

# DAILY BEAUTIES AND SURPRISES

MARIE MASSEY'S RICHLY-COLORED PORTRAYALS OF EVERYDAY SPLENDORS  
ARE INVITATIONS TO SHARE THE ESSENCE OF BEAUTY.

*By Suzanne Smith Arney*



**Adobe Iris**      oil on canvas      40" x 30"

Iris. What is it about this long-stemmed, droopy-bearded flower that makes it so alluring? Is it the subtle shift of intense color, most commonly from sheer lavender to ultramarine, found in its voluptuous blossoms? Or, could it be the almost imperceptible sweet scent? Perhaps it's the ability to capture beams of crystalline sunlight on sensual petals and reflect it in ways few other flowers can—a singular perfect moment, presented like a gift.

If you are an artist endowed with the sensitivity of Marie Massey, you try mightily to capture this emotional stirring found in nature's perfection—and share it in a painting such as *Adobe Iris*. Looking at this particular work of art, one cannot help but reflect on similar events of their own joy

and wonder. Whether an iris or some other wondrous object of nature, it doesn't matter, it's a moment in which the viewer senses an understanding of the pure essence of beauty. Through Massey's unique skills with brushes and paints, she expresses this awareness to the benefit of all.

Dick and Gwen Oliver hadn't been in Taos long when they discovered Marie Massey's paintings at Walden Fine Art. Each of them had been introduced to art as a child, and over the years nourished their appreciation of art by visiting museums and galleries. Both are now board members of Taos Art Museum. Dick recalls their introduction to Massey's paintings, "We were immediately impressed—the vibrancy of the colors, the space, just the way she could capture a scene."

Soon after, the Olivers commissioned Massey to paint a scene depicting their new home, an adobe structure the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. “It’s not photographic,” says Gwen, “instead, it captures the soul of the place.” The couple’s next acquisition was Massey’s color-filled painting, *Tequila Sunrise*—a flash of fiery poppies against the cool, purple wall of a house in deep shadows. It was the vivid color combination that captured the Olivers’ attention, instilling in them an enduring feeling of admiration and pleasure.

It is Massey’s ability to capture the essence of scenes such as these that make her paintings so emotional. She animates familiar views, brings to life a favorite image. It’s almost impossible not to imagine the clink of coffee cups on a veranda, or the tremor of petals in a morning breeze. *Sunday Morning, Taos* is just such an experience. The viewer arrives at the sidewalk café before it has opened. The fabled light of Taos creates a crisp definition of light and shadow, and irises dance in the fresh air.

In this painting, Massey’s blue palette is varied but cohesive—a cerulean sky, cobalt flowers in ultramarine shadows, a turquoise doorframe. These play against the sunlit rose adobe building and paler patio floor. The trees, a viridian green under-painted with red, act as a frame for the colors and composition. Finally, the square dimensions of the picture imply a stillness, a captured moment. But these details don’t convey the immediacy of the sensation, the gentle whisper of leaves over-head, a walk interrupted by memories of delicious meals and shared laughter.



*Dappled Iris*, 30" x 24", oil on canvas



*Sunday Morning, Taos* 24" x 24", oil on canvas

Another painting of a scene from the same restaurant is titled *Lunch at Renato’s*. It is festive, rich and promising. The bright red umbrellas sheltering the café’s tables are poised like bird’s wings. They repeat the color of the tablecloths, and Massey’s red accents flit around the scene like hummingbirds. Sun-warmed terracotta planters overflow with pansies, and chatter from La Plaza de las Flores bubbles in the air. It’s an indulgent scene, so inviting, as if Massey has mixed into her paints a wisp of conversation, some distant music, the fragrance of bread, warm sunshine, and the anticipation of the day.

Alternately, *Dappled Iris* is a study in contrasts, and displays Massey’s skill in composition. The luxurious blossoms dance slightly in the foreground, countering the solidity of the background building. Reaching toward the sky, their petals reflect pale blue. Sepals in darker shades curve like silk peplums. The adobe building is horizontal, emphasized by jutting angles and beams. These, however, create diagonal shadows leading the eye back to the ballet, as if the viewer had front row seats.

"When you paint you get to explore things," says Massey. And she adds that being the mother of two little boys has renewed a childlike fascination with nature. Her delighted discoveries are shared, her expertise in focus. For example, the paintings Sunday Morning, Taos; Lunch at Renato's; and Dappled Iris are all images from the same restaurant. Yet in each case Massey devotes her gaze and attention on a particular view. It is a lesson in looking closely, with deep care and attention, at the daily beauties and surprises that are everywhere.

Among these ordinary subjects are the hollyhocks seen so often in Taos. Massey loves them, and describes them as "impetuous." She has explored them meticulously in an effort to "decipher" them and understand their essence. She compares their petals to "moist tissue paper," and in Hollyhock Delight, Taos, she gives us a portrait of that dewy innocence. The tall and somewhat gawky hollyhocks play like a band of kids at recess. Spring sunlight bounces off the leaves and the peeling turquoise paint on the door propped behind them. A *coyote* fence matches the flower stalks' upward reach, but is no match for their uncontained exuberance.



**Lunch at Renato's**, 20" x 24", oil on canvas



Hollyhock Delight, 24" x 20", oil on canvas

Hollyhocks also spring up in Ventana, tangled with crimson lilies in an overlooked side garden. Although untidy, these blooms in pink and cerise are lighter in color and have a more delicate feel than those of Hollyhock Delight, Taos. The rather small painting's title directs our attention to the single window set high in the wall and barred in diagonal turquoise, as if unaware of the display just below. The wall itself, in palest aqua blue, is a setting for the flowers' shy silhouettes. These greens, from the barely-there to the emphatic, dense base of shady leaves, show Massey's control of color range, her ability to convey sensory emotional botanical and compositional information. She applies paint sculpturally, adding oils over acrylic and enlivening colors with their complements. It is all done so unobtrusively, however, that we are only aware of the rightness of it, what Dick Oliver would describe as, "Ah, that's it!"

Sometimes Massey leaves Taos' streets and plazas and heads for open country on an early morning run. There, she might find a field of wild iris, irresistible in purple and green. "It's like a gorgeous vision," she says, and in that rush of awe can hardly wait to paint en plein air. Painting outdoors, she says, "You have 360 degrees of information—scale, contrasts, the size of things—and see the whole versus the particular. I like to paint the big picture with the big idea—how it stretches back, or the detail of flowers opening to expanse." Here her voice trails off, and each of us is left to view the paintings from our own vantage point, imbue them with personal associations, and then simply to accept the invitation to linger and look.



Tequila Sunrise, 12" x 12", oil on canvas

"Taos Gardens," an exhibition of new paintings by Marie Massey, will open at Walden Fine Art, 125 Kit Carson Road, Taos on May 26<sup>th</sup> and continue through June 30. An opening reception for the artist is scheduled for May 26<sup>th</sup>, 5-7pm.

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Wild Iris, 30" x 40", oil on canvas