

Lovely Landscapes

Local watercolorist finds inspiration around the world and at home

Europe, Asia, Africa, Central America, and Frederick are just some of the many places Sonia Maher uses as inspiration for her stunning watercolors. Born and raised in Cairo, Egypt, Maher first traveled to the United States in 1963 to do post-graduate work in hotel management and tourism marketing. Maher and her husband, Jim, later moved to Frederick in 1976, where she applied for the director of tourism position for Frederick County.

Maher was told she'd be given six months salary and whatever happened after that depended on her. Ten years later, she had built a tourism program that became a model for the rest of the state.

In 1986, Maher started a private consulting practice, working with international agencies that assist countries in using tourism as a means of economic development. Over the next several years, her work took her to places like Nepal, Monaco, Ethiopia, and the Caribbean, where she'd stay for six to eight weeks at a time.

"It was very intense," says Maher. "I would work with the local population training them, evaluating programs, and identifying sites for tourism programs. It was a wonderful challenge to try and see what each wanted and needed."

During this time, Maher came to realize the photos she had been taking of her travels weren't doing these places justice. Having been so involved in her career, she couldn't find time for hobbies, but, in 1989 and in her mid-40s, Maher decided to cultivate the passion she always had for painting.

BY JENNIFER MELLACE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIMOTHY JACOBSEN

She began by taking courses at Frederick Community College. Local artist Andrea Bruchett was her first instructor. “She was wonderful, so patient,” says Maher. “Halfway through the course, I was called out on assignment. Andrea encouraged me to keep painting and learn by trial and error. I fell in love with the watercolor medium and was hooked. I painted everyday.”

After several courses and workshops here and in countries such as France, Greece, and Mexico, Maher learned to paint landscapes with all their different colors. These compositions became the best way to document her trips.

Today, Maher carries a sketchbook everywhere she travels. An instructor once told her to always sketch in pen, not pencil. If you sketch in pencil, you’ll want to correct things. Pen gives more

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life. Learning to trust her eye, Maher has adopted this method and sketches strictly in pen without any inhibitions.

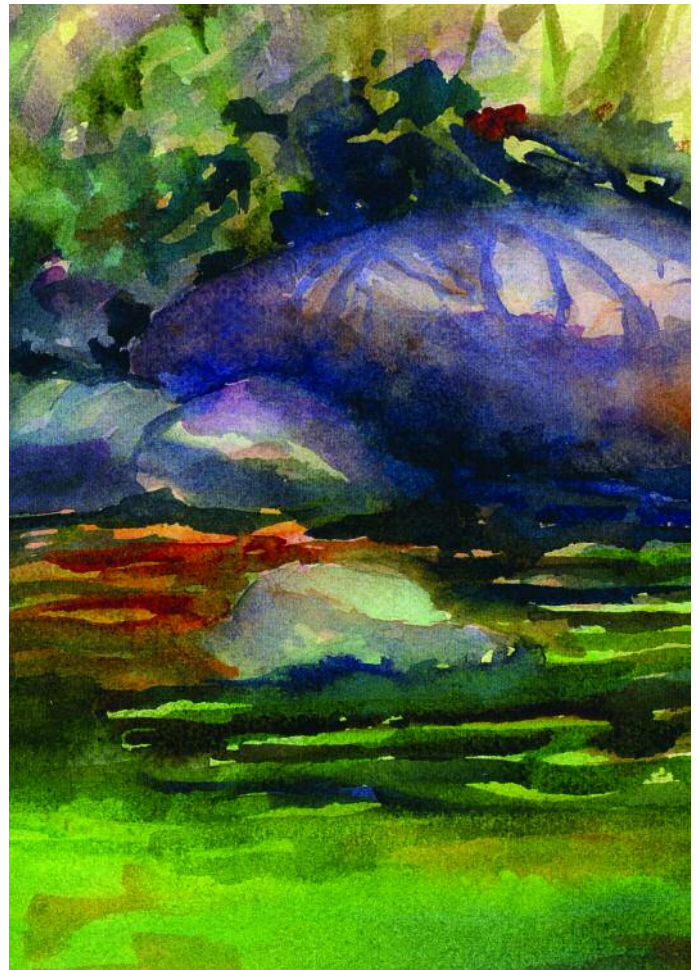
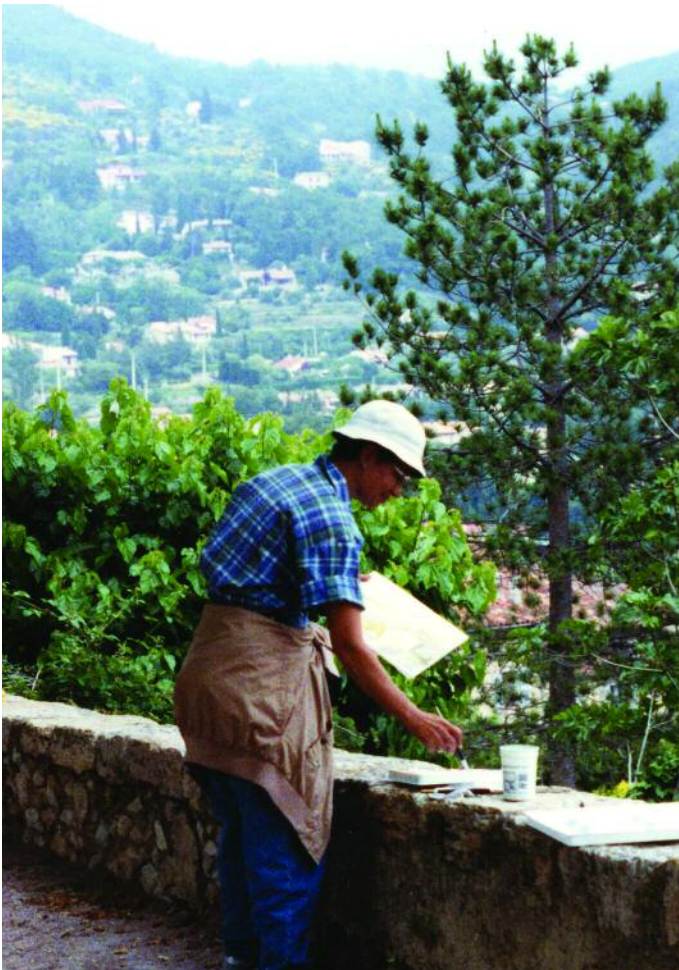
Working off these sketches, which contain notes that help her recall colors, shapes, even the time of day, she creates her watercolors. “An artist’s eye is stimulated by an individual’s personality,” says Maher. “My feelings are expressed in the way I sketch. Some areas are lighter,

others darker, bringing more emphasis to things I’m interested in. There’s a very personal, intimate expression of what appeals to me.”

Maher “becomes one” with what she’s painting—not by copying, but by noticing what the scene is expressing to her. During one of her trips, she had been playing with a friend’s young daughter on the beach. Later, on the car ride home, Maher was able to sketch the exact scene, right down to the colors and shadows.

Maher’s goal is to share the beauty she captures and hopes others can relate to her paintings. After all, painting is a way to communicate, she says. She equates painting to learning a new language. “Learning the different painting techniques is like learning the alphabet,” she says. “An artist can express them-

(Left) Maher captures a hill town north of Nice on the southern Mediterranean coast of France. This is one of the areas where the French impressionists painted, and was a favorite of van Gogh because of its clear air and sparkling sunlight. (Right) Closer to home, Maher spent time sketching and later painting Carroll Creek.





Inspired by picturesque Frederick County, Maher recreates a rugged old barn on a cold, wintry day.

selves better after they master the technical aspects.”

There are three variables in painting with watercolors—paper, pigment, and water. The artist, as Maher explains, is just the element putting them together. “For instance, a hot press creates very smooth paper,” she says. “When painting with watercolors, the water floats all over the page and, in the end, the water is truly what painted it. Each pigment works differently too. Some have sediments which create texture. Each of these elements lend to different subjects in different ways. This is why you can never truly copy a watercolor. Watercolor is such a versatile medium.”

Varying from the extreme to the abstract, Maher finds herself somewhere in the middle. “It’s fun for me to experiment in a variety of techniques and a variety of subjects. My subject depends on my mood.”

Maher’s inspiration comes from many places. Of course, her travels allow her to capture exotic images, but she’s also an avid gardener with a large perennial garden at her Middletown home. “My flowers provide me an opportunity to practice colors, shapes, and delicacy. They also give me the opportunity to enjoy my flowers more intimately,” she says.

Landscapes are a core element in

Maher’s collections. Living in Frederick County gives her the opportunity to capture farmland, hills, and woods. One of her collections showcases Carroll Creek, not painted from its banks, but from a canoe while floating down the creek.

“I hired a wonderful canoe guide by the name of Mark Melcher,” says Maher. “He would get out of the canoe and hold it steady while I sketched. It was a wonderful time.”

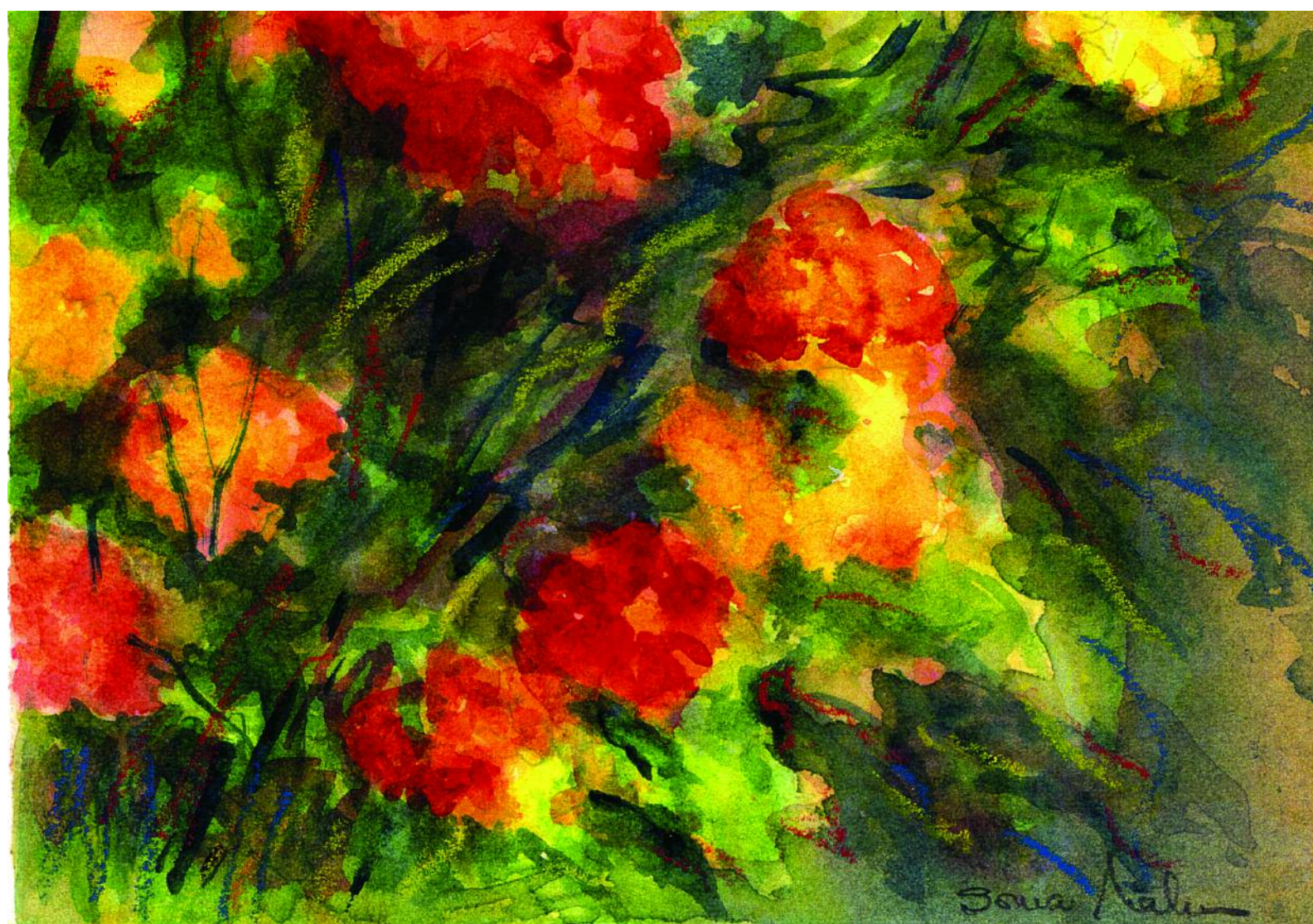
Maher has shared her talents by teaching introductory and immediate watercolor classes at her studio, a two-story glass atrium built 20 years ago as an addition to her home. She’s also



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(Above) Maher's own perennial garden inspires vibrant watercolors.

(Opposite) Maher makes notes to herself on rough sketches which later help her convey the colors, shadows, and feelings evoked from her time sketching.

designed and taught a special course in watercolor painting for seniors at Homewood and Buckingham's Choice retirement communities in Frederick.

"Some of the people I taught were in their seventies and never painted before," recalls Maher. "After several lessons they caught the bug. Some became avid painters."

Janet Cover, a student of Maher's, remembers her lessons fondly. "Sonia was so generous of her time, sharing her art skills and her friendship," says Cover. "She was excellent at teaching the fundamentals but also encouraged imagination."

Through the years, Maher's work has been exhibited at various art galleries in and around Frederick County as well as at her own studio. Although no longer exhibiting, she continues to work on

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commissioned pieces and has recently donated a number of paintings to the Frederick-based nonprofit organization Way Station, Inc. (see sidebar on page 79).

Scott Rose, executive director of Way Station, truly appreciates Maher's donation. "Not only do we appreciate the generosity of Sonia's donation, but we also treasure the gift of herself and her talents," says Rose.

"I've learned a lot from many people," says Maher. Constantly learning and practicing her art, Maher continues to share the beauty she captures in each watercolor she paints.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MAHER, VISIT WATERCOLORSBYSONIA.COM OR E-MAIL HER AT SMAHER@EROLS.COM.

CHANGING LIVES ... *one painting at a time*



Good news was recently given to Way Station, Inc.—a Frederick-based nonprofit organization providing mental health, housing, and vocational rehabilitation services for adults with mental illness or developmental disabilities and children with emotional and behavioral difficulties. On March 10, 2006, Way Station will be the beneficiary of the 5th Annual Charity Art Auction hosted by the Bar Association of Frederick County.

Attorney Beth Beam, chairperson of the annual event, explains how the BAFC focuses on making this a joint event with the chosen beneficiary. “Aside from the good work they all do, we look for beneficiaries who have an active board and who have people out in the community,” says Beam. “Way Station was motivated, eager, and ambitious to work with us. They really shined.”

The auction, which in 2005 raised more than \$11,000 for the Interfaith Housing Alliance, always consists of art provided by an art auction house. This year, the auction house has made allowances for art by a local artist to be used in a silent auction. That allowance couldn't come at a better time.

Not long ago, Frederick watercolor artist Sonia Maher donated more than 50 paintings to Way Station. Her only stipulation? 100 percent of the proceeds from her paintings would go toward funding Way Station services.

“Sonia’s gift has a double benefit,” says Way Station executive director Scott Rose. “Her art not only touches hearts, but changes lives.”

For years, people suffering from severe mental illness were shuffled from mental health institutions into communities unprepared to help them. In 1978, the Frederick County Mental Health Association responded to these patients in need by launching Way Station.

Today, the organization serves over 3,500 clients and has expanded its services to neighboring communities in Howard and Carroll Counties.

Through the years, Way Station has received generous support from donors in developing buildings in downtown Frederick that are now used as state-of-the-art training and education centers, open to rehabilitation and treatment providers and advocates from throughout the United States. And the centers are working. Statistics show that Way Station clients have a 26 percent employment rate compared to the 10-15 percent national average; nearly 50 businesses each year employ Way Station clients through the Vocational Program; and there’s a significant reduction in homelessness because of the organization’s Residential Rehabilitation & Housing Program, which provides housing and community living support to clients.

Although the average cost of services is only \$16,800 per individual, compared to over \$180,000 when cared for in a Maryland state hospital, the costs are still taxing on the organization. But thanks to the help of their benefactors, which now include Sonia Maher and the BAFC, Way Station can continue to serve the people who need them most.

Tickets to this year’s 5th Annual Charity Art Auction, held at Dutch’s Daughter are \$20 per person, \$30 per couple. To purchase tickets, contact Beth-Beam (301-694-4949), Kate Waeber (301-663-1139), or e-mail info@frederickbar.org. To learn more about Way Station, visit waystation.org. To learn more about Sonia Maher, visit watercolorsonia.com.

The cover art created for this issue of Frederick was painted by Sonia Maher and will be a part of this year’s auction.

