

PEGGI KROLL-ROBERTS AND RAY ROBERTS: Creating a Life

by Molly Siple

PEGGI KROLL-ROBERTS IS AN AWARD-WINNING figurative painter, well-known for her sturdy renderings of bodies bathed in strong outdoor light and colour.

Ray Roberts is an award-winning landscape painter, honoured for his masterful seascapes and views of the Southwest. Peggi and Ray are also husband and wife, the paths of their respective careers long intertwined.

THEIR STORY BEGINS DURING THEIR EARLY ART SCHOOL days and continues through home-making, child-rearing, and years evolving as artists, a history that has led to their considerable professional success. About this special partnership Ray says, “I can’t imagine doing all that we have done with anyone but Peggi!” It’s easy to see how Peggi would make a substantial partner after spending days with her in a weeklong workshop, as this writer did. She was full of energy, focused on the task at hand, serious about getting things right, and deliberate in her approach—a collaborator for the long haul. It was fine to have a good time, but there was also no messing around.

Both Peggi and Ray began their formal art training at **Art Center College of Design** in Pasadena. Peggi transferred from

Arizona State University with a goal of becoming a professional

illustrator. “At Art Center I had so many fantastic classes with so much painting and drawing from life. But when I took my first class in fashion illustration, I knew I had found my career,” she says. “The teacher was **Gregory Weir Quiton** and he forever changed the way I approach drawing. He gave us this exercise, to “draw” the model using a #11 Exacto knife. We each had a stock of paper supported on a wood panel, and we had to commit to the cut, following the contour of the model.

Ray Roberts and Peggi Kroll-Roberts



There was no way you could hen scratch like you can using a pencil. No poking and hoping! You had to make your decision matter and to this day when I place my pen on paper and begin to draw, I go for the throat!” The boldness of her figure paintings is revealing of this uncompromising approach.

RAY HAD ALREADY BEGUN ART training before he entered Art Center. With the early death of his father, and his mother in ill health, he was only fourteen when he began to have trouble in school. In response, his aunt and uncle suggested Ray attend the **Orme School**, a ranch-style, private boarding school on 40,000 unspoiled acres in central Arizona. The facility featured a strong fine arts program, and Ray still remembers the landscape by **Edgar Payne (1883–1947)** that hung in the school’s library, a work that called to him.

Ray majored in advertising illustration, which included studies in graphic design, photography, film, hand-lettering, paste-up, and illustration. He came away with



Ray Roberts
La Jolla Cliffs
Oil on linen 30" × 40"



Ray Roberts
Midday Light, Shark Harbor
 Oil on linen 30" × 40"

a lasting appreciation for craftsmanship, a hallmark of his fine art to this day, but the objective of the classes, to turn students into jack-of-all-trades to work for ad agencies, did not appeal. When in his last semester, **Mattel** gave a presentation to his class offering a lucrative future in designing Barbie Doll ads, he changed plans

Upon graduating, Ray began looking for work as an illustrator and started at the bottom, doing black and white newspaper ads for real estate companies. "This turned out to be invaluable experience," says the artist. "Printing on news print is like trying to print on paper towels, so my illustrations had to contain strong lights and darks. Only then would the values and shapes read," he says. "What I learned, I make use of to this day. Strong contrast gives images clarity." As his reputation as an illustrator grew, Ray's assignments improved and he was hired to illustrate brochures for prestige clients such as **Princess Cruises**. He also became known for including aspects of landscape in his imagery, something he couldn't resist as a longtime lover of the outdoors. Even then, he was especially sought after for his expert rendering of water.

Peggi's illustration career began on spring break during her fifth semester when she returned home to Phoenix. She had brought along the illustration portfolio she was working on with the

idea of showing it to a fellow artist and asking for guidance. Instead, she decided to take a chance and present her work to the advertising section of **Goldwater's Department Store** in Scottsdale.

During the meeting, the staff gave Peggi a fashion illustration assignment to complete that night and deliver the next day. The same happened the next day, and the next, and by the end of her spring break, they had offered her a job. Peggi never returned to school and her fashion illustration career was launched.

WHILE RAY AND PEGGI HAD crossed paths at Art Center, it wasn't until Peggi moved back to Los Angeles in the late 1980s and landed a top position as an illustrator, that they had the chance to know each other better. When an old friend from Art Center threw a party, they met up again. As Peggi recalls, "We both liked golf and Ray began asking me out to play, off and on for four or five months, but always to play on a Wednesday," she says. "I had a full-time job, while he worked

freelance, so I was never free to go. Then finally, at the end of May, he asked me for a golf date on Memorial Day weekend. I accepted the invitation, borrowed some clubs, and we were married three weeks later." They will be married thirty-six years this June.



Ray Roberts
Sierra Siesta
 Oil on linen 30" × 40"



Peggi Kroll-Roberts
Solano Beach Scene
Oil on canvas 10" × 12"

The couple settled into home life, had their first child (with two more to come) and then decided to leave Los Angeles for Arizona, a land of natural beauty they both knew well. Setting up their household in Scottsdale, Peggi and Ray began to get in touch with fellow artists and fortuitously met **Kevin** and **Wanda MacPherson**.

Kevin at the time was also working as an illustrator; but, in addition, was trying his hand at fine art at the relatively new **Scottsdale Artists' School**. Brimming with excitement over the teachings going on there, Kevin made sure Peggi and Ray visited the school where there were classes on painting the figure from life and the landscape *en plein air*. Peggi and Ray began to attend weekly open sessions as well as taking workshops by master artists such as **Dan McCaw**, **Len Chmiel**, and **Mark Daily**. "We quickly got the bug," Ray recalls. "Deep down we knew we wanted to be easel painters."

By the early nineties, Ray and Peggi decided to reduce their illustration workload and commit to creating fine art full time. Omitting the details of all the challenges of heading in this new direction, Ray says, "We really had to scramble. We now had three young children." The two began to participate in outdoor shows and the Scottsdale Artists' School hired them to teach, an integral part of their careers to this

day. Peggi taught watercolour still-life and figure painting; Ray taught plein air landscape and portrait. At present, teaching singly and as a couple, their annual workshop schedule is substantial. In addition, their website krollroberts.com is designed to link with students—through CDs, streaming videos, live online classes, and through the webinar conferencing platform, **Zoom**. "It's easier than it sounds," Peggi says.

Peggi is particularly comfortable teaching. "She has a gazillion followers," Ray says. She is also on Facebook, but her favourite social network is Instagram. Explaining her approach, she says, "I try to keep the mystery out of the fundamentals. There is a science to how light falls on objects. It's not magic." She also simplifies anatomy, dividing the figure from top to bottom into easy to understand segments, a technique that stems from her years as a fashion illustrator. These proportions underlie her own much sought-after figure paintings. Explaining these, she offers students a first-step into accurate drawing of the body. But she is quick to

add, "So much of your growth as an artist has to come from you. The fundamentals I teach are tools, but you have to apply your own aesthetics."

Ray also has his own bottom line of advice that he always



Peggi Kroll-Roberts
Girls with Boogie Boards
Oil on canvas 8" × 10"



Peggi Kroll-Roberts
Yellow Boogie Board
Gouache 9" × 12"



Peggi Kroll-Roberts
Loving the Warmth
Oil on canvas 40" × 30"

tells his students: "Remember the three-Ds: design, design, design. The way your light and shadow shapes are arranged create a painting's rhythm and composition." For his own work, the design process starts from the beginning. "Once I really take in a scene I plan to paint, I have a way of gathering information in which I assign different levels of importance to various elements in the scene," he says. "I try to put the image together in my mind holistically, considering value as well as colour and its temperature, in a way that expresses what I am looking at, as I perceive it. Then I let the painting paint itself. I just observe how everything works together."

Given his renown for rendering the translucency and fluidity of water, many students seek out Ray for his coastal workshops. "Painting water is tricky," he says. "Your subject is always moving. My aim is to teach the different optics of water which involve both its translucency and the way it reflects light. Close observation is vitally important as weather conditions effect all this," he adds. "In painting a wave, to make it appear luminous, you may think the whitest part of the wave is the foam, but the spectral light is actually the brightest. Spectral light is the sparkly light reflecting the sun on a slightly overcast day. It's also called glare when it's overwhelming, such as full sunlight on a clear day. In a seascape you need to control your gray scale. It's very easy to have a couple minor misplaced values that will destroy the sense of water you're trying to create."

Today Peggi and Ray live in Angel's Camp, situated in the historic gold-mining region of California's High Sierra. They moved to a twenty-acre ranch there years ago to give their growing children a life close to nature. For a while, the family kept a menagerie of farm animals but that era ended when, as Peggi recalls, "A bobcat got the last chicken."

Given her subject matter, which includes the figure as well

as still life featuring household items such as coffee cups and cosmetics, Peggi is able to conveniently work from life at home in her own studio. Ray, on the other hand, unless he's painting at a plein air event, or out and about teaching on location, mostly works from reference in his studio to produce his grand landscapes. "I've painted on location for thirty years now, under so many different types of light, that I have thousands of sketches I can glean information from as I do fresh work."

As fellow artists, sharing a life, Peggi and Ray also draw on each other's knowledge. "When I paint the figure, Peggi encourages me to go the extra mile on accuracy," says Ray. Peggi insists she's learned more from Ray than the reverse. Asked if they critique each other's work, Peggi describes herself as a cautious critic, who tries to keep criticism to a minimum. Answering the same question, Ray says, "I offer criticism only when Peggi asks. We can sense when the other person is working hard on a piece and not wanting outside help. But it's also true that a fresh eye can be very useful. If I do decide to volunteer a comment, I might say something, and then I duck." 📷

Notes:

Senior Editor **Molly Siple** studied painting and art history at the **University of California at Berkeley** and is an Artist member of the **California Art Club**. She has also taken formal training with master artists **Shuqiao Zhou, Jove Wang, and Ian Roberts**. In addition, Siple has contributed to numerous national art publications, and is co-author of *Enchanted Isle, a History of Plein Air Painting in Santa Catalina Island as well as California Light, A Century of Landscapes: Paintings of the California Art Club, and Painting California, Seascapes and Beach Towns: Paintings of the California Art Club*. She also recently completed a biography of her father, *Southern California architect Allen G. Siple*.