

A painter and her dahlias

Cami Thompson manages to keep her paint brushes active



QUESTA NORTH

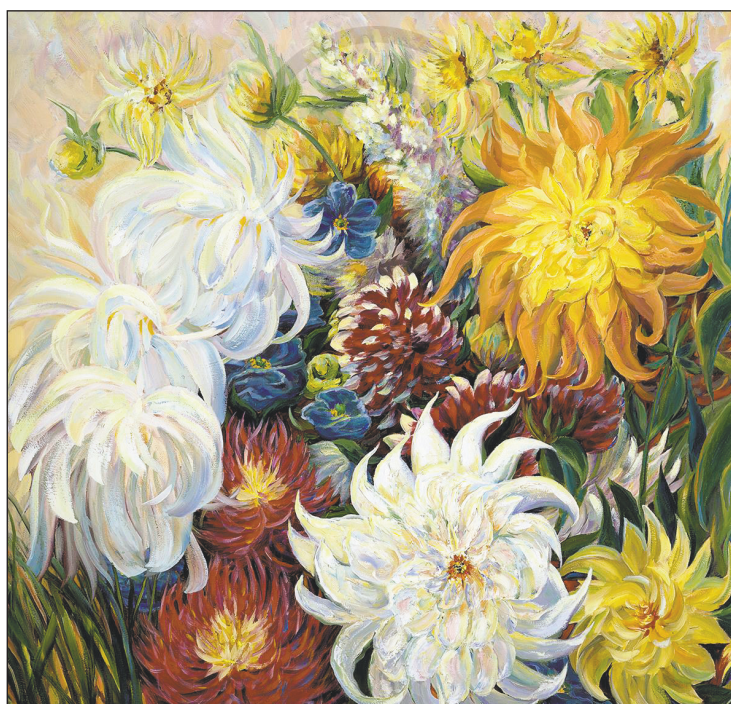
By Anna Racicot

Editor's note: This week marks the beginning of a new column by Anna Racicot focusing on the artists and artisans of Questa and northern Taos County. We hope you enjoy it.

Cami Thompson's paintings of dahlias — dynamic, uplifting, detailed — seem a perfect reflection of who she is. By embracing creativity at every opportunity, everything Thompson touches reveals her love of wildlife, of light, and color whether she is painting wolves or winter scenes or cultivating the outstanding dahlias she and her husband, John, grow in their garden.

Thompson moved to Taos County from Aspen, Colorado in 2001 and has shown in nine galleries here and has been featured at the Taos Art Museum at the Fechin House in Taos. She is by anyone's standard a successful artist.

She got her start, however, in fabric and fashion. No matter how busy she became in her fashion business, however, she always kept her paint



"DAHLIA CITY" painting by Cami Thompson

brushes active in the fine arts world, completing at the very least a painting a month. "And a good one, too," she adds.

Wildlife designs, handpainted onto silk blouses or onto velvet, were the steps this artist trod until her oil paintings opened the door to commissioned works and galleries.

Thompson's fascination with drawing began as a young child when she was sent off to draw pictures while her mother tutored her sister. Thompson credits her unusual ability to work with clients for commissioned works to these early years when her mother would suggest adding a dog or more trees to her picture.

From this love of drawing, Thompson hoped to be an illustrator and

studied this in college. Illustrator careers had largely vanished, however, and in the 1980s in Aspen, Colorado, she found herself becoming an entrepreneur, eventually employing 10 people to handpaint her ever evolving fabric designs, her braided bolo ties and thousands of feather earrings.

A pivotal moment in her artistic journey came in 1988 when she visited Taos and was introduced to plein aire painting by Joseph Nordman, himself a student of Nicholai Fechin. This no doubt planted the seed in her to move to Taos County.

Underneath all her paintings, she points out, whether they portray young dancers at the Taos Pueblo Powwow or her now signature dahlias, are fine drawings. "Photography can be an

aid," she says, "but it can't beat drawing." And, she adds, the imagination must always be used.

"Every time I go to the easel," she confides, explaining her approach to art, "I ask for divine guidance. I now realize I have been given a gift."

"Art heals the soul," she said. "It's the best thing for your mental health, but you have to keep it happy."

In speaking of her technique, Thompson stresses that she no longer uses toxic chemicals. She points to her brushes, some of which are 20 years old. They are soaking in soy oil, not turpentine. Linseed oil is her mixing medium which makes the colors, she says, more transparent.

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—CAMI THOMPSON

Using these nontoxic products does increase drying time, however.

In addition to sharing these nontoxic secrets, Thompson has advice for

young artists. First, she said, create "A-plus" pieces of art.

Thompson, for example, studied the dahlias growing in their garden for five years before she decided how she wanted to paint them. "You have to let go of ego, let go and be an observer."

"Creativity," Thompson said, "is an idea or thought and it's the artist's job to take that thought and manifest it." But artists, she emphasizes, must be wary and must try to maintain shared rights to their work, and copyright all digital work. She encourages artists to participate in group shows that compliment their own work. Thompson also believes it is essential when selling in galleries that artists be told who has bought their work.

It's important for artists "to find something unique in order to make sales. You have to sell it yourself," she said.

At their home north of Questa where Cami Thompson and John this year grew 103 dahlias, she has, finally, the studio of her dreams, with north-facing windows giving her unchanging light throughout the day.

Thompson now represents herself and looks forward to exploring her wildlife interests: from the wolves at Yellowstone to trees here, loaded with snow, in the wintertime. To view more of her work, visit camithompsonartist.com.