

Creating a Common Purpose

Jan Dilenschneider

Throughout history, artists have exercised their freedom of expression to make the world a better place. This has been their mission and this has been their purpose.

Today, civilization stands at a crossroads. The need for global change has never been greater, and yet countless artists face persecution and imprisonment and, sometimes death, as did the staff of the satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo*, fulfilling their mission.



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Expressionist painter Jan Dilenschneider of Connecticut, who has achieved worldwide recognition for her work, believes that now, more than at any other time, we stand at a defining moment that will irrevocably determine our future. There is a tremendous need for artists to unite in their common purpose as we confront monumental challenges, which include political oppression, terrorism, climate change, environmental disasters, and the inequitable distribution of the Earth's resources.

She says there is a particular urgency for artists to step forward to defend our fundamental freedoms, to inspire us to a nobler purpose, and to save our environment.

"From transforming the environment, to the suppression of the artistic voice in many countries, to the need for hope and opportunity among the young people of the world, artists must use their talent and stature to bring about positive change for the betterment of everyone," Dilenschneider says.

As an expressionist painter whose solo shows in Paris, Monaco, and the United States have been much acclaimed, she believes that whether their talent is painting, sculpting, music, or another creative process, "Artists have a rare platform to make a point, address issues, and inform the viewer about important subjects – about the needs of their world."

Of particular concern to her is the global destruction of the natural world from such trends as extinction of species, deforestation, and climate change.

"It's important to get people to fall in love with nature again," she says, "so they appreciate the leaf on a tree or a pure blue sky, and want to preserve such beauty for future generations to enjoy and cherish." This has been the goal of landscape painters from the Hudson River School to the present.

"I am greatly influenced by living on Long Island Sound, where many subjects lie within a mile of my home – beautiful old trees, crystal blue

water, elegant grasses, birds, and great storms," she said. "I see a painting in everything – spring green leaves against bright blue skies, or misty trees that fade to blue-gray. The beauty of the world right outside my door is my inspiration."

In her paintings, she leads viewers to a richer life experience, one in which she asks the viewer to participate and even be emboldened by her style and subjects. However, she notes, "I do it subtly," appealing to their emotions with the beauty she places before them.

"If you show something beautiful, you are encouraging someone to participate, be aware of it in the world around them, and to take action to make sure we don't destroy it," Dilenschneider says. "If words could say everything, we wouldn't need painters."

It is for this reason that her shows have a "direction" or theme that is designed to guide the viewer to a personal interpretation of her paintings.

Pursuing this theme, Dilenschneider titled her second show in Paris, "It's a Beautiful World, What Are We Doing to Protect It?" A recent show at the Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum, a National Historic Landmark in Connecticut, was called "Eco Visions" and featured 21 paintings focused on nature.

Though Dilenschneider does not see her mission as provoking controversy, she acknowledges an artist's work can be controversial. In sharing visions and expressions of the world, "The artist has a responsibility" and that responsibility is to represent in their medium how they view the world; to invite the viewer's own intellectual input in interpreting that work of art; to embrace freedom of expression; and to support such freedom among artists and people everywhere.

Preserving freedom of expression, in fact, is another theme she advanced in her third Paris show in 2015, not long after freedom of expression was besieged in that city by an attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* during which a dozen members of its staff were assassinated for publishing an irreverent cartoon of the prophet Mohammed.

"We as artists have to stand up for freedom of expression in all its forms," says Dilenschneider, who with her husband, Robert, developed The Janet Hennessey Dilenschneider Scholar Rescue Award in the Arts, which rescues artists and arts scholars from repressive regimes around the world. She believes that we all must



"Marvelous Organic Shapes" from Jan Dilenschneider's Eco Visions Exhibition at the Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum

support those who exercise that freedom, especially under the severe restraints that some countries enact.

The Janet Hennessey Dilenschneider Scholar Rescue Award in the Arts, administered by the Institute of International Education (IIE), one of the largest international exchange organizations in the world, has thus far provided life-saving fellowships that have taken oppressed artists and their families out of danger and allowed them once again to create and flourish.

One recipient, a female Ph.D. from Syria whose home had been invaded and whose family was physically threatened, was resettled in New Jersey and offered a professorship at Montclair State University. Another, brought to Massachusetts, is continuing her artistic and scholarly work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

"I believe we need to support those people who are out there making a statement, especially artists who, through freedom of expression, are giving us new insights into our own world," Dilenschneider says.

What of future generations and the mission of the artist? She sees a looming danger in the way young people learn, work, and entertain themselves.

"I have a fear that young people are too involved with their computers," she says, "and not experiencing the natural world as a result. Their minds can become governed by computer codes that someone else wrote, rather than their own imaginations. This robs them of the ability to think creatively, and thus many cannot apply their own ideas and solutions to situations around them. However, many young people are highly creative in the tech world."

"I speak of it at every opportunity," Dilenschneider says. "The creative process is extremely important, but the creative side of life is being left out of what we Americans are known for – creativity."

Art education is beneficial in so many ways, she adds. "Kids who have creative courses in school – art, music, dance, drama – tend to be the leaders in their classes. They stand out in science, in sports, and in so many other areas."

In addition, they see the world differently because they view the world artistically.

It was the great English-born artist Thomas Cole who founded the Hudson River School and is known for his paintings of the American wilderness, who said, "To walk with nature as a poet is the necessary condition of a perfect artist." That, ultimately, is Jan Dilenschneider's goal. ●