



OPPOSITE PAGE

**Gemini**

2008, oil, 44 x 40.  
Courtesy John Pence Gallery,  
San Francisco, California.

# Contemporary & Classical

Oil painter **Patricia Watwood** places  
a bygone style in present-day contexts.

—  
**by John A. Parks**

Patricia Watwood paints figures, allegories, and portraits that are both stylishly classical and entirely modern. She presents forms framed within compositions of stately intervals and orderly calm, rendered to a perfection that brings to mind painters from another age—Ingres, David, or perhaps Bouguereau. Her subject matter, however, is clearly modern. In *Gemini*, for instance, two nude women sit on a cloth-covered plinth illuminated in a cool, diffuse light, their poses almost mirroring each other. At their feet, a small still life adds to the sense of order and contributes a decorative warmth to the painting. Timeless as this image is, there is something in the matter-of-fact solidity and self-possession of the models that makes it a distinctly contemporary piece.

“I would like the viewer to feel that my paintings are made in the classical tradition of figure painting but that they connect to their world—the world of today, not the world that existed long ago and is now preserved in museums,” Watwood says. “It is important to me that people looking at my paintings understand my view that their

contemporary experience is just as worthy of hanging on the wall—that the basic ingredient of beauty and meaning is enduring and present, now as always. The world changes, but our human emotions, struggles, and questions about ourselves are universal and timeless.”

Watwood embarks on every painting with considerable study and planning. “A figure painting starts in one of two ways,” she says. “Sometimes I have a specific person that I want to work with, and I find some interesting way to create a composition working with that individual in the studio. The other method of proceeding is when I have some particular theme in mind, such as an allegory, a narrative, or a character. I proceed to develop the idea through a process of sketching and studies. The inspiration for the idea could come from many different places—poetry or other reading, a play, a movie, music, or a painting that inspires me.” In the case of *Gemini*, the artist began working with a model by simply making drawings and studies. “At first I had no thought that I would make a composition



with two figures,” says Watwood. “But an important part of the process is to be open to new ideas as things develop.”

Having conceived the idea of the composition, Watwood made a large drawing, working out placement and interval. “There is no specific geometry beneath this painting,” she says, “but in art school I was very interested in proportions such as the Golden Mean and other ratios that classical painters were interested in. I think that, to some extent, I’ve internalized these

ideas.” Having finalized the drawing, Watwood then enlarged it using a machine in a Kinko’s store that can make copies as wide as three feet. “I use the photocopy the way a Renaissance painter used a cartoon,” says Watwood. “I put sanguine pastel on the back, place the copy on the canvas, and then transfer the image like any tracing.” Once the outline has been transferred, the artist draws back into it with sanguine pastel to adjust and balance the drawing. She then fixed the line by painting into it with oil paint



in an earth red mixed with some white, turpentine, and a little medium, such as Liquin. This dries fairly quickly, leaving a warm red-brown line that remains visible as she begins to paint.

The next step in Watwood’s process is an underpainting. She uses a limited palette of yellow ochre, Venetian red, burnt umber, viridian, white, and ivory black. “Occasionally I might add a blue if there is something very blue in the painting,” says the artist. She places the paint somewhat thinly and transparently. “It’s a process of mapping out the painting,” she says, “determining where lights and darks are going to be and setting up the overall pattern and fall of the light.” At this stage the artist does little in the way of turning the forms, and the process proceeds quite quickly. “Usually I can get the whole painting covered and laid out in three to four hours,” she says, “although I might make changes and adjustments for three or four days before proceeding to the next stage.” It is in this underpainting that the artist establishes the still life elements in the piece. “It is much easier to move them around in this thin painting than it will be to move them later, once I have more time invested in the piece,” Watwood says. In general, she uses synthetic brushes



**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
**Bacchus**  
2008, oil and gold leaf on canvas,  
38 x 36. Courtesy John Pence  
Gallery, San Francisco, California.

**ABOVE LEFT**  
**Semele**  
2005, oil, 36 x 24. Collection  
the artist.

**TOP**  
**Homage to Rembrandt:  
Bathsheba**  
2001, oil, 46 x 46. Collection  
the artist.

**ABOVE**  
**Music and Poetry**  
2000, oil, 36 x 60. Private  
collection.

of various brands, although she notes that recently she is more inclined to use bristle brushes during the early painting stages.

Once the underpainting is completed and dried, the artist moves on to the finish layer. “I work a section at a time,” says Watwood. “For instance, I might decide that today I am going to work on the thigh. I will set up the model and then begin to mix color, which I will lay on the area broadly and openly with a big brush.” Once the artist has established the major values in this way, she proceeds carefully into the area with small synthetic brushes, working and teasing the layers to display the subtle shifts of color and tone as the form turns in light. “I’m really trying to finish the area at this juncture, although I may come back right at the end to make small adjustments,” she says.

In this stage the artist uses mostly stand oil as a medium, sometimes adding some cold-pressed linseed oil if she wants



to slow the drying rate. Each section she paints takes three or four hours to complete; working through a large painting such as *Gemini* in this manner takes several weeks. One of the challenges of working at this rate is that edges sometimes dry rather hard. “I have to go back and really work at the edges,” says Watwood. “You try to make them look natural, but you really have to put a lot of thought and time into them.” Having worked the entire surface to a finish, the artist will consider the whole painting and begin to make small adjustments to aid readability and consistency. “I keep working until the painting stops bugging me,” she says with a laugh.

In addition to her work with the full figure, Watwood is an enthusiastic and accomplished portrait painter with a number of fine commissions under her belt. In *Julie and Russell Patterson*, the artist playfully painted a couple with a Jackson Pollock painting they own hanging behind them. She greatly enjoyed using her tiny brushes to reproduce the splashes of the famous Abstract Expressionist. “Painting portraits presents some challenges for me because I want to work from life as much as possible,” says Watwood. “These days it’s not unusual for a client to expect one photo session and then a painting to be sent on later.” For the Pattersons’ portrait Watwood was able to get eight sittings from her clients, enough time to paint the faces entirely from life. She then placed the clothing on mannequins—carefully imitating the way the sitters themselves were dressed—so that she could also work from life at her convenience. Photography was used only as a reference for the background. The result is a



painting of great warmth and considerable charm.

Sometimes Watwood makes a painting that displays an intriguing mixture of portraiture and allegory. In *Bacchus*, for instance, she carefully chose the model as a character who in real life exemplifies the qualities that the Roman god might be thought to have, someone who thoroughly enjoys the pleasures of New York nightlife and fine living. The evident vanity and playful narcissism of the figure provide a highly entertaining update of Caravaggio’s famous painting of the same subject. Once again we see how Watwood uses the dialogue of past and present to give a new edge to both.

Watwood came to her present interests in painting through long training. She began by studying theatrical design but once at work found herself taking a drawing class at the Gage Academy of Art, in Seattle, where she discovered her talent and passion for figurative artwork. Still, she feels very positive about her early years of study. “I have been very grateful for my theatrical and



OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT  
**Hope**  
2009, oil, 58 x 28.  
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT  
**Claudia**  
2001, oil, 30 x 20.  
Collection the artist.

ABOVE  
**Flora Crowned**  
2003, oil, 34 x 26. Courtesy Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York, New York.



OPPOSITE PAGE

**Julie and Russell Patterson**

2009, oil, 48 x 38. Collection Weill Cornell Medical College, New York, New York.

LEFT

**Chrysanthemums**

2008, oil, 18 x 15. Collection the artist.

Now that I am doing some multifigure, narrative work, I find that it is quite like being the director—casting the characters and creating the right setting for the picture. Theater training has given me a background and confidence in creating pictorial images.”

Having studied with Anthony Ryder in Seattle, Watwood went on to study with Jacob Collins at the Water Street Atelier, in Brooklyn, and with Ted Seth Jacobs, in France. She also completed an M.F.A. program at the New York Academy of Art, in Manhattan. “This was a good complement to my atelier training, as

I learned anatomy, sculpture, art history, and contemporary figurative art and criticism,” she says. “Teachers such as Martha Erlebacher and Vincent Desiderio emphasized the importance of critical thinking and consideration of subject matter and meaning, especially in a modern context. I enjoyed studying a more cerebral side of the discipline of painting and am glad to have had that exposure and provocation.”

When asked about how she would like the viewer to respond to her paintings, Watwood is thoughtful. “I would like viewers to feel sated,” she says. “I want to give them beauty and pleasure and the simple satisfaction of enjoying looking at something. I want them to feel validated—that our daily life has some higher meaning and that we are empowered as individuals to assert our values and priorities. I want them to be intrigued and interested to delve into the why of the picture—what does the subject and the interpretation have to say about this painter’s point of view or that of society as a whole? I want them to love it and to feel the love that has gone into the years of painting and study that is behind every work of art. I want them to sense that there is time enough for the things we value. Time to craft a painting, to study, to learn, to enjoy, and time to sit still and contemplate a picture and the world that it contains.”

For the future, Watwood plans to continue her work with the figure and portrait with the occasional diversion of a still life painted for pure pleasure. “I think I will continue to try to find that balance between timeless and today, personal and universal,” she says. “I am starting to explore subjects that are a bit more personal and reflective of my life as a mother and wife, as well as a painter. I am trying to get down to the bottom of myself, figure out who I am, and make paintings from that singular experience.” ■

*John A. Parks is an artist who is represented by Allan Stone Gallery, in New York City. He is also a teacher at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, and is a frequent contributor to American Artist, Drawing, Watercolor, and Workshop magazines.*

## About the Artist

**Patricia Watwood** was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and studied scenic design at Trinity University, in San Antonio. After moving to Seattle, she began to study at the Academy of Realist Art (now Gage Academy of Art) and decided to become a painter. She moved to New York City, where she completed an M.F.A. program at the New York Academy of Art, and studied with Jacob Collins at his brownstone studio and then at the Water Street Atelier, in Brooklyn. Watwood also spent almost a year in France studying with Ted Seth Jacobs at his École Albert Defois. She is represented by John Pence Gallery, in San Francisco, and has shown with Hirsch & Adler Gallery, in New York City, and Atlanta Art Gallery, in Georgia. The artist makes her home in Brooklyn with her husband, Duncan, and their two daughters, Sophia and Jocelyn. More of the artist’s work can be viewed on her website at [www.patriciawatwood.com](http://www.patriciawatwood.com).

design training,” she says. “For one thing, it trains you to take a text and create a visual world to support and extend the artistic ideas of the playwright. This is very similar to taking an allegorical theme or poetic idea and imagining a painting that conveys it.

“Also, theatrical training is the greatest way to learn how to dream up a crazy idea and turn it into a reality,” the artist continues. “Design training gives you the skills to develop the ideas and plan your execution. Theater techies have to know a bit of carpentry, scene painting, prop making, sewing, and all sorts of random skills to put a show together. Those skills and the ability to make something out of random things you have on hand are tremendously helpful.