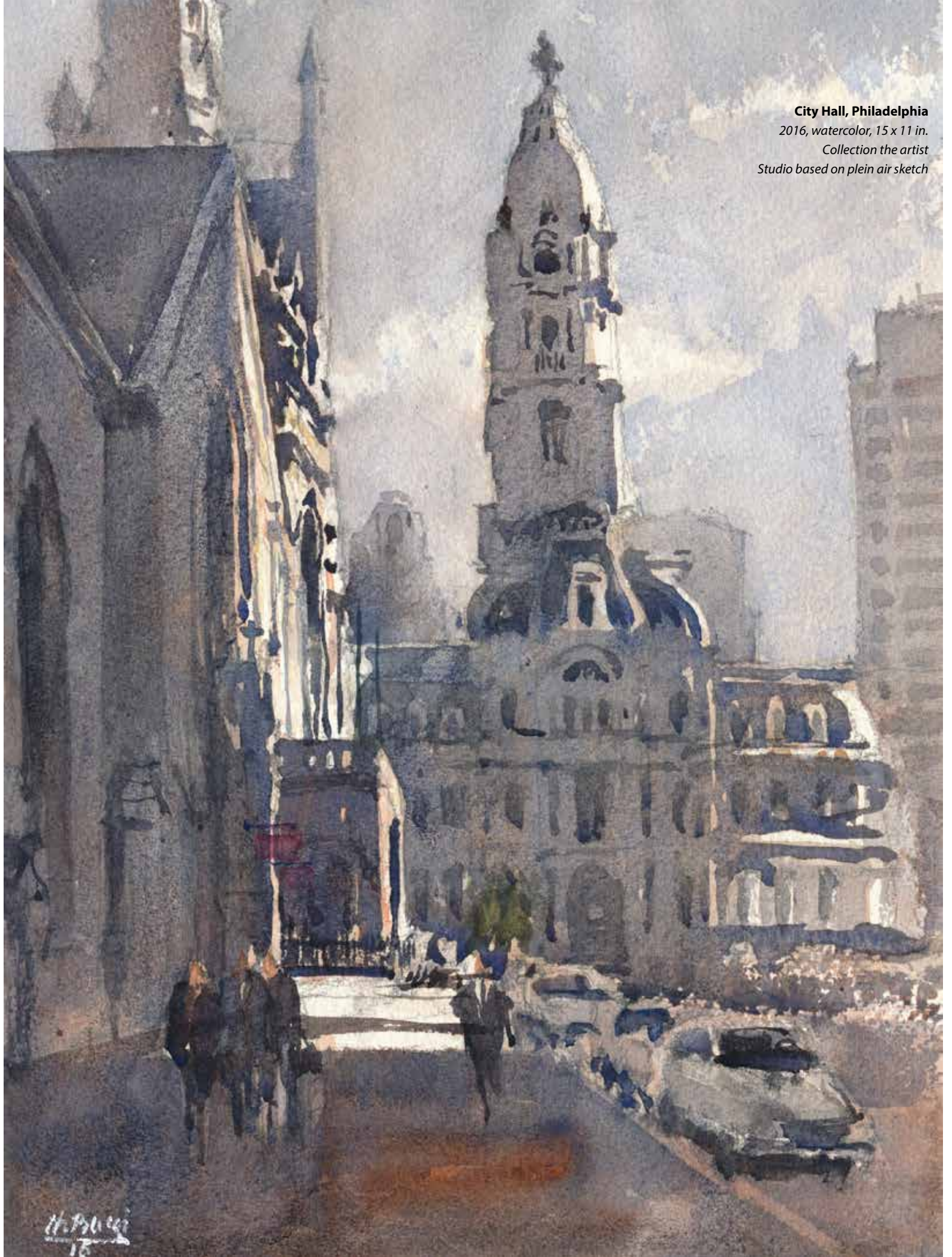


City Hall, Philadelphia
2016, watercolor, 15 x 11 in.
Collection the artist
Studio based on plein air sketch



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THOMAS BUCCI

THE CITY AS MUSE

Although buildings still figure prominently in his work, this former architect now fills his days with plein air watercolors.

BY BOB BAHR

Washington, D.C., painter Thomas Bucci loves to walk around old cities, especially European ones. He was trained as an architect, but essentially walked away from the field just as he scaled its heights, moving on after his first project proved to be a highly acclaimed and innovative museum design. Still, his training was by no means in vain. He broke through by selling the watercolor illustrations of his buildings, then expanding this into painting any distinctive building that caught his artistic eye. His background makes visits to cities such as London richly rewarding.

“Everybody has a muse,” Bucci says. “I see painters who have a love for rural landscapes, or for beautiful skies. I’m not anti-nature, but I’m not the guy taking a walk in the woods. I’d rather walk down 5th Avenue.”

Cumberland Overlook in Grey

2018, watercolor, 11 x 15 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



Bucci says he appreciates how a cityscape gives him powerful compositional tools, in particular the wires, poles, roads, and buildings that provide perspective lines that firmly situate the viewer in the scene. “In architecture, we refer to one kind of urban design as axis and episodes, which simply means a line with interesting elements at intervals along the line, or axis. The axis, which is often a street, is the connection between two things. When you come upon a notable building or other element, and you look down the axis, you see the next interesting thing. It’s planned that way; it has an episodic feeling to it. Paris is all about avenues and axis, for example.”

THOMAS BUCCI says he treats what he sees in front of him as a suggestion that can be manipulated as needed.

thomasbucci.com

A Walk Down Light Street

2019, watercolor, 11 x 15 in.

Courtesy of Crystal Moll Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland
Studio based on plein air sketch

THE RIGHT FIT

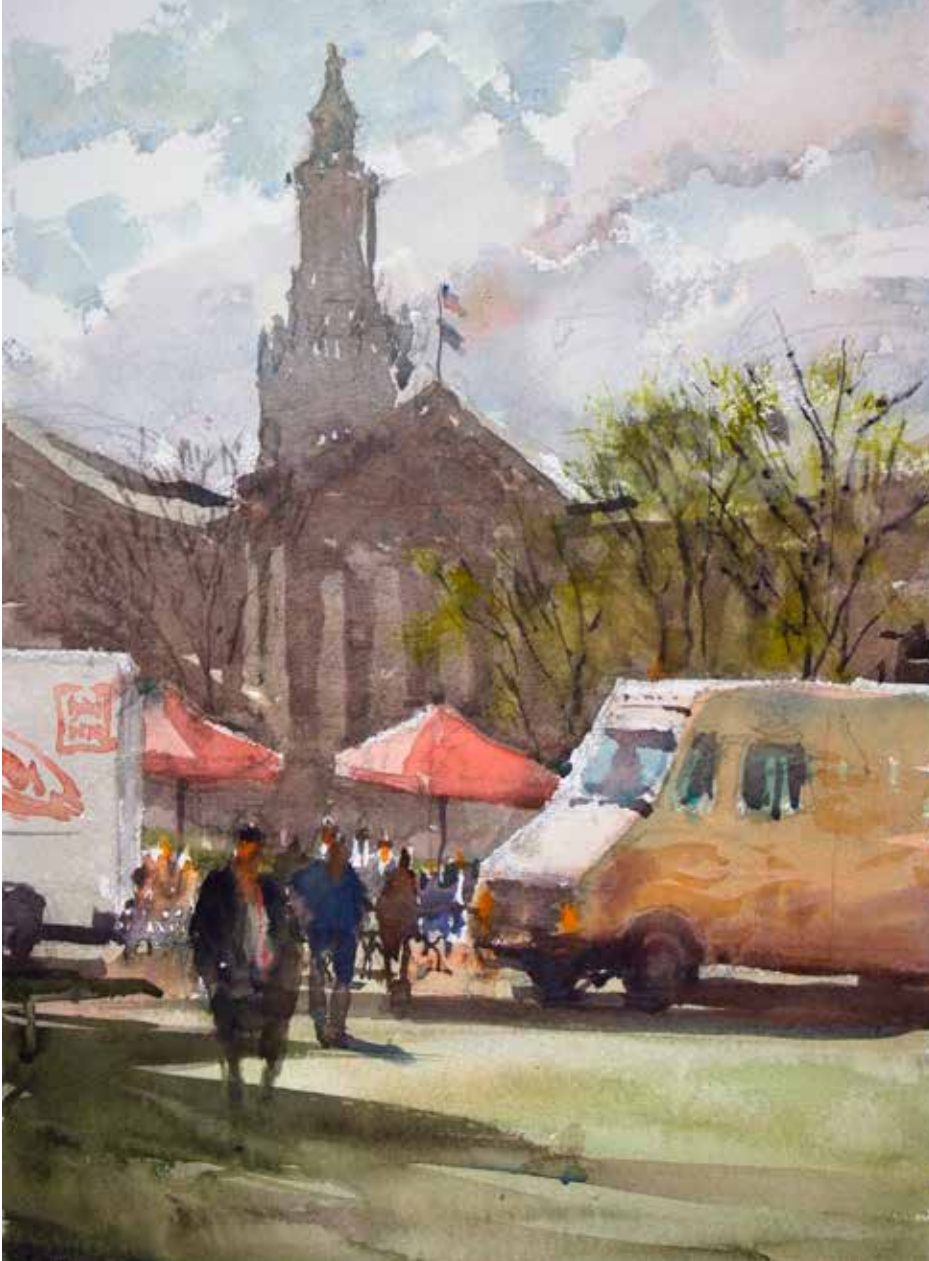
Before turning to architecture, Bucci first explored art school, but came away dissatisfied. His story is a familiar one. “I went to art school in the ’70s,” the artist recalls. “There was no traditional painting, but we were all fans of representational art, even though our teachers told us not to bother with it, that galleries, collectors, and museums didn’t care about that kind of art. So I became a graphic artist. Pretty soon, however, I felt like I was spinning my wheels. I remember my boss saying, ‘This ain’t art. This is about getting it done.’”

Chinatown Rain

2019, watercolor, 11 x 15 in.

Courtesy of Crystal Moll Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland
Plein air and studio





Denver City Hall, Food Trucks

2019, watercolor, 15 x 11 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

“It didn’t take long for me to move on to architecture school. That was better. I woke up every morning looking forward to spending 15 hours a day at school. At age 33, I went on to form my own firm, and my partner and I won a big competition designing a museum. We had a show of our drawings when the museum opened, and I was amazed that we sold every one of them. I hadn’t made much money working on that commission for three years, and here I made more money selling my sketches than I did on the project. People wanted to buy more than I had, so I started doing architectural drawings of buildings in our neighborhood ... and they sold.”

For every rule-breaking Frank Gehry building erected in Manhattan, there are at least 100,000 more ordinary structures built, all designed by working architects. Bucci says that in architecture schools, designs such as the Gehry plans were derogatorily referred to as “trendy.” Bucci clearly loves older buildings with character. But this artist is not in love with safe choices and predictability. If he were, watercolor might not be his chosen medium.

“Accidents are the difference between watercolor and other media,” Bucci says. “It’s very difficult to fix mistakes in a watercolor without damaging the paper, so you have to figure out how to work with them. The weather can really affect a watercolor painting, as well. Here in D.C., where the humidity can hit 95 percent, a painting never dries. I have to take my painting into a store so it can dry in the air conditioning before I can get the next wash down. The first time I painted in Denver, I didn’t realize how dry it was there. I put down a wash, and it started drying before the next brushstroke. I had to keep a spray bottle in my other hand while painting to keep wetting the surface.

“Beyond the weather, the watercolorist has to determine the right strength of color and the right dampness of the paper for the painting to work. Is the paint mixture too watery and weak, or do you take it straight out of the tube for more of a drybrush effect? It’s all about timing. Touch your surface at the wrong time and you have just ruined the painting. That’s where the caprice of watercolor comes out. My favorite is when watercolor rears its head and says,



A Morning Dog Walk

2017, watercolor, 11 x 15 in.

Private collection

Plein air

'We are going to change our plans.' Yes, the good accidents are less common than the bad ones, but when the good accidents happen, it's great."

WHEN ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Despite the challenges of weather and a capricious medium, Bucci embraces plein air painting over studio work, facing down a wide selection of obstacles, including bugs, rain, people, uncomfortable temperatures, the odd animal, and various other interruptions and distractions. "I was doing all my painting in the studio and only occasionally working outside, but now when I paint in the studio I keep looking out the window," he says. "I want to be outside; there's just no comparison. In fact, I spent five or six hours on a studio painting the other day, and I like it but it doesn't look like one

Labor of Love

2019, watercolor, 11 x 15 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



Old Executive Office

2017, watercolor, 11 x 15 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air





Ghost Car, Parrsboro, Nova Scotia

2019, watercolor, 10 x 14 in.

Private collection

Plein air

of my paintings. I never could have done it en plein air, given all of its purposeful and detailed areas.”

Indeed, plein air painting is fairly hostile to the process of capturing details. There just isn’t time before the light changes or the painter needs to go home. Architecture, of course, has plenty of details, but this doesn’t create a conflict for Bucci. Because he is so well-schooled in the structure and minutiae of buildings, he can very effectively put in just a few key details and have the painting read as accurate. He knows what details are needed for the subject to speak as a particular building. In fact, he prefers weather conditions that obscure details, so few are even visible in the actual scene.

“Silhouettes of buildings are simple and they draw me in,” says the artist. “It’s stimulating to see. When I visit Maine, I love to get up first thing in the morning and catch the fog before it disappears by 9 a.m. Atmosphere creates a sense of depth in a painting, a touch of 3D. Linear perspective, atmospheric perspective, and what I call chromatic perspective all do this. By chromatic perspective I mean that colors become less saturated and cooler as they recede in the picture

plane. When something is backlit, when the sun is behind an object, it creates depth, too.”

Stark sunlight works for Bucci as well. He tells the story of painting belted Galloway cows, and instead of putting them in a field as the primary subject, he “zoomed in on the landscape and got the cows with their shadows. I built a cityscape out of cows,” he says with a chuckle. When there are no canyons, and no concrete canyons of a city, Bucci will find raking light crossing through some other vertical shapes, just like a street at dawn or late afternoon, broken by the towering shade made by structures.

A DEEP UNDERSTANDING

Bucci favors a limited palette of colors. “I don’t like too much polychromatism,” he says. “I prefer to pursue an understated beauty. You can take just one color and do amazing things with it. I like to mix muted versions of primary colors. Often I will mix yellow ochre, quinacridone burnt orange, and ultramarine blue to get a range of grays — warm and cool. There is something harmonious, beautiful, and quiet about painting with only a few colors.”

Most cities are a mishmash of architectural styles. Under Bucci’s brush, they become concordant. It helps that this world has so many options for a watercolorist with his interests. There’s undoubtedly more than a billion buildings in the world today, and many opportunities to make elements work together. The painter does have some standards, though.

“I feel at home around good design,” Bucci says. “I don’t feel that way in just any built environment, only the ones with interesting design. Old cities are a like a magnet to me. I could stroll all day long among those buildings. I see the stones that someone put together purposefully. They were thought about, each one. Architecture made me understand buildings in a technical way, not just a visual way. I’m that kid who always asked, ‘Why?’ so it is more interesting to me if I understand why, to have an intimate knowledge of the subject matter.”

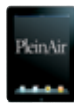


BOB BAHR has been writing and editing articles about art instruction for more than 12 years. He lives with his wife and two sons at the northern tip of Manhattan.



(TOP LEFT) Basilica in the Alley, 2018, watercolor, 15 x 11 in., private collection, studio based on plein air sketch • **(TOP RIGHT) Full Moon, Streetlight, Last Night in Italy**, 2019, watercolor, 15 x 11 in., collection the artist, studio based on plein air sketch • **(RIGHT) Hooper Straight Lighthouse**, 2019, watercolor, 11 x 15 in., courtesy of Crystal Moll Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland, plein air





Expanded Digital Edition Content



Looking Up Main, Annapolis
2019, watercolor, 11 x 15 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air



The Smithy
2019, watercolor, 11 x 15 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air



River Traffic, Pittsburgh
2017, watercolor, 15 x 22 in.
Private collection
Studio based on plein air sketch