



Photograph: Paula Duncaff-Barber

Her Muskoka home is important and inspirational to Susan Eck. Above, she holds her oil painting "Muskoka Fall Day" and at right is "Honey Dew Fields of Dee Bank."



Achieving balance

Article by Maria Duncaff-Barber



Photograph: Paul Bennett

*I am a soul who, when nature calls
I listen with my heart
Then I retell
The lesson
For you
In my art*

This poem, "My Art," is part of Susan E. Eck's book, *Face of Love*, a collection of love poems, prose and lyrics – and a showcase for her colorful paintings.

Face of Love is her fourth in a collection of self-published books. She wrote the first three under

the pen name "Michaela More." Her first book *The Angels Cried With Me* was released in 1997. *On the Wings of an Angel* followed in 1998 and *The Angels Sing With Me* was next. All have sold well in the Muskoka area, where she has given many readings.

Susan Eck is an emerging, contemporary artist who expresses herself in creatively as an artist, writer, poet and songwriter. By capturing common feelings and shared emotional journeys, her work reflects the richness of her experiences and travels.

Born and raised in Toronto, the youngest of six children, Eck says: "I was born at home and, because my grandmother delivered me, I had a strong bond with her. From the instant I was born, I was touched by love. My mother was a working mother so I was raised by my grandmother until I was six years old."

Eck now lives on beautiful Three Mile Lake in a purple cottage called the "Secret Garden." It's named after the famous book by Frances Hodgson Burnett and also because of the way the cottage is laid out – the garden is at the front, a surprise for visitors. This idyllic place has been her home in Muskoka for seven years.

Her paintings are based on her spirituality and desire to listen to her soul with passion, strength and commitment, as she explores the spiritual side of life and her own creativity.

As an artist, Eck is attached to her paintings and sees them as transference of love. "I don't think of business or selling the painting, when I am painting," she says. "An artist friend once told me, a long time ago, to never let go of a painting until I am absolutely sure I want to let it go." She smiles and points to the walls adorned with exciting, vibrant paintings. "When clients come to my studio or buy a painting from one of the galleries, I know they have to have a magical connection to the painting; then I know it is going to a good home and family.... Each painting is an individual birth – giving birth to a new invention is a feeling most artists have."

A self-taught artist, Eck is passionate about artistic expression. She started to paint 10 years ago, when a friend took her to an art camp and she found that painting was a beautiful way to express herself. When she brought the painting home, a neighbor bought it, and that was the beginning of her career.

"That opened the envelope for me. Other friends and neighbors said to just put it out there, and I graduated to canvas and realized I loved to paint. I had to see myself as

the artist, to visualize it, to realize it. I was very strong in the arts in high school, however, I listened to the practicality of my mother's wisdom and she encouraged me to study and get a job."

Eck has learned to achieve a balance between two types of careers, straddling the art world and the business world. She has been teaching marketing at a community college for 14 years in Toronto, and she loves it – just as she loves living in Muskoka.

"I love Muskoka. This environment helps me feel settled; I feel at home. I have met many wonderful peers here and I am at peace, not just because of a sense of scenic beauty but because of the acceptance of who I am, just being myself. All my energies here come together and I

feel balanced. I like who I am. The love comes through my paintings." Eck is expressive with her hands as she speaks with love about her chosen creative fields.

"I had to *claim* being an artist. I am a good artist but, inwardly, I had to grow spiritually. My journey is not over yet; my technique and sense of self-expression are still growing. My recent works have been extremely well received. I have had comments from other artists who tell me my work reminds them of Van Gogh.

Yes, I am influenced by him and, with all the studying and reading I have done from art books, I am influenced by others also. I like Van Gogh because of his intense use of his palette knife; I love Monet because of the softness of his mood and use of color and lighting. With Picasso, I love his sense of form and capacity for boundaries."

Eck who won the Muskoka Arts and Crafts Award for Excellence in 2002, for her mixed media painting "Fantasy and Truth" – but her creative endeavors also include poetry and song writing. Her awards in that area are many. In 2001, she won song-writing contest in the United States, along with several awards for her poetry, and had some submissions published in anthologies.

"I don't think of business or selling the painting, when I am painting," says artist Susan Eck.

The poet in Eck gives her work its thoughtful mood as she explores her innermost fantasies while contemplating such things as the beauty of a landscape, the simplicity of life or the feeling of freedom. She is a member of the League of Canadian Poets and the Canadian Poetry Society.

Her life is full of diversity and color, which is reflected in her cottage, a bright, color-filled environment. Art adorns the walls and her taste in interior design is contemporary and classy. "I don't like mess. I like things to have their natural place. If it is not organized, my creativity cannot be released. When everything is in its place, the energy flows in the cottage. I need a sense of order and no interruptions to the creative flow."

Eck has loved Muskoka, and its people, for a long time. "I fell in love with Muskoka in my early 20s. I used to come up for weekends, from my job in the city, and stay at Deerhurst or Muskoka Sands when they were really rustic getaways." Laughing out loud, she continues: "In those days, I used to take the train up here. It was so liberating to get to the clean, fresh air and to the rolling greenery of Muskoka. I would stand by the lake and friends would say that my eyes would be reflected so blue. I found it all very calming."

Her eyes twinkle as she continues



Photograph: Mark Brumell-Saunders

At right, Susan Eck holds her painting entitled "Golden Beach" and her "Red Tulips Tango" is shown at the top.



Photograph: Paul Bennett

"Then, 15 years ago, I bought a 'bungalow' that was built in 1836 on the old Pioneer Road, by Muskoka Falls, in Muskoka. I loved the spirit of the place; it was uplifting to my heart. I was able to have both lifestyles, a place in the city and a wonderful place in the country. Muskoka cleanses me. It makes me feel rooted and grounded. The smell of the pines and the colors of the sky speak to my heart; the stars are so clear, I can almost touch them. All these years later, I still feel the same and I think 'oh my God, I am here,' and the energy rushes through me and I am cleansed."

Currently, Eck is working on a local show of her art to be held in Windermere. As well, a café gallery in Toronto is showing her art. For her, this is real proof of having the best of both worlds.

Eck, who is full of life and laughs often, says: "My accountant was trying to get me to start paying for RRSPs for my retirement but I have been investing all my energy into developing my separate projects on creativity, for example, self-publishing my books, and cutting a musical CD. I have made major breakthroughs since the millennium with songs and many other awards."

Sadness, however, is apparent as Eck recalls a difficult time of her life. "In 2000, I was diagnosed with a rare heart disease and, at that time, I came to Muskoka full time to rest." With tears in her eyes, she continues: "My brother looked after me. We had just lost our mother and, then, 17 days later, my loving brother-in-law died; then, my sister was diagnosed as critically ill – and has since died, this year. My brother and

I learned to grieve together; he gave me the carnival horse I have in the garden.

"I painted daily to escape my reality. I was keeping busy by writing down the feelings in my heart. It was an important time to for me to release, by using words, to express my love and affection for my mother."

Speaking on a more spiritual level, she talks about love. "Love is needed; love helps us to grow; love gives life. In the end, we have to learn to let go, that is another form of love. I let go of my grieving. I know my mother has gone to a good place and, from her hard journey in life, I wanted her to rest in peace. I was overwhelmed; I painted over and over as a release and a way to get into my creative mind, the place to create beauty."

"I found myself realizing that what I am is a visionary – not the teacher or the artist or the poet. I had visions; I took the visions from my mental map and transferred those

impressions onto canvas. It helped me to let go of the loved ones I have lost and knew were going to die. Life and aging is a process – I accept that – and the final stage is death."

She continues, putting into words the thought-out and honest processes of grief, loss and emotional pain. "I have an immense sensitivity to death and letting go. I know it is an essential part of life and I think, because I am a hopeless romantic, it takes me a long time to grieve. I reach out, silently, to my mother by praying to her. I am blessed; I have three guardian angels – my sister Joyce Patricia, my mom Ellen and my brother-in-law Bob. By the loss of my loved ones, I have grown in my heart and I can feel the love that is there."

Art is her life. Creativity is her calling. Her goal was not to compromise her personal values, nor was it to be admired by others; it was to fulfill her own spirit.

Regarding personal growth and self-development, Eck says: "Being an artist is all about taking risks. It is about putting it all out there and being vulnerable to the outcome. I am influenced by nature; the view from my cottage down to the lake is inspiring. Carl Jung said, 'If you want to learn about yourself, go and live among the trees.' Here I am, among the trees, and I love it. Coming here to Muskoka has enabled me to learn all about my creative awakenings, my inward strengths and how nature is the biggest lesson of all. I just sit and watch nature and how its flow is reflected in my painting."

Eck is definitely a painter to watch. She paints happily, blessedly, among the trees in Muskoka, letting her creativity flow, brilliantly, onto the canvas. **M**



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