



Thomas Paquette stands in his studio. [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]

# Warren artist's paintings hang in Erie and embassies

Story by **Brian R. Sheridan**

What Mark Twain did for the Mississippi River in words, world-renowned landscape artist Thomas Paquette does for it in oil paint. He celebrates the life along the Big Muddy as it winds its way for more than 2,300 miles from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico.

Paquette, who now lives in Warren, has just released a book of his work, "America's River Re-Explored." It showcases what he saw as the "enormous transformations" of the river as he viewed it from his boyhood home at its source to where it becomes the swampy bayous of Louisiana. Originally, Paquette planned on painting just the 72 miles of the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area in Minneapolis-St. Paul, his hometown. He instead painted what he calls the river's "many faces" as the project appealed to his adventurous side.

"There's always been this explorer in me," Paquette says. "I'd hop freight trains in my teens and 20s and travel around North America — usually not

knowing where I was going to end up. I'd be gone for months at a time. "

Before embarking on this project, Paquette reviewed the river's place in American popular culture. He had read Twain's famous "Life on the Mississippi" in his youth, but he says he wanted this to be his personal journey of discovery.

"When I started, I thought I should try and get a grasp on what has been done from music to literature to painting about the river. But they didn't move me to do this. It was more about discovering it in a sense of a rediscovery. What is there that we need to pay attention to in our lives as people, not only what is this river? But how is it impacting the lives that we are seeing?" Paquette says.

He says his goal was recapturing the idea that there is something to find in a river that many today may take for granted.

"I was responding to the river as a painter, and not as an anthropologist or geologist. What struck me as a 21st-century artist?" he says.





"Almas Buena Vista" is one of Thomas Paquette's paintings. [THOMAS PAQUETTE/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]

What struck him was the incredible diversity he saw along the river. Paquette painted not only the great scenic vistas but also the factories, refineries, the Grand Gulf nuclear power plant and the landfills. His work, he believes, captures how "our culture and an ancient culture" simultaneously exist on the banks of the Mississippi River in such places as St. Louis, where the Cahokia Mounds, the ruins of a Pre-Columbian Native American city, sit across from a modern metropolis. Paquette likes to underscore that co-existence on his canvases.

"My paintings do not have special messages. It's about seeing. I am an environmentalist but when I look at things I want to look at them with really open eyes and perceive what there really is to see," he says.

Paquette says his passion for painting began when his parents took him as a boy to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, where he was amazed by the range of art he saw. It was the work of

Vincent Van Gogh, however, that captured his attention. Paquette says he could sense his presence in his paintings. After experiencing the works of Van Gogh, he "took it for granted" that he would become an artist.

"When I was 12 years old," Paquette recalls, "I worked as a paperboy and someone had a dog that they did not keep away from little boys delivering newspapers. The dog had a mean streak and it bit my hand. My first thought was 'now I will never be an artist.' I don't know how many other kids would have that as their first thought." Luckily, the bite had no lasting impact other than to further confirm his desire to become an artist.

When he graduated from high school in 1977, Paquette thought for a moment that maybe art wasn't the most practical path after enrolling at the University of Minnesota.

"I thought painting was a ridiculous career to get into, so I studied something else that interested me — nature

— so I'd become a naturalist in national parks. I didn't get too far in those studies before I found myself taking art classes again," he says.

Paquette wouldn't complete his degree. Instead, he opted for the life of a vagabond artist. He traveled the country painting the world he saw from moving trains. When he looked out of the train car doors, Paquette saw America in the raw, perfect for capturing on canvas. His approach to painting the landscape he saw is multi-tiered but it always begins with location.

"Something in a particular location whispers visually to me, something like, 'Hey, pssst, over here!' I listen with my eyes, seeking what exactly intrigued me about this place. I don't seek a clear answer, but a compelling vision," he says.

Once he's found his vision, Paquette may paint a small gouache (opaque watercolor) painting, or take photographs or notes, as he tries to etch the vision into his brain, because he can't finish a painting in one sitting.



"I need to rely on the original impulse to carry the spirit of the painting forward, sometimes for years of work. Even little gouaches, perhaps just four-square inches, are revisited later, away from the subject, until they become as evocative as the original subject was for me," Paquette says.

The last stage of his process is creating the actual oil painting. It might take weeks or a few years, as he says he replays "that original scene, moving paint here and there, adjusting tone and color and texture in sweeping or tiny changes." But even after all of that work, he may not be able to finish the piece.

"And sometimes the whole canvas, after years of painting, collapses, destroyed under the weight of too many decisions. But usually, like layers of sediments that provide suitable ground for subsequent growth, a way is found to incorporate the previous work to actually build to a crescendo that is the final painting," Paquette says.

He recognizes that makes him sort of a throwback in the 21st century where landscapes are not often as heralded as they once were in art circles. Paquette believes art and nature go hand-in-hand.

"I look at the earth as a great teacher of art with all of its patterns and interesting things that go on in nature," he says. "I also use the example of nature to help me progress with my art. Nature destroys and I have destroyed my own work to progress. There's a lot of scraping and repainting. I tend not to throw away the paintings but I recycle them within themselves."

Painting nature has caused him to move several times in his life. After spending a decade in Maine, he moved to Warren when he married his wife Ellen in 2001. While visiting her, Paquette saw many potential paintings. He felt Maine was "overpainted" but the Warren area had beauty not yet captured in oil. He says the landscape is rich in landscapes that whisper to him, "Hey, over here."

"Warren is a great little Victorian town, and the architecture, environment and friendly people make it a great home," Paquette says. "Even though I note new subjects practically any time I open my door, this is the dilemma. It's impossible to paint everything. More importantly, this nearby cache of what could be future paintings is really a sort of nearby heaven that I like having around, just for itself."

***"I am very honored that State Department curators and ambassadors in so many countries have chosen my paintings to help represent American art to their host nations or are brought there as a token of our homeland, a reminder of what makes them proud to be Americans."***

Thomas Paquette, world-renowned landscape artist

Thomas Paquette calls this painting "Color of Time." [THOMAS PAQUETTE/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]



This painting by Thomas Paquette is called "Fox Creek Crossing." It is an oil on canvas and is on display at the Erie Art Museum as gift of Areta Kaufman. [THOMAS PAQUETTE/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]





"Fishing Reverie" by Thomas Paquette is one of the paintings in his book "Thomas Paquette: America's River Re-Explored."  
[THOMAS PAQUETTE/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]



"Claim on Camden" is one of Thomas Paquette's many paintings from the Mississippi River. [THOMAS PAQUETTE/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]

With new vistas calling to him in Warren, Paquette says he may be ready to move on from the Mississippi River, which he first painted in 1985.

"I just wanted to see and paint as much of the Mississippi as possible but I don't know how many more I will do," he says. "Every place on the planet has its importance. The Mississippi is obviously a great place for barges and is important historically. My work is kind of personal (and it is) not a comprehensive look. I'm not trying to show all the character of the river just what I saw as a painter. Everybody's view might be different."

Paquette seems to have a larger goal of keeping people from missing the beauty around them. He says he experienced that when talking with residents along the Mississippi River. People didn't see the river in the same light as they did in earlier times, but that attitude did not come as a surprise to him.

"We don't pay attention to the air we breathe until it's polluted," Paquette says with a note of melancholy in his voice. "The point is that we all live in places where we need to pay attention. Edward Hopper said he tried to capture in his paintings that feeling you get when you travel so that when you are looking at a familiar place, you get the feeling that you live in a special place that others might visit. And that's the essence of what I try to do as well. We should appreciate the things that we have in front of us." **LEL**