

# Ginger Bowen | Wit & Wisdom

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By Bonnie Gangelhoff



Drill Baby Drill, oil, 16 x 8.

Egg beaters, buckets, and buoys. Coffee pots, clocks, and blocks. These are a few of Ginger Bowen’s favorite things among the treasure trove of objects she has collected over the years. The Arizona-based painter has nearly a thousand old toys, tools, musical instruments, and other artifacts from bygone days, all contained in a storage area she refers to as her “prop room.” Bowen has a penchant for scouring antiques stores and flea markets, whether close to home or in her travels, and the resulting bounty eventually finds its way into her lively still-life paintings. “I like unique old things that stir a feeling of nostalgia,” she says. “Sometimes new things seem so plastic. Older things are well built, with beautiful colors, and they have a certain sturdiness about them.”

Bowen has been interested in art since she was very young. When she was four, she recalls, her family often ate at a local restaurant in her hometown of Amarillo, TX. The walls of the eatery were covered with reproductions of western paintings by Frederic Remington and Charles Russell. “My entertainment at the restaurant consisted of looking at those pictures,” she says. “I remember saying to my whole family that when I grew up, that’s what I wanted to do—paint pictures. They didn’t pay a lot of attention to me.”

But Bowen was hooked, and she especially loved drawing horses. “The horses I drew always seemed to be standing still,” she says. “But the horses in the restaurant were so lifelike to me and in constant motion. I was drawn by the energy of those paintings.”

As she grew older, one of her chores was to iron clothes for the family on Saturdays. Her mother paid her with S&H Green Stamps, which were popular in the 1960s and could be redeemed for various consumer goods. Bowen was about ten when she enthusiastically redeemed several books of Green Stamps she had saved for a box of watercolors and a brush.

By the time she was 14, she was taking art lessons from a neighbor who taught classes to local children in her garage. Bowen’s first piece, she recalls, was a painting of a gray mouse. She continued to study art with other local teachers during high school. Shortly after graduation she got married but continued to pursue fine art in her free time, logging miles and miles of canvas and painting everything from still lifes of fruits and vegetables to portraits of people’s pets.



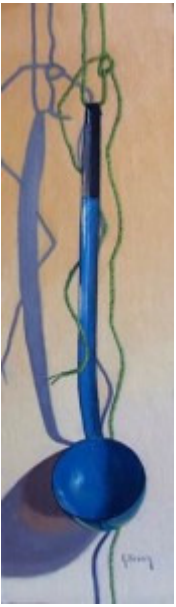
Up On Blocks, oil, 12 x 12.

Today Bowen is an established artist whose work has been featured in galleries and shows from Hawaii to New York. Recently she was included in the International Guild of Realism's annual exhibition and the California Art Club's annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition. Her paintings have been featured in several books on how to paint still lifes, florals, and landscapes. In 2009 her still life UP ON BLOCKS won a top award at the Catherine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club's annual exhibition, held at the National Arts Club in New York.

Bowen believes that getting to this point in her career was more of a struggle than it would have been if she had attended art school or enrolled in a college degree program in fine art. Her early efforts were unpolished and rudimentary, she says. But an important turning point came in 1985, when she took a workshop with the highly regarded pastel and oil painter Daniel E. Greene.

“It was a defining moment,” Bowen says. She was living in Nashville, TN, at the time and Greene, a New Yorker, had taken his workshop on the road. “The way he explained things, his use of color, and the way he taught us to draw was such an amazing thing that my work changed drastically, overnight, as soon as that workshop was over. My work went from being very amateurish to being more technically correct. My next painting was just better—better light and better shadow and better everything. All these possibilities opened up to me. It was my ‘wow’ moment when I said to myself, ‘I could do this. I could really be a professional artist and do this with my life.’”

For the next 10 years she continued to take workshops with Greene—and became, for a time, a self-described Greene groupie. “He never touched your paintings, but he was so good at coming over and saying things like, ‘If you move this an eighth of an inch, it will change the total expression,’” Bowen recalls of her mentor. “As students we were always thinking we might ruin a piece if we did something like that. But he would say, ‘You drew it once. You can draw it again.’ That was such an important lesson. So many artists get too afraid to change something, and so they accept less.”



Kitchen Tool #1, oil, 20 x 6.

Bowen has also taken workshops with well-known painters Matt Smith and Kim English, and more recently with Ted Nuttall. While she paints in all genres, she is primarily known for her witty and imaginative still-life works that feature unlikely juxtapositions of objects. She insists on painting from life and relishes setting up her tabletop dramas, arranging and re-arranging the objects to get just the right combination.

In *HOMAGE TO D. GREENE*, Bowen says, she is paying tribute to her former teacher. Greene once painted an egg beater during a class. Bowen fell in love with the piece and tried to purchase it from him, but he refused to sell. “I decided to paint my own egg beater as homage to him,” she says.

At times she incorporates political messages into her works, and she is fond of using plays on words in her titles that lend meaning to the paintings. For example, in 2008 she was looking for a way to use a funky old drill that sat in her prop room in a painting. The presidential campaign was in full swing at the time. “Coincidentally, the Republicans started to chant ‘Drill, Baby, Drill,’” she recalls, and the phrase proved to be a perfect title for the piece she created. “I was going to hang the drill upside down, but then I planted it on a table and stuck a flower in it,” she explains. “It’s my statement about drilling. I guess it goes back to my hippie days when a flower symbolized peace, love, and caring for the earth.”

Bowen says that the painting was originally destined for a show at Gallery Mar in Park City, UT, but a neighbor stopped by one day and insisted on buying it. Maren Bargreen, owner of Gallery Mar, says she first saw Bowen’s work in a magazine ad. “It was one of those small glimpses of rare genius in a 2-by-3-inch space,” Bargreen says. “Ginger paints from life, and the objects in her work are all life-size. Her collection of treasures is gathered from all over the country, and the ‘artifacts’ are combined to create witty statements. Collectors can sense the authenticity in her work.”

As this story was going to press, Bowen was enjoying the process of creating a new still life she has titled *TIME IN A BOTTLE*. “I took an old milk bottle and dropped an old brass egg timer into it,” she says. It reminds her of the folk song from the 1970s of the same name. And when that’s finished, she adds, “I have an old blue coffee pot that has been calling me for a while.”

When it comes to artistic goals, Bowen keeps it simple. “I just want people to look at one of my paintings and experience a moment of peace, or have it add a smile or a little bit of joy to their day. I feel blessed that I am doing something I feel so passionate about. Being creative is way too much fun. I can’t imagine ever retiring from creativity.”

### Representation

Gallery Mar, Park City, UT; Gallery at Rich Designs, Colorado Springs, CO; [www.gingerbowen.com](http://www.gingerbowen.com). *Featured in January 2011.*