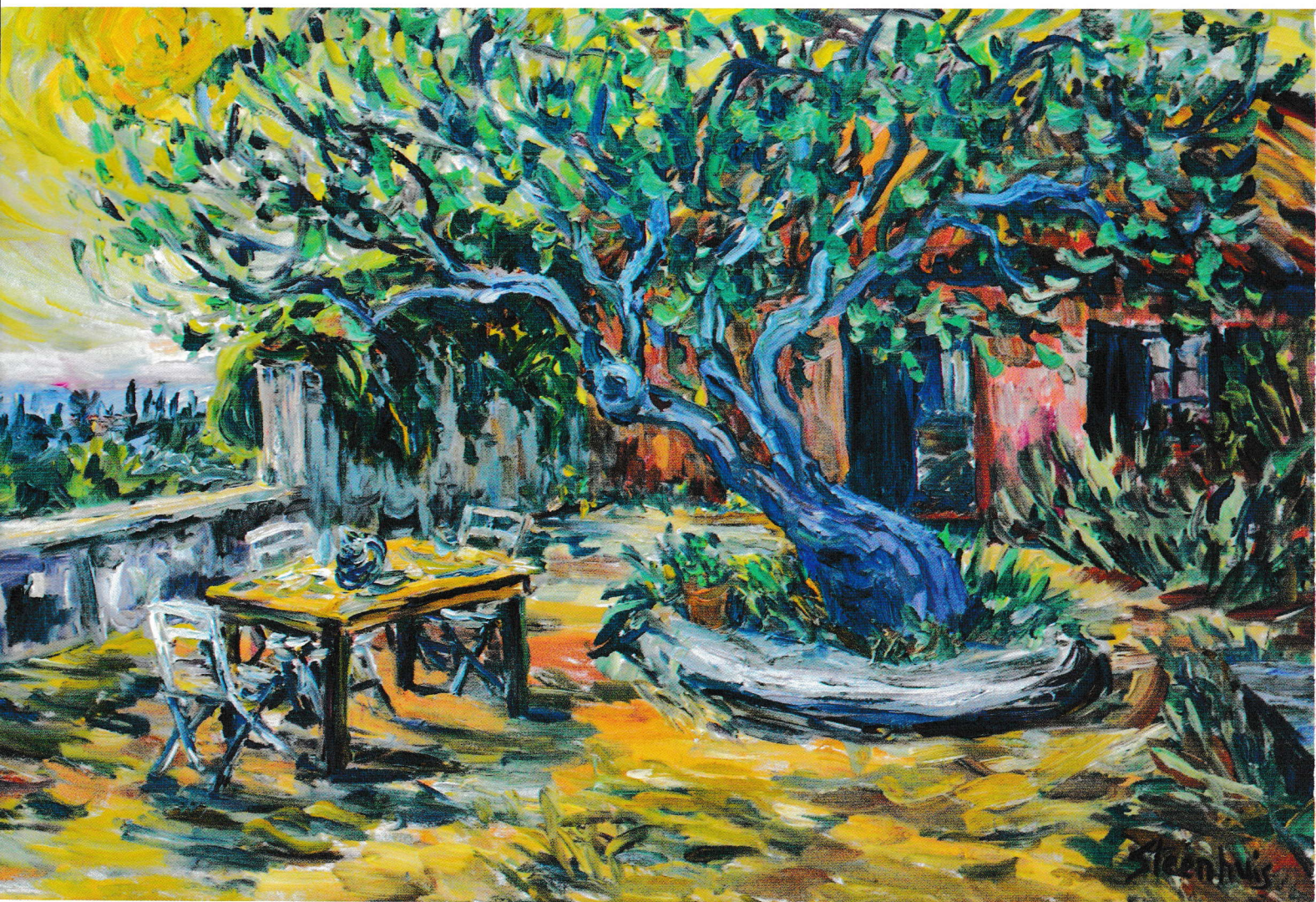


From *America* to *Provence:* In Cézanne's Footsteps

*A look inside the artistic journey
of artist Jill Steenhuis*

By Stephanie Curtis



Pistachio Tree at Chateau Noir, oil on canvas, 24 x 36" (61 x 91 cm)



Picasso's *Chateau in Vauvenargues*, oil on canvas, 12 x 16" (30 x 41 cm)

Climbing the wild, craggy road winding up among olive trees to the Château Noir, perched at the outskirts of the southern French city of Aix-en-Provence, it seems to the curious art lover-hiker that nothing has changed here since Cézanne occupied a simple stone studio from 1865 to 1898. Caressed by the rays of a late afternoon sun, the rugged path scented with wild fennel and rosemary leads past the Maison Maria, to reach, farther on, the famous pistachio tree, with, in the distance, a glimpse of the eternal Montagne Sainte-Victoire, all painted repeatedly by Paul Cézanne.

On a September afternoon an artist is behind her easel here, half a dozen brushes spread between the fingers of her left hand like an extravagantly colorful fan. The brush in her right hand moves swiftly over white canvas, splashing color in seemingly

arbitrary strokes, thick streaks and splats, mixes of sienna, orange, cobalt, Naples yellow, emerald and all their infinite combinations, giving birth barely 40 minutes later to a vibrant personal, pulsating rendition of the Maison Maria.

"As artists, we climb on the shoulders of the great masters, like climbing the trunks of a tree, and then send out our own branches," says the artist, Jill Steenhuis, who has been hovering on the shoulders of Cézanne, among other great artists, and spreading her shoots and branches since her arrival in France in 1980.

If any contemporary local artist holds a special place in the Cézanne landscape, it is certainly Jill Steenhuis. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, she could not have predicted that destiny would lead her to the Château Noir and the Sainte-Victoire Mountain. The first stroke of that special destiny took the

form of an unwanted birthday gift. On her 16th birthday, Jill had hoped to find in her driveway a shiny, bright new car wrapped in a big bow to mark this rite of passage. Instead, her father held out a large, beautifully wrapped book about an artist unknown to her and to many others at the time.

"Cézanne is the artist of the future, the father of modern art," Jill's father explained, as they leafed through the pages, the disappointed teenager feigning enthusiasm to avoid hurting her father's feelings. But as the pages turned, something sparked in the adolescent who had until then thought of pursuing a career as a stock broker. Studies in art at Sweet Briar College followed, and a BFA in studio art that equipped the young woman with expertise in mediums and techniques, even if in retrospect, she says that she felt more like a scientist than an artist at the end of her studies.



Reflections of Cap Canille & Pine Trees – Cassis, oil on canvas, 20 x 24" (51 x 61 cm)

Then came another little nudge of fate when during a cocktail party shortly after Jill's graduation from college, a friend of her father who had connections in the arts spoke about a school in the South of France that taught in the Cézanne tradition. Jill enrolled without a second thought for a six-week program at the Leo Marchutz School of Painting and Drawing in Aix-en-Provence, and took off for a place that immediately spoke to her aesthetic and her soul.

First there was the mountain, Cézanne's famous Sainte-Victoire, that, to Jill, echoed the one at summer camp in Alabama where she and her three younger sisters were sent after the death of their mother. The grieving 8-year-old found such comfort in the

mountain and nature that at the end of the summer, she feared leaving this healing place. Her camp counselor said simply, "Just take the mountain with you!" And so she did.

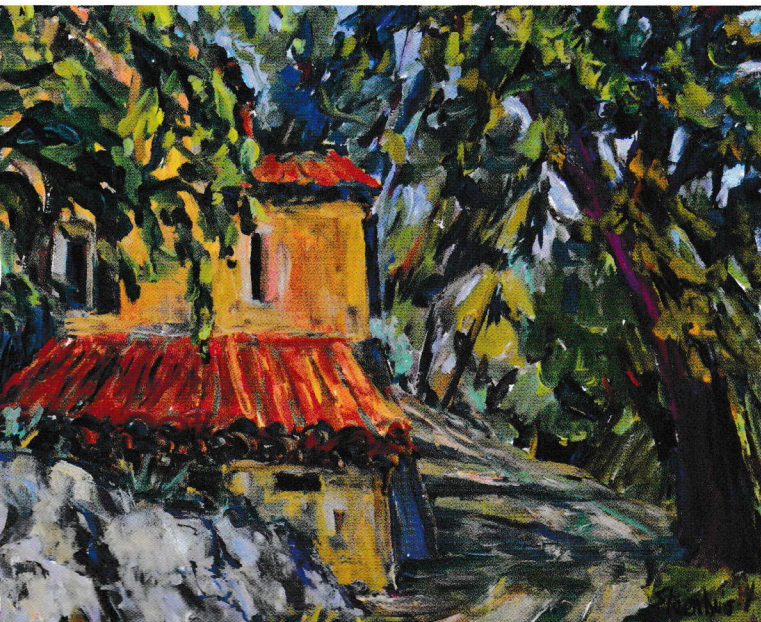
And there was also the young Frenchman, Serge, who Jill met on her second day in Provence.

Neither of them spoke the other's language, but a few years later, they said "Oui" in unison.

In the 1980s, Jill was one of the rare artists to have the privilege of occupying a studio at the privately owned Château Noir. Nurtured by this extraordinary site with its gnarled pines, with that special light filtering through, the mistral ruffling her hair and the scent of wild herbs in her nose,

Jill found the ideal space to develop her own style. As one of her artist mentors at the Marchutz School, François de Asis, used to tell her, "when we are young artists, nature and reality take up a very large place in our painting and personal poetry is relegated to a little corner. After decades of painting, nature occupies only a small place, and our personal poetry takes over, occupying an immense space." These words were Jill's mentor's way of releasing her from copying nature and allowing nature to be the catalyst for her inner poetry to soar.


Today, 36 years after what was meant to be a six-week hiatus, Jill is still here, painting daily, mostly *en plein air*, the legs of her easel lapped by waves in the little fishing port of



Maison Maria in July, oil on canvas, 20 x 24" (51 x 61 cm)

Cassis, or planted in the midst of garlic pickers, or fields of waving lavender in full fragrant bloom. When she is not capturing this essence of Provence on canvas with her own special poetry, she can be found in the light-filled, cathedral ceiling studio of the country house that she and her husband, Serge Rufatto, who became a sculptor, have lovingly restored.

Several times a year, Jill welcomes professional and amateur artists here for painting workshops. After an initiation day in her studio during which Jill imparts her conception of painting, her way of organizing a palette (with valuable hints for harmonizing colors), the group of generally four to six participants takes off to explore the landscapes of Provence, easels, canvases and palettes in hand. The workshop includes a memorable visit to Cézanne's atelier, and to sites where the master painted. At the end of the atelier, participants go away with a dozen or so of their own works created during the daily sessions, and often with a new vision of art and its powers over the spirit, a message that Jill shares during the hours of painting in nature.

Indefatigable, and graced with a quiet, unshakable faith in herself and the value of art (all of which she shares in her book *Art, Soul & Destiny, An Artist's Journey from America to Provence*), Jill organizes two annual tours to the United States to exhibit and sell her works in galleries, museums and private homes. In the fall of 2016, she exhibited in Jackson, Mississippi, and in Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin and Fredericksburg, Texas. Her message about the healing power of art seemed more pertinent than ever following the terrorist attacks in France, in Nice, July 2016, and in Paris, November 2015, which deeply marked Jill. Reflecting on the words of Vincent Van Gogh, "Art is to console those who are broken by life," Jill created the painting *Stars Give Hope—Starry Night in Paris*. For Jill, "France needs to know that America cares." 



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jill Steenhuis, a native of Atlanta, Georgia, has lived and painted in Aix-en-Provence in the South of France for over 35 years. After graduating from Sweet Briar College with a BFA in studio art, she travelled to France to study at the Leo Marchutz School of Painting and Drawing in Aix. From 1981 to 1996, Jill was one of the rare artists to occupy a studio at the historic Château Noir where Paul Cézanne had his studio in the late 19th century.

Acclaimed for her vibrant, colorful renderings of Provençal landscapes painted *en plein air*, Jill has exhibited in solo shows in New York City, Greenwich, Atlanta, Chicago, Washington D.C., Dallas, and San Francisco, among other major American cities, as well as in Aix-en-Provence and Paris. Her works figure in the permanent collections of several museums and in important private collections in American and France.

Jill was chosen by the Smithsonian Institute in 2006 as the Cézanne specialist for the 100th anniversary of this master's death, and has appeared on *Good Morning America*. Her book *Art, Soul & Destiny: An artist's Journey from America to Provence* is currently in its second printing.

Contact at

jill@artinprovence.com | www.artinprovence.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Curtis is a Paris-based journalist and author specializing in gastronomy and the arts.

She began her career in New York, first with *Vogue* magazine, and later *Food & Wine* magazine before moving to France to research and write *Birnbaum's Guide to France* and to become a Paris correspondent for *Food Arts* magazine. She has contributed articles to *Bon Appétit*, *Food & Wine*, *Virtuoso Life*, *Gourmet*, *European Travel and Life* and *The Los Angeles Times*, and has translated the cookbooks of several prominent French chefs, most recently, *Chocolate* by Pierre Hermé (Flammarion, 2016).

Founder of Culinary Concepts Corporation, Stephanie has guided food-lovers and culinary professionals on visits to Paris food sites, including Rungis for over two decades.

Stephanie holds degrees in journalism from Colorado and Boston Universities, and a certificate from the Ritz Escoffier Cooking School in Paris, where she studied under a Julia Child Scholarship for food journalists.