

The Art of Travel

■ For artist Diane Wood, a life of travel and adventure shapes a diverse, sophisticated portfolio.

BY KARIN M. LAZARUS, BFA



Flowing Rio Grande, Diane Wood.

The home of Diane Wood is filled with her stained glass; pastels; and lovely woodland art created from collected sea shells, birds' nests, and other found objects from nature. A tour of her home brings to light the wide range of the artist's talent, with diverse pieces spanning 35 years of creating beauty. Wood did not develop a signature style and stick with it. She developed a style and then made changes, again and again, with astonishing range. Some people create works of art to explore themselves. My sense of Wood is that her interest lies in exploring the world.

Circuitous route to pastels

Born in Hartford, Connecticut, and raised in Rockville, Wood pursued music and dance as a girl. When she graduated high school at age 16, she knew she wanted to further her education. Her parents believed that girls' best option was to get married and have children, but Wood had bigger ideas. With money she had saved, she signed up for night school to study chemistry, English, and history. Why these courses? "I wanted to expand my knowledge and give myself some diversity," she says. "I never knew I would become a painter." She also studied piano at the Hartt School of Music and the University of Connecticut.

In the mid-1960s, Wood began a career with Gerber Scientific, working as

administrative assistant to the company's president, CEO, and founder, Heinz Joseph Gerber. "He was a brilliant man who had a few of his inventions at the Smithsonian," she says. "The corporation was a think tank of engineers that revolutionized several industries. In 1996, Mr. Gerber died. His son David was very instrumental in getting the Smithsonian to accept all of Heinz Joseph Gerber's papers. One day David called, asking whether I would mind if a photo of me in a miniskirt and white go-go boots could be included with the papers, as it was a sign of the times. I laughed and said, 'David, that is the only way I will ever get into the Smithsonian.' I am sure it is in a steel file cabinet somewhere, but it is there."

At Gerber Scientific, Wood met her husband, Ken, to whom she's now been happily married for 38 years. In 1975, the couple read the James Michener novel *Centennial* and decided to see for themselves what Colorado was all about. They visited and fell in love. After seven more visits, they finally decided to move to rural Boulder County, Colorado, in June of 1999.

"As soon as we got settled and were out of boxes, I began creating stained glass lamps, mirrors, and window pieces," Wood says. "I took workshops and classes. I pursued a talent I hadn't even known I had." When Wood was 50, she got arthritis in her neck, which prevented her from continuing to work in



Wood at work in her studio.

stained glass. She decided to turn her creative energy toward painting, starting with watercolor. “My first instructor kept telling me that my work was not right, and I felt discouraged,” she says. “I moved on

to oil, acrylics, and finally pastels. I find pastels intriguing—the vividness of color and the ease of bringing that color to canvas.”

Diverse inspiration, creative flow

Wood draws inspiration from the influential works of the Impressionists, from the old Dutch masters, the artists of the Hudson River School, and Salvador Dali. Her paintings express the emotions that she is experiencing at the time. A piece may reflect hope, joy, and amusement, all seen from different angles. Her work sometimes begins with a geographical reference or with something that catches her eye in her garden; she often finds that unexpected things happen while she’s walking through the woods.

“Sometimes there are creative blocks,” she says. “Then I’ll see something inspirational, and all of a sudden there are at least 12 different things I want to do—the flow begins! I’m a Libra; I balance and weigh things accordingly. Sometimes a piece can go together so quickly I amaze myself. It can take as little as two hours. Other times maybe I’ll wait, look at it for a while, and add more detail. Some pieces can take up to 30 hours because of how intricate they are. I am not a portrait artist, although I can get likeness. I work from photos, from my imagination, or from sitting outdoors and seeing what captivates me. I want to be up close and personal with nature; I love painting landscapes and florals.”

Wood also draws inspiration from her travels. She recently returned from Turkey, where she took a hiking tour of the underground city Kaymakli. “The space we hiked through was so tight that my chest touched my knees in some passages,” she says. “We then hiked out to Rose Valley. In the middle of nowhere, there was a beautiful tent filled with pillows, and a radiant Muslim woman was selling nuts and delicious, fresh-squeezed orange juice. She captured my attention.” Wood’s fans can rest assured they will soon see images of Kaymakli and the woman of Rose Valley.

Over the course of a day, Wood may morph from painter to teacher to president of the Pastel Society of Colorado (PSC), then to passionate cook, and finally back to painter. “I do demos quite often, and I like to inspire children and adults to bring out their creativity,” she says. “Some say, ‘I could never be creative.’ My response is always, ‘You would be surprised.’” Wood teaches workshops and organizes a local music festival that has an environmental awareness theme. “When we return from trips, I give a presentation at our local senior center,” she adds. “I’m not selling anything; I just bring my projector and talk about the interesting people we met and experiences we had. I get really good attendance.”

Adventure seeker—and finder

Wood begins her day at 6 a.m. She sits on her sofa, drinks coffee, and watches the sun rise as she and Ken hold hands. Then she gets going. Wood is dynamic and charismatic, with a fearless sense of high-flying adventure.

In May of 2010, she and Ken traveled to southwestern Utah for a truly daring experience: exploration of a slot canyon, a deep, narrow canyon with steep sides. “When we met our guides, Mac and Angus, they told us to drink a large glass of water before leaving so we would start the journey fully hydrated. They



Sunset Colors, Diane Wood.

also told me to remove my watch so it would not catch on rocks in the canyon,” she says. “We traveled 16 miles down a washboard dirt and gravel road at speeds up to 70 miles per hour, then turned left into ‘Egypt,’ a desolate area named by cowboys years ago.”

The party parked in an area of flat sandstone, next to a gaping, dark hole. “Yep,” says Wood, “we were going down into that hole. Mac went through many safety issues, including what we should do if anything happened to him and Angus. Then it was time to rappel into the canyon. Mac hooked my belay device to the rope and instructed me on stepping over the edge. Walking down the side of a cliff is quite a sensation! I trusted the guides’ expertise, but I was still apprehensive. I had never done anything like this, and I was 72 years old. It was a true adventure.”

After the seven-person group made it down the cliff, they continued into the slot canyon. “Deeper into the earth went the adventurers,” Wood recalls. “Every few feet posed a different problem. The sandstone is like sandpaper. I wore long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and workman’s gloves. By the end of the trip, my clothes looked like they had been trashed.” They traversed some parts of the canyon by using their bodies as bridges between the two walls. “Sometimes we advanced with our toes on one wall and our heels on the other,” Wood explains.

“Sometimes we had to bridge with our butts on one wall and feet straight across on the opposite wall. At times we also used a sort of spread eagle, with one foot on each wall.”

Trouble struck when the party reached a third rappel point mid-canyon. “We had to rappel straight down into a 20-foot hole,” Wood says. “The problem was that the wall was oddly curved and the sandstone was slippery with dust. When I had descended about eight feet, I lost my footing, and my feet shot upward. My shoulders and head flew down, and my back and head slammed into the sandstone wall. Fortunately, I was wearing a helmet and a heavy backpack, which helped cushion the blow. Mac scrambled down and asked whether I was OK. My response: ‘I don’t know.’ He checked me for a concussion or other serious injury, then carefully turned me back to an upright position.” Throughout the frightening episode, Wood kept her cool. “My right hand was gripping the brake rope through the whole experience,” she says. “I was doing what I had been instructed to do. Ken was proud that I never lost my composure.”

The group continued their journey. Slot canyons are a one-way street; you always go one way and never go back. “At last the canyon got wider,” Wood says, “and we were able to



Berlin Cafeteria, Diane Wood.

climb out. On the hike back, we regained all the altitude we had lost. After expending so much energy in the canyon, the trek back up to the car on steep sandstone was not trivial. When we got back to town, I bought a commemorative T-shirt. I felt I had earned it.”

Adventures like this drive Wood’s creativity. Another example is the experience that inspired the cover art for this issue of the *CSA Journal*. Wood explains: “In 2007, I fractured my pelvis. It so happened that we had booked a hot air balloon flight at the Hot Air Balloon Festival in Albuquerque that same year. I was still on crutches, but I was determined to get into the balloon. I approached the balloon basket rear end first and swung my legs over the side. It was worth the effort. What a wonderful experience I had seeing hundreds of balloons! I painted a couple of these scenes, and I may do more.”

Two of Wood’s paintings were recently selected by Senator Michael Bennet to represent Colorado by decorating the senator’s office in Washington, D.C. She concludes, “There is so much I would like to paint. Time, time, time; it all takes time!” Take a walk through her [website](#) to read about her many adventures, view the stunning artwork they’ve inspired, and find upcoming workshop opportunities if you’d like to explore your creative side. You will quickly find that Wood makes the world sparkle a little brighter. ■



Karin Lazarus has been writing about cooking and art for more than a decade. As a former artist’s representative, she has always been fascinated with the art world. You can reach her at karinlazarus@gmail.com.