

Cindy Sturla, Our SWRA Artist

Cindy's love for art started early. When she was 7 her mother took her to the Art Institute of Chicago. She fell in love with the Impressionists, Renoir in particular. Her mother let her pick out a book in the museum store about Renoir and she was hooked.

Living in the Chicago area, Cindy was able to make many trips to the city museums and galleries. Cindy attended Eastern Illinois University to pursue a degree in education and in 1970 she married her high school sweetheart Craig Sturla, and in 1972 Craig graduated from Purdue and took a job in Pittsburgh with Westinghouse in the nuclear division. Switching gears, Cindy decided to pursue her art at the University of Pittsburgh where she took classes hoping to get a degree in Fine Arts. However, the last semester was cut short when she and Craig moved to Brussels, Belgium in 1976 when Craig was offered to participate in an exchange program in the nuclear division.

Having a chance to live, work, and travel in Europe was a dream come true. They were able to go to the cities and countrysides where the masters had lived and created their work. And in the mid 70's Americans had not yet rediscovered Europe. They did not have to fight the crowds. Can you imagine walking into the Sistine Chapel with a handful of other tourists and spend as much time as you wanted taking photos?

In 1982 Craig and Cindy moved to Orlando with Westinghouse, along with the 600 other families to start a new life. Cindy took an active role volunteering for any roles that centered around her love of art. She became the "Picture Lady" at Keeth Elementary showing different paintings from the masters to children and talking about the paintings.

Cindy also attended Crealde Art School. While she was living in Pennsylvania she had been painting in oils, but she realized that watercolor was the perfect medium to capture the light of Florida. So it was back to the drawing board to learn the watercolor medium, which most artists find is the most difficult.

After initially taking classes in watercolor painting from Helen Hickey at Crealde, Life Drawing from Rima Jabur, and plein air landscape painting from Don Sontag, Cindy traveled to workshops of well known watercolor plein air landscape painters around the country such as Judy Wagner, Tony Van Hasselt, Tony Couch, Betty Lou Schlemn, and Peter Spatero. Painting in watercolor en plein air (a French term for painting outside) has its particular challenges and learning from these artists was critical.

A group of women at Don Sontag's outdoor landscape painting class started showing their collective work. Their first show was held at the Winter Park Library in 1999. From this show the group began to expand and they established the first organized plein air painting group in Central Florida. From there they were invited to paint with a group in Gainesville. That group organized the first invitational Plein Air Paint Out show at the Kanapaha Botanical Gardens in Gainesville in 2002. Cindy was invited to paint around the state, in Sarasota, St Petersburg, Ormond Beach, St Augustine, Cape Canaveral, and in Winter Park Florida garnering awards for her watercolors. She was one of the few watercolor painters, which gave her an advantage. Cindy's style is Realistic Impressionism.

Cindy began showing in Juried Sidewalk Art Shows. She was noticed at the Heathrow Art Show in 2000 by a member of the Valencia College faculty. So in 2000 Cindy had her first solo art show at Valencia College Orlando. From there she got into many juried shows around the state and she and Craig would be off on weekends setting up for the shows. Craig did all the hard work!.

Locally, Cindy became a bit of a celebrity for the Taste of Oviedo poster contest in 2002. Oviedo had a strong history as a farming community where immigrants had come over 100 years ago to establish a new home. Cindy won the poster award with the painting, "Sunday Morning on Broad Street". In 2007 she was the poster artist with "Ducks on Lake Charm". And if you happen to go to the new Town House restaurant in Oviedo, be sure to look above the entrance. Cindy's painting of the old Town House diner and the Baptist Church is on the sign.

Cindy took a studio in Winter Park in 2001 and joined the Central Florida Watercolor group. The group had started in 1998 with 12 members. During that time the Plein Air Painters of Central Florida expanded in numbers and were requested to paint in and around Central Florida at different events capturing historic buildings and areas in paintings for posterity. Cindy was a board member of both groups helping to guide their artist efforts to have a voice in the Orlando area community.

In 2003 life became more complicated when her father developed cancer. Cindy had helped her parents move to an assisted living facility in Mt Dora in 2001 when they could no longer live without help from family. Her mother had been diagnosed with Alzheimers and her father could not take care of her alone. She left the studio and put her art business on hold to help during the year he was ill and her mother was at loose ends making trips to Mt Dora to help out. Her father died in 2004 and Cindy assumed responsibility for her mother's care. Cindy finally got her mother settled in Arden Courts after trying to find a good memory care facility. And life opened back up with her painting.

Cindy even got her mother painting to help her feel better. Surprisingly, her mother really loved painting. Her ability to paint really well in watercolor took everybody by surprise since she had never done art or watercolor. So at 80 years young, Arden Courts hosted an art show reception for Carol Loeffel. Cindy got 50 wonderful paintings matted and hung. Jill Huff of the Orlando Sentinel came and did a piece on Carol that was an inspiration to many readers. Friends and family came and purchases were made of Carol's work. Sales totaling \$500 were donated to the Alzheimers Resource Center. It was a great day for Carol who felt like queen for the day.

In 2006 Cindy discovered Gallery on First in Sanford. The gallery has 8 working art studios, so she put in her application. Cindy shares a studio with watercolorist Stewart Jones. Gallery on First shares the space with Jeanine Taylor Folk Art Gallery who represents many folk artists from around the country. The eclectic combination of art and artists brings so much character to Sanford.

Cindy's reputation grew as a plein air artist when she was invited to paint in the Winter Park Paint Out, a prestigious event put on by the Polasek Museum to help raise funds for the museum. Her works grace the homes of many patrons. One painting was purchased by Rollins College to hang in the Chancellors' Office. Winter Park Magazine ran a story about Cindy in September 2010 with the painting she did of Rollins Chapel on the cover.

Cindy has been active promoting and shaping the art community in Central Florida. From 2012-2015 Cindy was the president of the Central Florida Watercolor Society. Under her presidency the group grew to 200 members from 7 counties around Central Florida. The CFWS brings watercolor painters together whether they are beginners or professionals for monthly meetings to share their love for watercolor. A juried members show each year produces professional work of the highest caliber. Cindy was awarded 2nd place this year in the competition for a painting "Bee Keepers".

Gallery on First has been Cindy's home base since 2006. Cindy not only does landscape and nature, she also loves to paint portraits and people. Her works include many commissions of private homes, places people have visited they want to remember in a painting, and loved ones, past and present. Many are done from photographs she requests from clients. Commission work for portraits is the toughest. It's never easy to get a likeness in a portrait, but Cindy works until she gets it right.

Cindy has also been teaching watercolor classes at the gallery for the past 12 years. There are so many people who come into the gallery and tell her they would love to learn to watercolor. Some had tried and told her they couldn't do it. To which Cindy would tell them maybe they didn't have a good teacher. Cindy has successfully taught watercolor through her own system of learning the basics of watercolor painting. She teaches beginner, advanced beginners and intermediate classes at the Gallery on First.

Cindy can be found in Studio #1 at Gallery on First most days, but with Covid-19 and the reopening of business it's good to contact her for times she's there. For class information you can go to her page at GalleryonFirst.com or go through her website, cindysturla.com. to see examples of her work.