

# Watercolor

## Philip Pearlstein: A Champion of Watercolor

Philip Pearlstein is often credited for the resurgence of representational art in the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century New York City art scene, but a look at his career shows that he offered the same support to the medium of watercolor. **by Naomi Ekperigin**

**W**atercolorists often remark on the lack of respect their medium receives. Indeed, watercolor is rarely taught at an advanced level in undergraduate and post-graduate fine-art programs, resulting in fewer educational opportunities. It's a vicious cycle: watercolor is not taught, so fewer people learn it; with fewer people trained at an advanced level, those who seek to improve can't.

For those who lament the medium's reputation, the work of Philip Pearlstein serves as a sign that things may not be as bad as they seem—and, in fact, are much better.

Pearlstein is widely credited with the resurgence of representational painting in the New York City art scene in the 1960s and 1970s. Born in Pittsburgh in 1924, the artist began drawing and painting at an early age, attending Saturday morning classes at the Carnegie Museum of Art and going on to win awards in a national competition for high-school students sponsored by *Scholastic* magazine. World War II interrupted Pearlstein's formal education, but he continued to hone his skills while serving his country: the artist was employed in a graphic workshop, where he made signs and illustrations for soldiers' training.

His work in the army introduced him to men who worked as commercial artists before joining the service, and through them he learned the ins and outs of graphic design. In his spare time he also created drawings and paintings of life in the army, using the few materials he had access to: paper and ink. When he was deployed to Italy as an infantry soldier he purchased watercolors, which he used in his spare time. When his tour came to an end he returned to Carnegie Institute of Technology, in Pittsburgh, to continue studying illustration. There he met Andy Warhol, and they decided to try their luck in New York City.

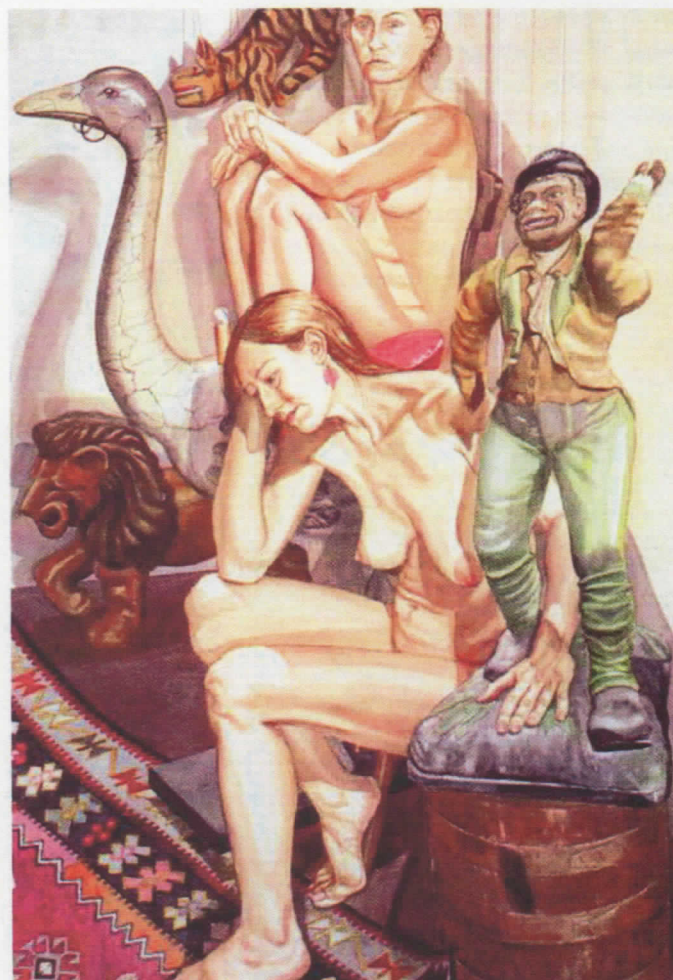




**TOP**  
**Two Models With  
 Four Geese Decoys**  
 1993, watercolor,  
 40¼ x 59¼.



**ABOVE LEFT**  
**Model With Kimono  
 and Chrome Chair**  
 2008, watercolor,  
 30½ x 23.



**ABOVE RIGHT**  
**Two Nudes With  
 Ostrich, Lion, and  
 Minstrel**  
 1994, watercolor,  
 60 x 40¼.

All artwork this article courtesy Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York, New York.



Moving to the center of the art world had a profound impact on the young Pearlstein. He developed friendships with such artists as Willem de Kooning and Philip Guston and was heavily influenced by the Abstract Expressionists, although his works weren't completely abstracted. The graphic designer for whom Pearlstein worked took an interest in him and encouraged him to study art history. At the suggestion of his boss, Pearlstein earned an M.F.A. at New York University. It was there that he began to broaden his palette (both figuratively and literally) beyond the current trends. He continued to create landscapes in an abstract expressionistic style throughout the 1950s, but toward the end of the decade his work moved toward greater realism.

Pearlstein first exhibited his figure drawings in 1962, and he caused a flurry among the New York City art world. His paintings of nude figures in stark, unflinching, and highly detailed realism was antithetical to the abstraction and improvisation favored by the prevailing movements of the time. For Pearlstein—who painted army barracks with the same detail as the human torso—creating art was about

seeing, not purposely confusing oneself or the viewer. He has spent several decades making the human figure his subject, and his view remains largely unchanged. This is not to say that he hasn't evolved and improved; it means that his devotion to depicting the world as he sees it has not wavered.

It is this same level of devotion that

the artist brings to the use of watercolor. While Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art took advantage of the introduction of acrylic paints in the 1950s and 1960s, traditional watercolor remained a vestige of the past—both colonial and provincial, it was decidedly unpopular among young, hip artists. Given that his subject matter

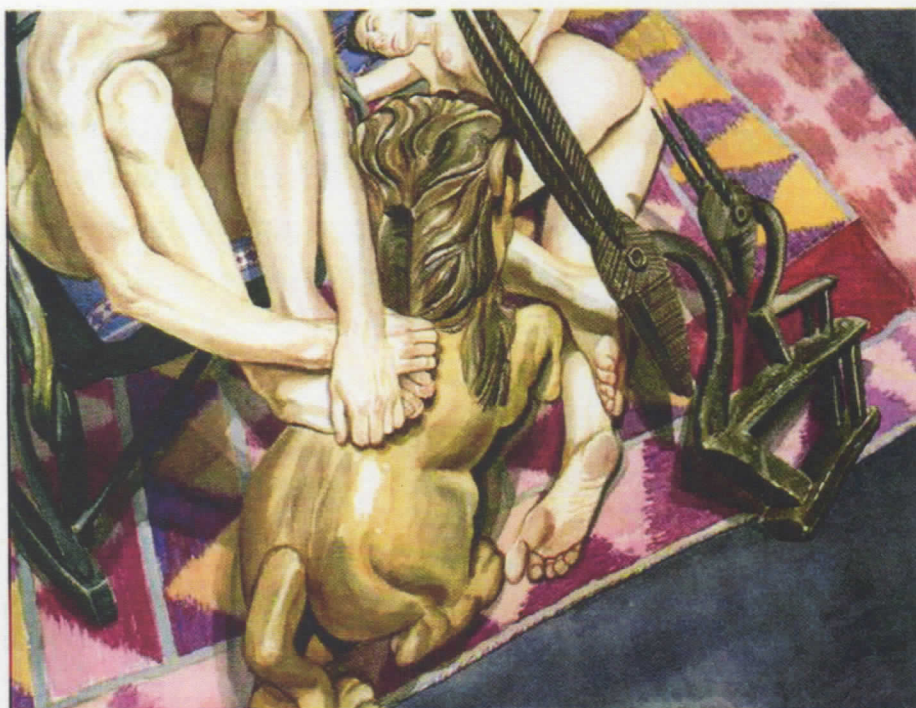
**Two Models With Eagle Weathervane, Cardinal Whirligig**  
2008, watercolor, 59¼ x 40¼.



## About the Artist

**Philip Pearlstein** has had more than 100 solo shows in his 50-year career, and his work appears in the collections of such notable institutions as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in Washington, DC; The Art Institute of Chicago; and many others. The artist is represented by Betty Cunningham Gallery, in New York City. For more information, visit [www.bettycunninghamgallery.com](http://www.bettycunninghamgallery.com).





**LEFT**  
**Model on Kiddie Car Tractor**  
2002, watercolor, 60 x 40.

**ABOVE**  
**Two Models With Carousel  
Lion and Antelope Headdress**  
2000, watercolor, 29¼ x 41¼.

## Teaching at

**Weekend  
With the Masters  
INTENSIVE  
NEW YORK CITY**  
June 22-26, 2011

Philip Pearlstein will be participating in American Artist's Weekend With the Masters Intensive: New York City event this June, and leading the watercolor track with a full-day master workshop on Thursday, June 22. This figure workshop will be focused on composition and design, and the artist will demonstrate as well as work with students individually. The following three days of classes will be lead by Timothy J. Clark and Susan Shatter, who are also featured in this issue of *Watercolor*. (See pages 82 and 88, respectively). For more information and to register, visit [www.aamastersintensive.com](http://www.aamastersintensive.com).

already bucked tradition, there would be no reason to abandon a medium that had served him well. Pearlstein's watercolor paintings are at once multilayered and flat, distant and engaging. For the last three decades, the artist has placed his models among props that appear to be little more than junk, such as marionettes, old chairs, and weathervanes—remnants of his folk-art past. In these paintings the figure is no more important than the wooden duck he or she rests on; man is an object, and seeing the object through the artist's eyes is what makes it worthy of close observation.

In his essay "Figure Drawings Are Not Made In Heaven," published in *ARTNews* in 1962, Pearlstein wrote, "It seems madness on the part of any painter educated in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century modes of picture-making to take as his subject the naked human figure. ... The description of the surface of things seems unworthy. Most of us would rather be Freudian, Jungian, Joycean and portray the human by implication rather than imitation. ... Cézanne devised a system, most successful in

his drawings and watercolors, of defining forms by indicating only the areas where two forms overlap in space." In this passage, Pearlstein not only shows his art-history education but also his own creative leanings. Like Cézanne, drawing and watercolor are Pearlstein's most used media. Also like Cézanne, he defines his forms by what his eye perceives. It can be tempting to view his use of a portable medium such as watercolor as a wry comment on the futility of existence, especially in light of the way he poses the figures as if they couldn't care less about being watched.

A more observant view of his work shows that Pearlstein's use of watermedia, be it brush and ink or watercolor tubes, is his vehicle for capturing the world as he sees it. Watercolor is best suited for his direct approach, requiring decisive and confident use of the brush. What can easily be misinterpreted as ironic detachment is actually a trust in the painter's greatest tool: the eye. "I accept what I do," the artist said in a recent interview. "I don't second-guess myself. ... If that is the way I saw it, then I stand by it." ■