

Article Woodward Magazine and Bronberger

JOHAN MARAIS WORKING AND LIVING IN PARIS SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2006



JOHAN MARAIS

By courtesy of the South Africa Association for the Visual Arts, I was granted permission to occupy an apartment in the Cité International des Arts in Paris for a period of four months. I arrived in Paris on Monday, 4 September 2006.

I unpacked, did the necessary grocery shopping, and then I took a long walk through the two islands surrounded by the Seine, which flowed by just across the road from the Cité. What a privilege!

By the end of the day I had made up my mind that I would focus mainly on landscapes, in particular the parks, public gardens and forests in and around Paris, as well as in Southern France. Overwhelmed by the beauty of Paris, I started my first painting that same evening.

I am convinced that there is something in the drinking water in Paris that makes a person cheerful and enthusiastic! Another possible explanation of the state of euphoria that I experienced could be the affordability of the lovely French wines Working in your studio and outdoors has been a delight.



CLAIR DE LUNE (MOONLIGHT) 60 cm x 45 cm ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

On my second day in Paris I booked a venue for an exhibition from 6 – 16 December 2006. I realised that it would take hard work to produce enough paintings - my goal was to finish 40 paintings, which would include both works in acrylic on canvas and pen and ink sketches on acid-free paper.

During the first few weeks I visited as many galleries and museums in Paris as possible in order to learn from, and about, old masters like Monet, Manet, Renoir, Picasso, Morisot, Sisley and many more. I spent hours at museums like the Musée Marmottan Monet, studying his life and works, and making notes. I came to the realisation that although much could be gained from a study of this kind, it was important for me to use my own individual approach.

In Paris you are on your own. You do your own research, work alone and experience art on your own. People who believe that they always need a teacher or guru to show them the way run the risk of becoming paralysed by dependence. A good teacher will set his students free as soon as they have learnt what can be taught, keeping in mind that some things cannot be given or taken, but must be experienced personally. Regardless of your level of achievement as an artist, in Paris you will find practical information and insight without rigid rules and formulas. You learn how to observe the effects of light and reflection on everything around you and then how to mimic these effects and techniques in paint. Such insights are responsible for the difference between average and exceptional work.

Soon after my arrival in Paris, I realised that my very scant knowledge of French would not suffice. Parisians are ardent about their country and their language and are not at all eager to speak English. Although I was always treated politely, despite being unable to French, my inability to communicate effectively often led to extreme frustration. Fortunately French-speaking artists at the Cité offered to help me with translations when I was preparing price lists, invitations and posters for my exhibition. Their invaluable assistance was greatly appreciated.

Sometimes I spent whole days doing what I call 'landscape meditation' on the bank of the Seine across the road from my studio, or in the parks around the city. Landscape painters are part of a noble tradition. Landscape painting is a serious art form that stems from human awareness and artistic sensitivity. It is the result of a lengthy creative evolution, a companion to humankind's ever-changing approach the natural environment.



JARDIN DU PALAIS DU LUXEMBOURG (GARDENS OF THE PALACE OF LUXEMBOURG) 60 cm x 45 cm ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

Generally I felt completely rejuvenated after spending time doing sketches outdoors in the parks. Nature seems to place everything in perspective. While it is true that the challenges posed by the recreation of nature in drawings and paintings are enormous, landscapists seem to enjoy the struggle. In fact, we take great pride in what we do!

Although my paintings were done in my studio, I frequently visited the areas that I was painting. I realised that in order to be successful, I had to spend as much time as possible out of doors, taking time to observe nature and to see how the changing light at different times of the day affected the colours of the land, and how the colours of the leaves changed with seasonal changes. This first-hand experience in observing nature made my paintings more than mere copies of photographs. It was a great compliment to my skill when someone in the studio commented that my paintings effectively convey the actual atmospheres of the places I had painted. The ability to transfer one's inspiration to a painting that makes the viewer feel what it is like 'to be there' is at the essence of successful landscape painting.

On several occasions during my stay in Paris, I had to ask myself whether a particular subject was indeed worth painting, or whether painting it would perhaps be no more than an exercise in technique. This happened every time after I had been at the receiving end of some negative criticism. The 350 studios at the Cité were occupied by artists from all over the world, each of whom had their own opinion, not necessarily positive, about my work. The art scene in Paris is as diverse and international as its music, with galleries and exhibitions showing works by artist from every corner of the world.



JARDEN DES PLANTES 50X50CM OIL ON CANVAS

Fortunately the negative criticism I received did not make me despondent rather, I became more determined to paint landscapes, and more excited about exploring the potential of this art form. My enthusiasm was like a snowball rolling downhill, becoming bigger and gathering momentum, and soon it became impossible to push the visions away. What I observed had to be painted I had to examine the mysterious reasons for the graceful way in which trees are bent by the wind, for why fog remains longer in certain places, for how the glassy reflection on the surface of a pond breaks apart when a breeze is blowing, and for the brighter colours of certain flowers when the sun is low. Nature yields countless secrets to those who genuinely pursue their visions.



LE DEDUTE DE L'HIVER PARC FLORAL DE PARIS (STARTING OF WINTER BOTANICAL GARDENS IN PARIS) 100 cm x 70 cm ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

Prior to my exhibition, I invited a number of artists from the Cité to my studio to look at my work. This was perhaps not a good idea, but I believed that I could learn something from their opinions. Within 10 seconds, one of them pronounced that my paintings were 'too strong' or 'too powerful'. The next artist's opinion was the complete opposite, and I was told that my work was 'too peaceful' and 'too traditional' and lacked emotions such as sadness and violence. However, I realised that, above all, I had to be true to myself when painting. I gave much thought to the aspects of a painting that would force people to stop and take a closer look. I came to the conclusion that a great painting has a presence that is so powerful that one is drawn to it. That is what I hope to achieve in my work.



PARC FLORA DE PARIS 100X70CM OIL ON CANVAS

My total experience in Paris – including every person that crossed my way, everything I observed, every spell of happiness, every small discovery, every painful disappointment, every step forward or backward - has brought me to where I am now.

I do not try to paint traditional academic paintings, but I want my work to be clearly distinguishable from the work of other contemporary artists, regardless of how good they may be. I want my art to stand out from the body of landscape paintings. My continuing goal is to produce paintings that are dramatic and intriguing, a unique expression of who I am and of the way I see the world around me.

When people walk into a gallery or museum and are confronted by numerous great works of art, I want them to be drawn to my paintings. After all, that is my job as an artist. As an artist I am also an entertainer, which means that I have to create art that will grab the viewers' attention long enough to ensure that they will explore it and respond to it in some way, be it good or bad, positive or negative.

During my stay in Paris I realised that painting is not easy, and that it is further complicated by the many ideas, concepts and theories out there. Given an opportunity like the one I enjoyed, the

best one can do is to use every opportunity to learn about composition, value, colour, texture and focal points, to read widely and to study as much as possible.



UN PAYSAGE D'HIVER (BEGINNING OF WINTER) 96 cm x 120 cm ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

In Paris I was able to paint in the studio without interference for the first time. I was relaxed, motivated and very happy. On a rainy day I would spend 12 hours and more in my studio painting. For an artist this surely was a perfect world to live in.

I am immensely disappointed that the critics did not grasp my work, that the galleries did not want my paintings, and that I did not sell a single painting during my 10-day exhibition. Nevertheless I received very valuable exposure. What one must take into consideration is that there are 30 000 registered artists in Paris and that there are several hundred galleries in this city alone.



JARDIN DU BIBLIOTHEQUE FONEY 50X50CM OIL ON CANVAS

While working in Paris, I came to the realisation that painting goes beyond a mere representation of facts it digs down into the artist's soul and is an expression of his or her humanity. Painting and art in general, is the universal language that connects people of all nationalities. We each have a unique perspective on life, and our experiences, religious convictions, personal preferences and habits colour the world we live in. The one outstanding thing that I learned in Paris is that it is good to be different in the way you express yourself in the art form of your choice, to express your individuality. I have accepted both the positive and the negative criticisms as I have realised that something can be learned from each opinion.

Remember that being an artist is not just a job – it is a life-long adventure during which you are constantly putting your life experience on canvas. Persistence, determination, motivation and commitment are what made my stay in Paris as an artist so successful. Hard work, not talent, brought me to where I am today. The more you study and learn, the more you will realise that you have barely scratched the surface of the knowledge available to you. Instead of calling this the conclusion, I should really call it the beginning.

I give grateful thanks to God, Paris, the Art Association of Pretoria, and my family and friends.

Johan Marais