscovers and reapplies important but forgotten visual stimuli."

Fred Wessel

Fred Wessel is represented by the Arden Gallery in Boston, ACA Galleries in NYC and Skotia Gallery in Santa Fe. Since 1985 he has had 20 solo exhibitions, including two at the Sherry French Gallery in NYC, eight at the Arden Gallery in Boston, and a retrospective exhibition at the Evansville Museum in Evansville, IN. During this period his work has also been exhibited in over 80 invitational exhibitions including shows at The Southern Alleghenies Museum, PA; The Arnot Art Museum Elmira, NY; Jenkins-Johnson Gallery, San Francisco, CA; The Evansville Museum of Art, IN; Sangre de Cristo Art Center, Pueblo, CO; The Korean Culture and Arts Foundation Seoul, Korea; The Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art, Japan. In 2012 his work will be included in a show entitled "Gold" at the Belvedere Museum in Vienna.

Fred Wessel's work is included in numerous private collections and over forty five public collections including The Museum of Modern Art, NY; The Brooklyn Museum, NY; The Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA; The Library of Congress; The DeCordova and Dana Museum of Art, MA; The Evansville Museum, IN; The Wichita Museum of Art, KS; Smith College Museum, MA; The University of Tianjin Fine Arts College, People's Republic of China. He has recently had feature articles in *American Artist Magazine* and *American Art Collector Magazine*.





## Q&A Fred Wessel

### *How long does one of your pieces take to finish?*

Depending on size, a piece can take three weeks to four months or more to finish. The process of tempera painting is very slow and deliberate. I start with a full valued ink drawing on the panel then add thin layers of color to achieve the luminosity that the medium can provide. All blending is visual and occurs through cross-hatching one value over another with tiny, # 2 and 4 kolinsky, sable brushes. Many layers of glazing and modeling are required to complete the painting. The gold work on a larger image can also add a good three weeks of work to the painting.

### *Do you believe art should serve a political purpose or*

### *remain neutral?*

Today's art world should be large enough to encompass both of these objectives. There are many good artists whose work has a strong political bent but there are equally as many who strive to produce solid pieces devoid of the political content that is constantly being pushed upon students in art schools today. I can't help but think about something my good friend, and a true giant of "American Realism", Jack Beal, told me about his early painting goals. Jack declared that he wanted to make paintings "so beautiful that the viewer couldn't ignore them!" This struck a very real cord with me.

I believe that in our search for novelty in post-modernist art





making, we often lose touch with certain basics. Beauty, grace, harmony and visual poetry are nowadays rarely considered important criteria in evaluating contemporary works of art. I strive to re-introduce these basics back into my work. I personally find that in these days that are filled with uncertainty and stress, a great number of people are responding to the reintroduction of this beauty back into works of art and, in turn, their lives.

*How does your family life come into play with your artistic life?*

All of my immediate family is involved in the arts. My wife Lee-Ann is a ceramist who makes miniature reproductions of historical ceramic pieces for collectors worldwide. My

daughter, Kerri, is an illustrator who also makes jewelry and felted sculpture. Her fiancée, Steve is an illustrator and they both hold jobs as store artists for Trader Joe's. My son Brett is a businessman but he also has a deep passion for cooking, photography, and glass blowing.

This has been a great boon to my life as a working artist. All of my family react and respond to each of my new pieces while they are in progress and often offer helpful suggestions. I value their initial response to seeing a new work in progress and their criticism is usually "spot on". Their art background also helps me deal, "guilt free", with my deadlines. Since we all have these interruptions to "our normal life routines" on a regular basis, we all understand and support each other when confronted by a looming deadline. I had promised Skotia



Gallery, in Santa Fe that my new piece, "Scorpio" would be available for them to take to ArtLA. Everyone in my family was supportive when I told them I had to work on the piece on Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. These are generally family times.

#### *What painting to you have hanging in your living room?*

I have a number of paintings and drawings hanging in my living room but one of my favorites is a small painting by Scott Prior. Each year I offer a workshop in painting in various parts of Italy with my colleague, Jeremiah Patterson. ([www.workshpsinitaly.com](http://www.workshpsinitaly.com))

Scott came on one of our workshops in Assisi as a Visiting Artist and, unbeknownst to me, did an *alla prima* painting of me while I was painting the beautiful Umbrian landscape. He gave me this painting as a gift a few years back. This little gem reminds me of my own personal paradise and never fails to transport me back to the richness and warmth of sunny Italy.

#### *How has digital accessibility come into play with your work?*

Digital accessibility has become an integral part of my art making process. I start a painting by developing its plans and color studies on my computer with Photoshop. I used to do watercolor studies in bound journals (part of me misses this ritual) but I can accomplish what used to take me 2 or 3 days to do in a single afternoon.

I also use the web for researching my images. Recently I began drawing into my gold backgrounds by using selective tooling and burnishing techniques. I have been working on a series that has drawings of charts of the constellations in the gold. The charts are interpretations of 17th century engravings made by the astronomer artist John Flamsteed.

I found Flamsteed's work on a large and beautiful web site, *Atlas Coelestis*, which is the creation of Italian historian, Felice Stoppa, of Milan. I emailed Stoppa, asked for permission to use Flamsteed's work in the background of my painting and he immediately obliged. Felice took an interest in my work and we became good friends. He sent me a gift of a hand bound, limited edition book of Flamsteed's engravings and I made a silverpoint drawing of his daughter, Giulia, for him in return. My wife, Lee-Ann and I were able to meet him and his family on a recent trip to Milano.

#### *What tool or supply can you not live/work without?*

I could not live without the many of jars of beautiful pigments that I have collected from all over the world. I love finding exotic and beautiful pigments and mentally recording them for later use in "that perfect spot" on a new painting. For example, I stumbled upon a dusty apothecary shop on a back street in Florence and, in a jar way in the back of the store, I discovered the most beautifully intense ground malachite... a pigment that I now use judiciously in intense green areas of my paintings.

#### *Explain your process.*

I have included photos of "Scorpio" in progress. As mentioned above, I start a painting as a 21st Century Artist by developing it as a maquette of sorts on my computer with Photoshop. After planning my image, I shut down my computer, mentally return to the 15th century and begin executing my painting. I often listen to books on tape, opera and even Gregorian chants while painting. Framing is of great importance to me and it is at this time that I also plan for how the painting will eventually be framed.

The tempera painting begins as a full, tonal drawing in ink on my hand prepared panel. I often start by doing a silverpoint drawing then covering it with a fully developed ink drawing. If I am applying gold to my painting using the traditional water gilding technique, it must be done at this time. After gilding, thin layers of color (pigments mixed with egg yolk) are carefully applied by alternately glazing and modeling with transparent and semi-opaque colors.

I work the fleshtones in a figure painting much in the way 14th Century Artist Cennino Cennini described the process in his book "Il Libro dell'Arte". All of the skin areas in the ink drawing are first painted over with green pigment. My students often refer to this as the "Kermit the Frog" state of the painting. At this point thin, warm glazes are applied to selectively remove the green from the painting. The key to good skin tones is a presentation of the proper mixture of cools and warms. Since green is the complement of pink it can neutralize the cooler areas of the skin if allowed to peek through the warmer tones applied over it. Essentially one removes the green in warm areas like the cheeks, chin and lips and allows it to have a slight presence in cooler areas such as the five-o'clock shadow area in a male's face.

After the painting is complete the gold that was applied earlier is burnished and tooled with agate burnishers and various punches.







**Scorpio** egg tempera with gold, silver and palladium leaf 30"x26"