

Back to his roots:

# Tom Maakestad’s painting reflects the beauty of Minnesota’s nature

LORI ANN REINHALL  
The Norwegian American

Growing up, Tom Maakestad used to watch his dad work at his painting and drawing. Early on, he saw that art could be a workable way of life, a real profession. His father, John Maakestad, was a professor of art history at Minnesota’s prestigious St. Olaf College in Northfield. There was a constant coming and going of artists and intellectuals, the likes of Paolo Soleri and Buckminster Fuller. It is no wonder that Maakestad would be inspired to study both literature and studio art.

As a legacy of the St. Olaf faculty, Maakestad had the privilege to attend 13 colleges in their network tuition-free, but in the end, he chose Luther College, a liberal arts college in Decorah, Iowa. It was a good match for the young student, with his varied interests and intellectual curiosity.

Decorah is also home to Vesterheim, the National Norwegian-American Museum and Heritage Center. Maakestad is of 99.9% Norwegian ancestry, with deep roots in Norway. The family homestead, Maakestad Farm, is located on a remote branch of the Hardanger Fjord. The property is now diluted in terms of ownership, but Maakestad’s father has been there, and the family has remained in contact with relatives in Oslo.

While Maakestad has never been to Norway, he longs to experience its mountains, forests, and fjords. Love of nature is in his blood, and he has an affinity for Nordic



Image: Tom Maakestad

In “Two Fly Fishermen,” painter Tom Maakestad captures the atmosphere of summer life on the water in Midwest.

culture. More recently, his appetite has been further whetted by a Scandinavian cooking show that he enjoys tuning in on regularly. Norway is definitely on his travel bucket list.

The years at Luther were formative, as Maakestad studied drawing, English, and French. While Decorah is an idyllic and somewhat isolated town, through his studies, he gained “an understanding of the value of our place on the planet. Literature opens up a new world for you,” Maakestad said. One book that made the strong impact on him was *Giants of the Earth* by the Norwegian-American author Ole Edvart Rølvaag.

First published in English in 1927, the novel depicts the life of a pioneer Norwegian immigrant family as they try to make a new life in America on the prairie. The descriptions of the landscape and the way the people responded to it made a profound impression on the undergraduate. It was the same landscape that he had come to know from trips with his family driving across North Dakota and Montana.

It is this Midwestern landscape that would become the primary subject matter of Maakestad’s artistic oeuvre. While he has traveled and lived in other places in the

world, it is a landscape that he always returns to as an artist. Maakestad explained that he spent time at Lake Chelan in the Cascade Mountains in eastern Washington state, and while he was taken by its beauty, it’s nothing that he would be apt to paint.

“When you’re in the Cascades, you’re faced with tremendous detail,” he said, a detail that does not lend itself well to his style of painting.

Maakestad and his wife, Anna, also spent several years in Asia in the 1980s and ’90s,

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Image: Tom Maakestad

The painting “Far North” captures the distinct beauty of the boreal forest wilderness of northeastern Minnesota, with the orange hues of the afternoon sun.



Image: Tom Maakestad

With the fog lifting off the island, this study is reminiscent of the painting of the French Impressionists, with a sense of fluidity and light.



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when he worked for a multinational publishing and tradeshow firm, creating exhibition concepts for shows in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. When they lived in Hong Kong, Maakestad found new subject matter—fish markets and boats—but each summer, the couple would take leave and return to Minnesota and the landscape he loves.

Today, home is in Marine on St. Croix, Minn., where Maakestad has maintained a studio for the past 16 years. He takes many of his motifs from the surrounding area: the river and the lakes, the broad valleys, the farm fields. He describes his style as “realist fiction,” a blending of photographic image and the artist’s subjective experience. “With realism, you are depicting something you saw, and the fiction is what you add to it from your own personality,” he said. “If you write fiction, you can make something up; you make it work in the story you are trying to tell. When you paint, you can invoke a feeling, as the setting serves the color palette you had in mind.”

It is this personal element that makes Maakestad’s painting so distinctive. He explained that he never tries to do something simply because someone else will like it, rather his work always means something to him personally.

To evoke the soft nuances of a given moment, the artist generally works with oil pastels. He prefers to paint in the early morning or late afternoon, when the light is more muted, in contrast to midday, when the bright sun will wash out the colors.

Seasons of the year also play an important role, each season with its own beauty. Most of Maakestad’s painting takes place in fall, winter, and summer. While spring is magnificent, at time of the year, he only sees green and black, lacking the muted tones so prevalent in his work. Overall, climate and weather conditions can have a profound effect on the colors of the landscape. The artist explains that even humidity in the air will have an effect on how the color and light is reflected.

When you look at Maakestad’s paintings, you may detect a hint of French Impressionism, the same sense of light and fluidity always present. He acknowledges the influence of Claude Monet and Paul Cezanne, artists who created paintings with color and light at the forefront of the image.

Throughout his life, the Minnesota artist has gained inspiration by visiting some of the world’s greatest museums. When he graduated from college, he spent an entire month exploring the museums of Washington, D.C. And in 1992, he spent another full month in Paris, where he studied the great Impressionist paintings at the Musée d’Orsay and the masterpieces of modern and contemporary art at the Centre Pompidou.

Other post-Impressionist influences include Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, both masters of the American abstract Expressionist movement of the 1940s and ’50s. Maakestad also admired the vibrant landscapes of German refugee painter Wolf Kahn and the work of Richard Diebenkorn, a representative of abstract Expressionism and the Bay Area Figurative Movement in California. The American pop art painter Wayne Thiebaud, known for his colorful works depicting commonplace objects of mass culture—lipsticks, paint cans, ice cream cones, pastries, and hot dogs—has also been a favorite of the Minnesotan.

But there is nothing resembling an Expressionist scream in Maakestad’s painting. The feeling is more a Romantic expression of harmony found in nature in the works created “en plein air.” Even when the artist



Image: Tom Maakestad

Maakestad likes to paint in the mornings and afternoons when the sun’s intensity is not so strong as to wash out the colors of the landscape. The colors of summer, fall, and winter are most appealing to him.

incorporates human subjects, they appear in unison with their surroundings. In a recent painting, “Two Fly Fishermen,” the artist explained how the composition of the setting drove the creative process.

The focus was on the two men in the boat on the water, and behind them are the simple strokes that created the landscape. He had thought about giving it more detail, but he realized that if he filled in too many details, it would take away from the most important part of the composition. The effect is that you zoom in on the fishermen in the boat from the artist’s perspective in this stunning example of his realist fiction.

Maakestad also works in larger formats with a broader perspective on the landscape. He remembers climbing a mountain as a kid in Washington state and for the first time in his life being taken by the sweeping aerial view from the top. Later, when he flew to Asia, he would take the polar route and look down on sea-blue color of the ice caps. “It was mindboggling,” he said.

Experiences like these inspired Maakestad to apply for a Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grant in 2014, which enabled him to fly over the same areas where had lived and worked for most of his life. Pilots flew him above the St. Croix River, down the



Image: Tom Maakestad

Throughout all of Maakestad’s oeuvre, soft pastels applied with flowing brushstrokes create a soothing feeling of harmony with nature.

Mississippi, all the way to the Iowa River. At times flying in a Piper from 1946, he would lean out the window with his camera to capture the views. It brought a new perspective in his paintings with a bird’s eye view of the geography—with stunning results.

Since 1995, Maakestad has been associated with the prestigious Groveland Gallery in Minneapolis, where his work is featured in solo exhibitions every two years. This summer and fall, he will be showing at the Sivertson Gallery in Grand Marais on the North Shore of Lake Superior in northeast Minnesota.

The new show will include pieces from a series created in the boreal forest wilderness of Minnesota in the Duluth area for a project with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The artist already knew the area from childhood visits with his family. He visited again in 2012 after a fire had devastated the region. But nature rejuvenates itself, and the forest began to come back in 2016, when he returned to start work on the project.

The stunning beauty of the forest provided yet another unique landscape for Maakestad’s paintings. There is an unusual light in the northern landscape, which the artist captures: the sense of the light hitting the top of the trees at end of the day when the trees turn to orange, as it is refracted from the material in atmosphere. In Maakestad’s own words, “It’s a magical experience.”

Maakestad’s art has been displayed in over 60 exhibitions in the United States and abroad since he graduated from college in 1980. He has received numerous awards and has been reviewed and featured in major publications around the world.

But without a doubt, one of the most significant achievements for him was when Dr. Mary Jo Thorsheim at Minneapolis’ Norway Art gallery arranged for the U.S. State Department’s Art in the Embassies program to purchase four of his southern Minnesota oil pastels for the ambassador’s Oslo residence in 2005. Then in 2016, the ambassador organized an exhibit of four of his paintings at the U.S. Embassy, bringing together top representatives from Norwegian galleries and museums. Maakestad and his wife were not able to attend, but his Oslo relatives were able to represent them, forging an even stronger bond between the families on opposite sides of the Atlantic.

Short of a few difficulties in getting some of the oil pastels he uses from suppliers in Japan, COVID-19 has not hindered Maakestad in his work. In fact, homebound in Marine on St. Croix, he has been able to focus more on his painting. He hasn’t seen any drop-off in interest and even sees some positive effects of the pandemic.

“As people are sitting at home looking at the four walls surrounding them, they are seeing the value of art,” he said. There is that soft voice telling us to “slow down, look inside” he said.

And perhaps that is exactly what we need to do: slow down and look inside. During a challenging time, there is much solace to be found in art, with its ability to lift us up to a new state of contemplation and inner awareness—and Maakestad’s work serves as a testimonial to this. With its forests and fields, rivers and lakes, the outer landscape of Tom Maakestad’s painting evokes a healing, transfiguring inner landscape, which is the power of art.

- To learn more about Tom Maakestad’s work, visit [www.tommaakestad.com](http://www.tommaakestad.com).
- Maakestad is represented by the Groveland Gallery in Minneapolis: [www.grovelandgallery.com/artist/tom-maakestad](http://www.grovelandgallery.com/artist/tom-maakestad).
- To learn more about the Sivertson Gallery in Grand Marais, visit [www.sivertson.com](http://www.sivertson.com).