

Creation and Conservation



By Edward M. Gómez

Art & Antiques visits the New York studio of Daisy Craddock, where art and art restoration go hand in hand.

Unlike many of her painter peers, Daisy Craddock is also a skilled conservator. She works on modern and contemporary paintings, as well as on the painted surfaces of architectural details on historic buildings. Steeped in the methods and mystique of painting, she has developed ways of working in oil on canvas and in oil pastel on paper that capture images of the natural world in a mainly realist mode.



Trees are among the New York–based artist’s favorite subjects. Humble or majestic, delicate or sculpturally grand, they are the central motifs that anchor many of her compositions, most of which are landscapes. Craddock’s signature style highlights the textural and structural details of her subjects—Southern willows, mighty oaks, Hudson Valley pines—even as it abstracts them.

For Craddock, painting is as a visual language for expressing observations about the character and appearance of the world is a deeply personal pursuit. “I’m always interested in viewers’ reactions to my work,” she says, standing in her neatly arranged SoHo studio, where her recent drawings hang on a wall in natural-wood frames, and a large, abstract painting on canvas, whose chipped, punctured surface she is restoring, is set up on an easel. She adds: “But I’m not painting art with any particular audience in mind. I’m painting for myself.” She does, however, regularly show and sell her work, both at Fischbach Gallery in New York and at John Davis Gallery in Hudson, N.Y.

Craddock brings meticulous craftsmanship to her work as an art conservator. She has repaired damaged paintings by such well-known realist and abstract artists as John Marin, Joan Mitchell, Mark Rothko and John Wesley. For some time-worn or repair-needy canvases, she may painstakingly prepare acetate-overlay “maps” that indicate every chipped, faded, scratched, torn or punctured spot that might require her attention. As an experienced conservator, she says, “I try for the least invasive approach, and much of what I do falls into the realm of harm-preventive action. I try to keep my clients happy. In part, that means they can be assured that any work I might carry out for them will be held in the strictest confidence, which many prefer, as opposed to conservation that is done in a museum setting, where the artwork is in the public domain, and conservation can be discussed more openly.”

She has cleaned and conserved paintings for various galleries and private clients but does not limit herself to flat art; Craddock recently collaborated with her daughter, Georgia Elrod, an artist who is also a decorative painter, and A.M. Art Conservation, a small firm based in upstate New York, on the restoration of metal banisters, doors and other architectural details at the Federal Hall National Memorial, an 1842 neoclassical building in Manhattan’s Wall Street district. (In 1789, George Washington was sworn in as the first president of the United States on the balcony of the original version of this building, which stood on the same site.)

Even as a youngster, Craddock recalls, making art helped her through some of childhood’s roughest passages: “I drew all the time. Drawing was an escape.” Born in Memphis, she grew up in Tennessee except for a period during high school when she and her family lived in Panama. Her father had been sent there, “to the edge of the jungle,” as she puts it, to work for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers building schools and houses on American military bases. It was the Cold War era. “I remember the U-2 aircraft that would take off from those bases for spying missions over Cuba,” says Craddock.

There were some art genes running through the family. The artist’s parents did not make art or crafts, but her maternal grandmother, in Tennessee, had made quilts, and her paternal grandmother, whom Craddock never met, made paintings, one of which she once saw and still vividly remembers. It was a picture of a baby eating cantaloupe, faithfully copied from a seed catalogue. Craddock mentions that she had an aunt who was a close friend of William Faulkner’s sister. With such strong links to the South,” she says, “I feel closely tied to that region, even though I’ve been based in New York for so long. Aspects of the Southern landscape are a large part of my subject matter.”

After earning degrees in art at Southwestern (now Rhodes College) in Memphis, where she studied with the sculptor Lawrence Anthony, and at the University of Georgia in Athens, where a lecture visit from the New York-based realist painter Isabel Bishop deeply moved her, Craddock headed to Boston in the early 1970s and, shortly thereafter, to New York, where she stayed. By the middle of the decade, she was working as a textile designer in Manhattan by day and, in her own studio, making paintings based on the patterns of sea shells. "I waded through styles," she says, "and made plein air paintings and pictures of the shadows of the buildings I could see from my studio's window."

Craddock later stumbled upon a cast-off roll of thick, black paper, the kind photographers use as backdrops for fashion or portrait shoots. She made drawings with oil pastel on this paper and liked their dark backgrounds, which became almost invisible after she covered them with color. Still, through the broad expanses of sky in those landscapes, streaks of black could sometimes be detected. In time, she made oil-pastel drawings and oil paintings on other dark-color backgrounds, too. For example, sienna became one of her favorites. "Those landscapes felt moody and sometimes turbulent," says John Davis, who presented them in a sold-out solo exhibition of Craddock's work in 1983, when his gallery was still located in Akron, Ohio.

Craddock produced those semi-abstract landscapes of the early 1980s using cut-up sponges in lieu of paintbrushes; she had been partly inspired by the work of Arthur Dove (see *Art & Antiques*, March 2011, page 80), the early American modernist who painted sunrises, seascapes and, most imaginatively, even the sound of fog horns. During this period of Craddock's career, the art market seemed to catch up with her to some degree. So-called neo-expressionism was in vogue. With its crudely painted depictions of human faces and figures, this style sparked a renewed interest in impulsive ways of handling paint. "My kind of painting benefited from the interest in all that neo-expressionist brushiness," she says, "but my subject matter was different; it was not urban." Her art also did not primarily feature human figures.

In fact, her work was rooted more in the traditions of landscape painting. Its analysis and interpretation of visual perception seemed to reflect the concerns of 19th-century Impressionists and also those of 20th-century modernists, who famously reduced the portrayal of their subjects to the most basic elements of form and color. Craddock cites as an influence the Bay Area figurative painter David Park, whose human figures often seemed to lumber through broadly painted compositions. Her lean renderings of multi-hued skies also bring to mind the pared-down, sky-meets-horizon, layered-color passages in the abstracted city views of another Northern California modernist, Richard Diebenkorn.

This artistic lineage can be sensed in the way the branches or the clumpy mass of a Craddock tree may appear to recede and melt into the background of one of her paintings, only to surge forward again into the picture plane as a recognizable but still abstract form. Rivers, mountain ranges, an old red barn here or a fluffy crêpe myrtle bush there may act the same way, in a gentle, eye-teasing, push-me-pull-you visual rhythm. Craddock's nature pictures are attractive without feeling self-consciously sentimental.

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, Craddock continued to refine her painting technique. She observes: "Those earlier landscapes had evolved from the drawings I had made on the black paper. They looked spontaneous but were actually very deliberate." In works like *Sartoris* (1986), whose title is

taken from that of Faulkner's 1929 novel, Craddock streaked light-colored oil paint with gusto across the top and bottom sections of her canvas to create a sky and body of water that press into a dark ridge of trees between them. In *Blue Levee* (oil on canvas, 1986), wide orange, white and purplish-gray strokes form a thicket of brawling clouds against a dark, brooding sky.

Perhaps unwittingly, the slow, deliberative approach Craddock tends to take has brought a sense of contemplation to her subjects that is discernible in her finished paintings. The result is a kind of meditative hush in what are, in effect, portraits of non-human subjects: trees, bushes or quiet spaces. In fact, in many of Craddock's paintings, the artist's real subject is something intangible—the atmosphere or emotional temperature of a moment or of a still, unpeopled place, a quality that recalls the works of the 19th-century American painter Martin Johnson Heade (see *Art & Antiques*, June 2009, page 68), who could masterfully capture the mood of anticipation in deserted New England marshes just before a storm.

As an adult, Craddock has returned to Central America. For the past several years, inspired by the vibrant colors of plants and fruits she had seen there as a child and again during her recent visits, she has been making an ongoing series (called "Inside Out") of pairs of related drawings in oil pastel on paper. Their subjects: every imaginable kind of tropical fruit. Each set of images includes a close-up of the skin of a particular fruit on the left and, on the right, a complementary close-up of its inside. Examining such subjects as the watermelon, the nectarine, the winter plum and, most recently, the pineapple, Craddock's fruit pictures at first glance resemble small-scale color-field paintings; up close, they reveal themselves to be sumptuous, probing studies of a wide variety of textures and colors. They share affinities with the works of those modernists, starting with the Impressionists, who made the analysis of light and color the *de facto* subject of painting, calling attention to how a single color may actually be composed of a rich *mélange* of many shades and hues.

The attention to detail that is an essential part of Craddock's conservation work characterizes her approach to her own art-making, too. For instance, after noticing the clarity and brightness of the light around a studio she occupied in the Hudson Valley for several weeks last summer, she began, for the first time in many years, to paint and draw on white backgrounds, allowing a new luminosity into her pictures. "That light!" she enthuses, remembering how she immediately wanted to try and capture it in her art. "It was irresistible." By setting up such new technical and aesthetic challenges for themselves, artists like Craddock keep the art of making paintings, for makers and their viewers alike, something compelling and intriguing.