





**Connected by
Shadows**

2009, watercolor,
26 x 26.

All artwork this
article collection the
artist unless otherwise
indicated.

This painting received
the Ralph Smith Memo-
rial Award in this year's
American Watercolor
Society exhibition,
which earned Roman
signature membership
in the organization.

IRENA ROMAN: **Letting the Sun Shine In**

For this artist, instructor, and illustrator, the movement of light across forms provides a constant challenge and the foundation for meaningful still lifes. | **by Naomi Ekperigin**





ABOVE
Squeeze
2011, watercolor,
17 x 17. Private
collection.

LEFT
Shimmer
2011, watercolor,
17 x 17.



Irena Roman is having a good year. Her still lifes continue to gain attention from organizations and publications across the country—within the last six months she has earned signature membership in the American Watercolor Society, won the Mary Hill Memorial Award for Watercolor from the Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club, and her work appeared in the Transparent Watercolor Society of America’s 36th Annual National Exhibition. When she’s not creating award-winning paintings, she shares her experience and knowledge as a professor at Massachusetts College of Art and Design (Mass Art), in Boston. In short, Irena Roman can, does, and teaches.

Roman’s skillful rendering of glass objects and refracted light demonstrates a mastery of water-media that many artists spend their lives working to achieve—which is

why it’s surprising to discover that Roman didn’t start out as a painter. “It took me a while to get over what I call my ‘fear of wetness,’” she says. “When I left college, I was more comfortable with dry media because I hadn’t taken enough painting classes to feel as though I had a command over the medium. It wasn’t until graduate school that I went through intensive study and felt confident enough to paint with watercolor.”

Roman began her career in illustration, and for more than 20 years she has lent her skills to a wide array of projects, including magazines, children’s books, Tiffany & Co., and portraits for *The New Yorker*. Although it may seem that her fine art only appeared within the last decade, she is quick to note that she’s no overnight success. “I’ve always created art for myself,” she says, “and when I had time, I would enter

Roman's Palette

The artist likes various brands of paints but primarily uses Winsor & Newton paints in the following colors:

- cadmium yellow pale
- lemon yellow
- Naples yellow
- aureolin
- quinacridone gold
- raw sienna
- cadmium red
- alizarin crimson
- permanent mauve
- cadmium orange
- quinacridone rust
- dioxazine mauve (Old Holland)
- burnt sienna
- Delft blue (Schmincke)
- permanent blue
- ultramarine blue
- permanent violet (Holbein)
- lilac
- Hooker's green
- Winsor green
- cerulean blue
- May green (Schmincke)
- Winsor blue
- French ultramarine

She also likes Dr. Martin's Liquid Concentrated Watercolors, particularly ice blue and orange, but notes that she uses these strong colors very sparingly.



my work in shows. Even as an illustrator, I never waited for assignments; I was always working on something that was interesting to me.”

She was also teaching, and over the years she has served as an instructor in a range of classes, including watercolor for illustration majors and advanced drawing. These days, when digital technology is the norm and Disney magic is created on a computer, one might expect Roman to complain about students’ apathy

toward mastering skills by hand, but she doesn’t. She’s not just being diplomatic; her students really are excited to take in as much as possible—likely because of Roman’s influence. “A lot of the students at Mass Art want to do concept art or work in film and television, and we also have many students who want to work in illustration markets that have been around forever, such as children’s books,”

she says. “Honestly, I believe that no matter what path students pursue after graduating, they need an education in how to create an image. If they want to translate that into digital media, they’ll be more successful if they’ve learned painting and drawing skills because they’ll know *why* something has to look a certain way. The computer is simply another way to interpret the fundamentals of drawing and painting.”

In her watercolor classes geared toward illustration majors,

ABOVE
Bottle of Health
2011, watercolor,
23 x 16.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Jordan Almonds
2006, watercolor,
24 x 16.

Roman usually starts the semester with a still life done tonally so that the students focus on value instead of color. After completing this, students must create a full-color painting using the study as a guide. “The first thing they have to decide is their complementary color scheme—this doesn’t mean the painting is only done with complements but that there’s a dominant color scheme. I like them to have a firm grasp on the importance of color temperature and color relationships as soon as possible so that they can begin utilizing the concepts in their work.” When discussing these principles, she stresses the need for variation and warns students against what she calls the “deadly 50-50 split.” “In general, it’s best for your color relationship to have a strong dominant and a complement in a 3:1 ratio,” she explains. “When your painting is half-and-half, it will appear rather flat. When you make a strong choice and have a clear scheme, you can begin to create a sense of atmosphere, hint at the world outside of the frame—in other words, you can start to engage the viewer.”

In her own work, Roman most often employs yellow and purple as complements, and lemons are her most ubiquitous subject. They’re usually shown in groupings along with glassware and other everyday items. “I started working on these subjects about 10 years ago, when my mother passed away and I inherited a lot of her household and utilitarian items,” the artist explains. Roman was initially inspired to paint these objects because of her emotional attachment to them, but soon the process of painting them itself became gratifying, which has further deepened her connection to her subject.

On a purely technical level, glass is an ideal subject for watercolor, as it challenges the artist to explore the effects of light and depict soft color. Roman says that in working with this subject matter, she has really learned how to see light. “It’s amazing how



rapidly and dramatically it can change,” she says. “It can look one way at 10 in the morning and totally different at 3 in the afternoon.” In an effort to accurately portray these shifts, Roman sets up her still lifes outside on a tablecloth in her yard. She returns to her setup throughout the day, observing and recording variations through graphite sketches. She notes that her preference for these thumbnail drawings comes from her illustration career, but in her own work they’re much more abstract. She returns to her studio not with a blueprint for a painting but with a sketchbook full of possibilities.

“Because of the light, I’ve also really gotten interested in shadows,” she says. “And I’m starting to look at composition a bit differently. I’m working on finding ways to use shadows to create a sense of order and enhance clarity instead of obscure it.” In paintings such as *Swirl* and *Shadow*, Roman does precisely that. The delicately rendered shadows add a sense of depth to the composition, and



LEFT

Shadow

2010, watercolor,
17 x 25½.

This painting won the High Winds Medal in the American Watercolor Society's 2011 exhibition.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Swirl

2012, watercolor,
26 x 18.

Roman's Recommended Materials

The artist suggests her students use a large, white plastic palette with a cover and individual paint wells that wrap around the periphery. "This palette will help you save money on paint by keeping your paints fresh," she says. "It'll also help with paint mixing."

Palette

The artist recommends Winsor & Newton paints for the basic palette, which includes the following colors:

- cadmium red
- cadmium yellow
- Winsor blue
- cerulean blue
- Winsor violet
- Payne's gray
- sepia
- Hooker's green, Winsor green, or viridian
- raw sienna
- burnt umber
- raw umber

Brushes

"All of the following can be synthetic or a blend of synthetic and natural hair," the artist says. "Loew-Cornell Ultra Round brushes are great."

- medium watercolor brush (sizes 3 to 7)
- large watercolor brush (sizes 10 to 14)
- small brush for details, such as a Winsor & Newton No. 4
- flat sky brush, ¾" to 1½"

Surface

● Arches 140-lb cold-pressed sheets

● Lanaquarelle 140-lb cold-pressed paper

● Crescent or Strathmore illustration board: "This is great for mixing media," Roman says. "It takes graphite well."

- Bainbridge hot-pressed illustration board: "This is great for more experimental painting because the paint sits on the surface of the board, as opposed to sinking into the fiber, as it does with paper," the artist says. "That makes it great for lifting and scraping into paint."

Other

- pencils
- kneaded eraser
- plastic spray bottle with an adjustable trigger
- 1-gallon water containers
- 6-ounce plastic cups
- X-Acto knife
- Viva paper towels
- Incredible White Mask or Miskit Frisket masking fluid

About the Artist

Irena Roman's work has appeared in *Watercolor Artist*, *Splash 9, 10, and 11*, and is held in private and public collections around the world. She was recently awarded signature status in the American Watercolor Society, and she holds the same title in the Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club, the Transparent Watercolor Society of America, and the New England Watercolor Society. She lives outside of Boston with her husband, artist John Roman, and is represented by Renjeau Galleries, in Natick, Massachusetts. For more information, visit www.irenaroman.com.



although she makes great use of the white of the paper, the objects appear to be sitting on a table, not a flat surface. She also incorporates aerial perspective, which serves to put the viewer into the composition—in other words, she puts life into these still lifes. “In a way, still lifes become a landscape of sorts,” she says. “It’s not about just the objects but how they exist in space. I like to work from different angles so that viewers will stop and take a look at something they’d normally pass by.”

With her growing accolades and increasing presence in the fine-art world, it seems that Roman no longer has to worry about getting viewers’ attention. While discussing her recent successes, she is humble and somewhat thoughtful. “When there’s a connection between what you’re painting and what you’re feeling, I think other people can feel it, too,” she says. “I think there’s a universal experience that

people share, and because the objects I focus on are common, there’s almost an archetypal response to them. I’m simply trying to create images that transcend the objects themselves, because what makes them most engaging for me is the fact that there’s a permanence to them.”

Like any artist, Roman’s primary goal is to improve her craft and share her work with a larger audience, and she has utilized juried competitions for these ends. As the instructor of a senior-portfolio class, she is often asked how one goes about building a career and reputation, and she stresses that there are no hard-and-fast rules. “I often think that I don’t spend enough time marketing myself,” she says, “but sometimes there just aren’t enough hours in the day. Knowing whether you should submit or show a painting is a gut reaction that develops over time and, unfortunately, requires experience with rejection. You just have to keep putting yourself out there.”

Roman teaches approximately three days per week, depending on the semester, and in recent years she’s taken on fewer illustration projects so that she can devote her free time to fine art. Even after spending several years on her current subject matter, she is anything but bored. “As an illustrator, you go from job to job,” she says. “You can spend one week on a portrait and the next week you’re working on a book cover. The opportunity to really delve into a subject and build up a body of work around it has been really helpful. And even though I know how to work very quickly, I enjoy taking as long as I want to complete a painting simply because I can. Just as I teach my students to think of objects in terms of shapes, I do the same thing when I’m working on a still life. Working in this way, it’s almost meditative. I can spend hours painting and just get lost in it.” With summer vacation coming up, it’s no doubt that Roman will be making the most of every sun-filled day. ■