

Opening Address at CanWax West's "Waxing Poetic 2016",
Martin Street Gallery, Penticton BC, November 25 2016

Good evening, everyone. My name is Carol Munro, and it is my pleasure to welcome you to the CanWax West 2016 annual exhibition, "Waxing Poetic".

Events such as this are evidence of the vigorous revival of encaustic painting; and they are celebrations of a medium which has a very long history. Encaustic was a medium of choice 2000 years ago in early Greece.

The modern revival gained traction in the 1990's, and we are part of that rebirth as we gather here to show and see modern encaustic work.

There is wonderful artwork assembled here in the Martin Street Gallery: work by two members of CWW—and by encaustic landscape artist, Lisa Kozokowksi; and the hospitality here at Martin Street Gallery is legendary.

We have poetry and live music to enjoy in a few minutes, but first we'll make a short tour of the curious history of encaustic...and the formation of CanWax West, an umbrella

organization serving Western Canada, founded here in Penticton and anchoring a serious modern movement in this ancient medium. The Okanagan, famous for many remarkable attributes, is now recognized in North America and through social media, widely around the world, as a centre of encaustic activity. How did this all happen?

To put this all into perspective, today, I want to mention 4 names: you'll see why, shortly. One is Joanne Mattera. Another is the late Thea Haubrich. Shary Bartlett and Bethany Handfield are the other two.

Joanne Mattera is a figurehead in modern encaustic—on this continent and abroad. She is a respected painter, a founder of conferences, and the author of a reference book which is perhaps the absolute foundation piece in encaustic handbooks for artists.

I met her when I travelled to Massachusetts for an international encaustic conference. At that time, our local circle of encaustic artists was small, and we were striving to overcome the 'novelty-factor' associated with working in a medium that to many people looked like fooling around with melted crayons.

Thea Haubrich was our teacher and our inspiration. It was she who encouraged me to attend the Massachusetts workshop, and we travelled there together, Thea making it her business to introduce me to all the important encaustic headliners at the time: just as if we Okanagan painters were part of that world. Which, it turns out, we are.

It was Thea's dream that we would evolve to a state of enviable quality in our work, and that our association with one another would create the right mix for making the Okanagan a hotspot nationally and globally.

Thea's wish came true, though she didn't live to see the flowering of CanWax West. She did, however, supply us with all the tools to make it work, including familiarizing us with the artwork and writings of figurehead encaustic practitioners. Such as Joanne Mattera.

A supporter and accomplished artist/teacher from the coast, Shary Bartlett — and Bethany Handfield, one of Thea's first students here, have been at the core of CWW's growth. Thea and Shary conceived a plan for CanWax in 2008. Shary and Bethany, following Thea's death, launched CanwaxWest in 2013. Word has just come that Bethany and Shary will be

attending the 11th Annual Encaustic Conference in Massachusetts in 2017. This annual interdisciplinary event brings a community of artists from all over the world to meet and work together with gallerists, curators, critics and collectors engaged with wax, printmaking, mixed media, professional practices and more. Founded by — Joanne Mattera.

* * * * *

Joanne Mattera's book **“The Art of Encaustic Painting —Contemporary Expression in the Ancient Medium of Pigmented Wax”** was published in 2001. I've been asked this evening to present a nutshell history of encaustic...and I've borrowed liberally and so very respectfully from Joanne's text to fulfill my daunting assignment to outline over 2 thousand years of history in a handful of minutes.

So... beginning where the modern revival had its wellspring, we tap into an interview Mattera had with American Artist Jasper Johns. He had been experimenting with encaustic for a couple of decades at that point:

(4)

When I interviewed Jasper Johns for *Women's Wear Daily* in 1986, he remarked rightly of encaustic, "It's an archaic medium, and few people use it." Throughout the 1950s and 1960s he was virtually its sole practitioner, and at the time we spoke, just a handful of artists had gone beyond experimenting to create a serious body of encaustic work. Yet now, a decade and a half later, thousands of artists—impelled by the zeitgeist, the luminosity, or perhaps simply by the recent availability of good tools and materials—are exploring the possibilities of expression in pigmented wax. What a sweet irony it is that at the beginning of a new millennium, when cyber images are generated at the speed of light as pixels on a screen, a laborious medium that flourished over two thousand years ago should once again become a hot commodity.

And *hot* is the appropriate word here, for encaustic, from the ancient Greek *enkaustikos*, means "to heat" or "to burn." Heat is used at every stage of encaustic painting. The medium consists of beeswax melted with a small amount of resin to impart hardness; it becomes paint when pigment is added to the molten wax. Painting requires the artist to work quickly, for the wax begins to harden the moment it leaves its heat source. What makes encaustic unique—indeed, what makes encaustic *encaustic*—is the application of heat between layers of brushstrokes. Heat binds each layer to the one set down before it, so while the image may consist of discrete compositional elements, structurally the entire surface is one carefully crafted mass, a whole ball of wax, if you will.

The history of encaustic has arrived on our contemporary shores in evocative fragments—an archival scrap of information here, a startling image there—borne, not unlike a message in a bottle, by vessels from various times and places.

PAINTED SHIPS

We begin in ancient Greece, where shipbuilders used beeswax to caulk the joints and waterproof the hulls of their vessels. It would seem a short creative leap to pigmenting the wax and then patterning the surface of a waxed hull. Homer, writing in 800 B.C., makes note of painted warships sailing into Troy. We can only speculate on the designs on these vessels and the empowering effect that they would have had on the soldiers within—or the terror that blood red markings, say, might have struck in the enemy.

However they were painted, the curved hulls of seagoing barques led Greek artists to take encaustic in two directions: flat for easel painting and fully dimensional for the polychroming of clay and marble sculptures. Pliny the Elder, the Roman historian writing in the first century A.D., mentions Apelles, Praxiteles, Pausias, and other artists from the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. as practitioners of encaustic. Beyond this notation, a visual record—a message on a bottle—remains. A krater from the fourth century B.C., now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, depicts a sculptor applying wax to a marble figure.

Mattera...page 15

Those are the remnants of early glory for encaustic. Brief revivals followed, notably among 19th Century painters, sparked by a popular taste for antiquity and things ‘oriental’ (exotic).

(6)

century painters, just as the excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii in the eighteenth-century had sparked an "encaustic revival" in that period. But as artists throughout the centuries discovered new, less labor-intensive painting methods—tempera, fresco, oil painting, and, most recently, acrylic—encaustic became just a footnote in art history. It remained there until 1954, when a young painter, tired of waiting for his oils to dry, put encaustic to canvas.

Mattera...page 18

That artist was Jasper Johns, whose work catalyzed the modern encaustic movement.

THE NINETIES

The nineties saw an exponential increase in the use of encaustic, and two groundbreaking exhibitions documented it: *Contemporary Uses of Wax and Encaustic* at the Palo Alto Cultural (now Art) Center in Palo Alto, California, in 1992, and *Waxing Poetic: Encaustic Art in America* at the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey, in 1999. Like quotation marks around a statement, these shows virtually opened and closed the decade.

Mattera...page 24

Encaustic was once again the map.

(7)

Mattera...page 27

ENCAUSTIC IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Contemporary encaustic painting—that is, painting made with pigmented wax—is not separate from contemporary art, for, as we know, it is not paint that makes the painting, but the artist. In this new century, as encaustic loses its novelty status, encaustic history and art history will more fully intertwine. Each new painting, exhibition, essay, and review—and certainly, I would hope, this book—will contribute to that history.

Mattera...page 27

...And each workshop, conference, and gatherings such as this one, are contributing to that history.

CanWax West participates in writing that history by representing encaustic artists from Western Canada; by hosting annual workshops led by leading encaustic experts and practitioners; by hosting two exhibitions a year, and by holding studio painting sessions every second week, offering participants the opportunity to develop their work in a community of like-minded artists. All in all, it is a hive of activity!

END of TALK

further info for audience:

1. Show runs until: (Demo and Open House tomorrow)
2. Awards: what and when
3. Judy Millar poem
4. Thank everyone. Mention Ballot Box and Bio Book
5. The formalities completed, I now invite you to circulate, enjoy the the company, the art, the refreshments, and the music.

Acknowledgement: Joanne Mattera is thanked for permitting me for this occasion to quote from her book, “The Art of Encaustic Painting: Contemporary Expression in the Ancient Medium of Pigmented Wax”, Watson-Guption Publications, New York, 2001.

(8)