

Artist to Collect

Steve Mitts



A Contemporary "Old Master"

written by Nancy Silcox &
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No one has ever accused artist Steve Mitts of choosing commonplace subjects for his paintings. From his home studio in Camrose, Alberta come enchanting images out of the far distant past – children at play in a medieval winter wonderland, comely maidens in contemplation, sea-going sailing ships returning to harbour. "The inspiration for my work comes from the Renaissance primarily, the period from 1450 to 1600," says Mitts.

Looking at his paintings, one would be hard-pressed to infer that their artist was, in fact, born in 1968, in the small Northwest Territories town of Hay River. Mitt recalls his parents recognizing his need to express himself artistically from a very early age. "They got tired of washing the walls," he says, "so they encouraged me to draw on large sheets of butcher's paper that they would constantly hang and replace. Throughout my youth, art was a constant and I continually found inspiration from a variety of sources and subject matter. My thoughts were constantly absorbed by ideas to be put onto paper. Luckily, my art classes were a haven for developing those concepts. I knew what I was meant to do with my life and this desire never wavered or left me: I was going to be an artist."



After high school, Mitts enrolled in the art and design program at Red Deer College in Alberta. Prior to this, he had never taken a particular interest in painting, but to fulfill his freshman requirements he hesitantly entered his first painting studio. "It's been said that once a painter gets paint under his finger nails it never leaves and this was true for me," Mitts says. "I found the medium completely intoxicating and the ability to put paint to canvas became my reason for waking up each morning."

While at Red Deer, one instructor noticed Mitts' paintings were evocative of frescoes produced in Renaissance Italy. At the time, Mitts was working with heavy gels that would crack and pull the paint apart, making large recesses in the canvas and allowing layers of coloured washes to fill the valleys. Though he was then working in the abstract, Mitts was able to see direct similarities between his style and the works of Old Masters such as Giotto. "This fascinated me and pushed me in a new direction," he says.

Thus began Mitts' fascination with the constants that exist between the "then" and "now", which he seeks to marry in his work. He notes, "500 years have passed and yet basic human nature

prevails. The subject matter in my paintings usually involves people interacting with one another in conversation or debate, or even sharing a simple smile. All of these behaviours existed then as they do today, but it is the period they come from that captures my attention.

"The fact that I am a painter working primarily in a style from the 1500s and living in rural Alberta, separates me quite easily from my contemporaries," Mitts notes. "I live in a province known for its huge skies, fields of wheat and big industry. Musicians, poets, and people engaging in 16th century activities are unexpected themes for paintings here. That being said, there is an audience for the style and time period I work within. The fact that my works resonate with viewers today really attests to the emotional and spiritual similarities between the Renaissance and the present."

Larger-than-life Renaissance "stars" find their way into his work too – William Shakespeare, Elizabeth the Virgin Queen, Sir Thomas More and Machiavelli. They are often in a contemplative mood, exploring an idea or a feeling. Says the artist: "They might be playing a musical instrument or singing, reading a letter or looking out a window in hopes of seeing someone they miss." Highly detailed and often muted in colour, the subjects are frequently portrayed against a backdrop of snow. Steve Mitts likes snow.

The Dark Side

Don't expect to find only pleasure and refinement in Steve Mitts' work. He explores the darker side of the Renaissance too – a savage era where injustice, treachery and murder thrived. "Life was brutal in Europe during this timeline, so I try to capture this in many of my paintings." One of his recent works, called 'Winter Gallows', chronicles a crowd gathering to witness the latest public hanging. Under a somber fall sky, it is standing room only at this sideshow. "That was a reality in Renaissance times," Mitts states. "Capital punishment was carried out as a method of deterring crime, in a very public forum."

His work 'Plague' follows the same cinéma vérité theme. "The plague was rampant in Europe during this era, so to paint it is to show the daily way of life," says Mitts. With deft melding of painterly technique and colour, he contrasts life and death in this arresting piece. Against a background of pure snow, a holy church and warming candles







flickering from windows, grave diggers excavate frozen soil to bury the latest casualty. Others cart bodies away.

Winter Works

Winter scenes dominate Steve Mitts' world. And while Canadian Prairie residency might be the rationale behind such a choice, he dispels the connection. "Winter scenes made up a large part of the Dutch and Flemish art during the 16th Century, and so they're highly represented in my work too." It was Mitts' exploration of winter that captured the eye of his patron, Maria den Oudsten.

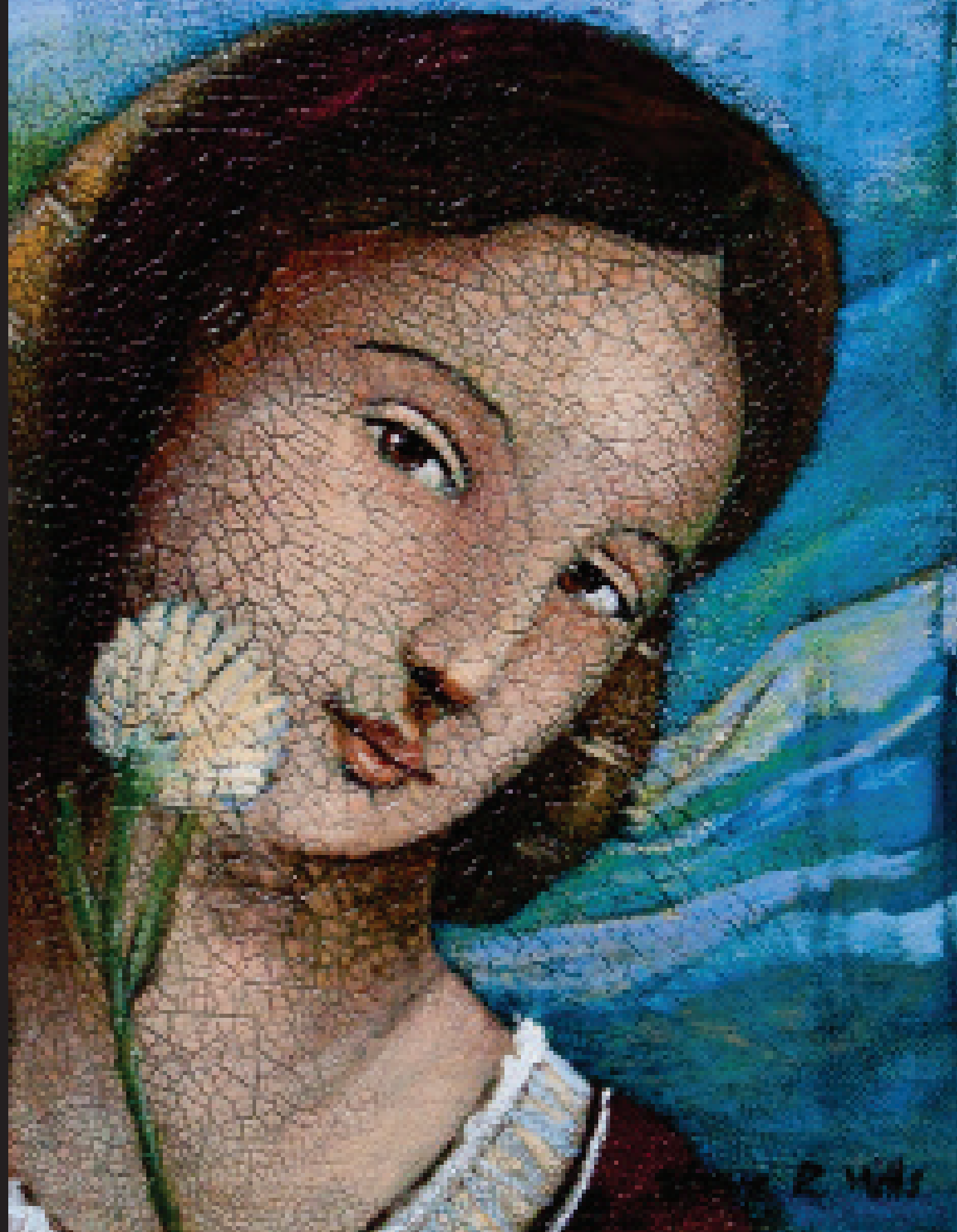
Maria had first learned to "appreciate" snow after her move from Europe to Winnipeg then Calgary, in 2004. It was in the latter city where she discovered Steve Mitts. "I fell in love with the romantic beauty of his paintings – especially the

snow-themed ones. They inspired me to develop a new concept of art and ideas."

She was planning a book to be used as a fundraiser for 'Inn from the Cold', a non-profit Calgary organization assisting the homeless, and commissioned Mitts to create winter scenes for her Journey into Snowmanland.

One of the most intriguing from the series is 'Ice Fishing', which portrays villagers looking for supper at the neighbourhood stream. "Back then they didn't have augers or ice saws to cut holes in the ice, so they would use these long iron rods to chip at the ice until they broke through," Mitts explains. As in his other works, the simplicity of theme contrasts sharply with the complexity of artistic method.

Another piece, 'Hunting Party', evokes a surreal mood through the use of subject and composition.





A group of hunters with dogs at their sides have surrounded a pack of wolves. The vigilant hounds have cornered two of the wolves whose faces are barely discernible amidst the rocks and snow-covered landscape. It's a fateful scene. One of the wolves, snarling and defensive looks down from his rocky refuge above the hunters, unaware of the hunter to the side with firearm at the ready.

Snow and Shakespeare

So pleased was den Oudsten with the success of the collaboration that she persuaded Mitts to create more winter scenes. These would decorate her 'Sweet Sorrow Lounge and Gallery' in Vancouver. Coined from a Shakespearean quote, 'Sweet Sorrow' shows only winter-themed art set in the famed author's era.

One of Mitts' works for Sweet Sorrow stars the Bard of Avon himself, grizzled and intent with quill pen at the ready, dominating a backdrop of spidery hoar-frost. A London streetscape and the Globe Theatre complete the time-travel.

Den Oudsten admits her appreciation of Steve Mitts extends beyond his painterly ability. "I am always so impressed with Steve's willingness to thoroughly research the time period he paints in, to create realism."

Exacting Technique

Mitts' technique is no less demanding than his subject. "My subject matter necessitates me emulating the aged and cracked look of original Renaissance paintings," he says. The skilled artist accomplishes this through an exacting process

which he begins by combining two different gels over the underpaintings.

"The gels dry at different rates; thus they pull at each other and cracking occurs," Mitts notes, adding that while he can control where the cracking occurs, he cannot manipulate how severe the cracks will be. After the gel dries clear, he applies dark washes of diluted paint. Then with a squeegee, he pushes the paint into the now-cracked surface. Next painting over the cracks can begin. "This creates wonderful value changes and depth to the images," he explains.

A Royal Interest

Steve Mitts' work has been displayed in various Canadian art galleries, as well as private collections throughout Canada, the U.S. and Europe. In 2005

one of his treasures returned home with no less a notable than Queen Elizabeth. In that year, the Queen and Prince Philip had been invited to Saskatchewan as part of the province's centennial celebrations. The royal party was lodging at the Hotel Saskatchewan in Regina, where some of Mitt's work was on display. Serendipitously, patron Maria den Oudsten was lodging at the same hotel, supervising the display.

"Maria noticed the Queen's secretary inspecting the paintings," Mitts recalls. "She seized the occasion to approach her and enquire if the Queen might like one of my works as a memento of her Saskatchewan stay." The secretary returned with a positive reply and chose her personal favourite, a winter painting entitled 'Children at Play, 1491'.

The scene featured an assortment of scarved



and mittened children frolicking in a snow-covered town. While the youngsters sled, skate and make snowmen, adults use the occasion to pass the time with each other. A fine manor home, church and a variety of more humble residences form the painting's backdrop, Again, a community spirit predominates and the mood is warm, despite the subdued tones of brown, tan, gray and white.

Later that month, Maria den Oudsten received a letter from the Royal Secretary thanking her for the painting. One wonders in which British household Steve Mitts' work now resides!

The Campfield Commission

Steve Mitts now calls the invitation to create the ceiling work at historic Campfield, "the commission of a lifetime." In 2000, however, he was a relative newcomer to the Canadian art

scene and harboured doubts that he could fulfill his employer's expectations.

Marie Durrer recalls Steve's perception of the opportunity that lay before him. "Steve was in awe of the project – it was both exciting and scary. He thought the prospect of painting a ceiling could not be happening to an artist so early in his career."

He also worried that grasping the brass ring before him would not come without personal sacrifice. He'd have to move to Ontario for no less than three months to complete the work. Graciously, he was invited to "bunk down" with the family for the duration of his stay.

Mitts arrived in Ontario itching to begin the challenge. He'd be working on super-sized easels to sketch his scenes to actual size – some up to twelve feet across. Then, lying prone on scaffolding

2.5 feet from the ceiling, he would transfer the drawings to the ceiling, using the Renaissance fresco technique. It was one he knew well.

The Fresco Technique

Describing the feat, Mitts says, "I pin-pricked every line and detail of my drawing, then used a nylon bag full of black graphite and gently tapped it up against the drawings taped to the ceiling. The graphite passed through the holes and onto the white ceiling allowing me to simply connect the dots. I repeated the process for each of the drawings until the whole image was transferred." The next step was sealing the underpainting with gel so he could apply washes over the images. No shortage of "elbow grease" in these masterpieces!

Marie laughs at the memory of her houseguest's usual condition during this period. "As the gel and

washes were applied over Steve's head, he 'wore' most of it, just as he had worn the graphite. Steve took lots of showers during this project!"

The initial corner paintings of the Campfield sitting room took 3 weeks to complete. The central mural work then proceeded, with each of the four quadrants' scenes covering an area of approximately 5 by 5 feet. Marie recalls her feelings as work progressed, "It was stunning and each day the paintings became a whole."

The last step in the sitting room transformation saw Mitts creating an artistic canopy over the Gothic bay windows. In time, six flying cherubs holding a banner that read, "Campfield. Est. 1858" emerged. The entire project had taken 3 months and 6 days to complete.

Marie pays Steve Mitts the ultimate compliment when she notes that visitors to Campfield assume



the ceiling painting has always been there. "They are amazed to find out that someone could create such an authentic-looking work in this century!" She laughs that she and Greg "feel almost selfish at times, having the privilege of viewing such exquisite pieces of work whenever we want." After a sojourn to Alberta, Mitts returned to Campfield to complete a Muses-themed work on the home's upper hallway ceilings.

Present-Day Patronage

Given Mitts' affinity for the Renaissance era, it is somewhat fitting that he, like the Old Masters, has found great success with patrons. "Every painter likes to dictate his or her own subject matter, but as an artist you need to develop and occasionally be prompted to leave your comfort zone. Commissions do that," Mitts points out. He

especially enjoys the challenge of a commission that demands he paint unusual subject matter, but still in his signature style. "This type of commission pushes an artist in a multitude of ways and provokes him or her to discover something new," he observes.

Steve Mitts' style continues to evolve, as he balances commissions and self-motivated projects. He's presently working on a magnificent portrait of Henry VIII and has recently undertaken a series of paintings set in the Canadian Arctic. No shortage of snow there, and he marries this with studies of community life in the far North. Always, he keeps his eyes and mind open for new subjects, new inspirations.

A Family-Oriented Artist

In addition to his patrons, Mitts' family has had a





Shaw R. 1898



Shaw R. 1898



tremendous influence on his artistic path. "First and foremost, my wife Cheryl has been a pillar for me. She supports all my endeavours and although she isn't an artist herself, her critique of my work (both positive and negative) is usually spot-on." He even credits his children with having a significant impact on his painting, explaining that, as a father, he pays close attention to the subject matter of his works and strives to avoid any harmful influences. He also includes his children in the painting process, inviting their blatantly honest interpretations and self-assured assessments.

It is not surprising that Mitts enjoys working from a studio in his home, despite the various distractions that inevitably arise. "My studio is situated on the south-west corner of the house, overlooking our backyard gardens. I have large windows to the west that allow abundant light

to fill the room. I find it to be a most inspiring location. When I'm working in my studio I'm very focused; however, I designed the room to be an extension of our family's living space and it has become one of our favourite rooms to relax in, as well," he notes.

When not in his studio, Mitts is often found in his carpentry shop, where he runs a contracting business. "Carpentry and painting are very intertwined, for me. I am blessed to be able to do both," he muses. During Alberta's beautiful summers, he and his family take advantage of the mild weather to play in the great outdoors; biking, canoeing, kayaking..."Sometimes," he admits, "a beautiful summer day is just too good to pass up.

For more information on Steve and his work visit Steve at www.stevemitts.com.