

# Meet

By Briana Johnson-Sims

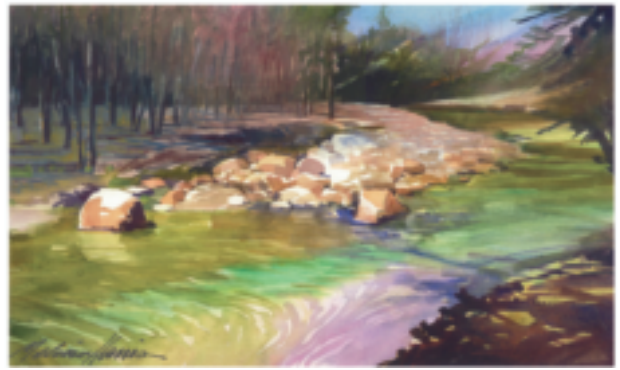
# MELISSA HARRIS

Walking into Aurora, Ohio's Heinen's Café it is impossible to ignore the unique works by Melissa Harris that line the walls. Portraits of bikers and their prized vehicles in soft watercolors stand out among the glass tables and potted plants.

Acrylic landscapes of numerous locales Harris has visited with her husband beautify the setting and add a western charm. However, the plein-air paintings and portraits that rotate through the café are most rewarding to the local artist. "I paint purely for the passion of painting," she shares.

As a young girl she enjoyed drawing. She credits her high school art teachers with her first exposure to painting. Afterwards she attended Advanced Placement Studio Art classes at Ohio University and earned an Associate Degree in Visual Communications from the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. Coming across the works of American artists in books, museums, and galleries has also fueled her artistic education. She became attracted to the spiritual connection artists such as George Bellows, Edward Hopper, and John Sloan held to their subject matter. Despite her formal education, Harris considers herself a primarily self-taught painter.

*Retired*



*Big Creek*

Melissa Harris' professional career began as a studio illustrator for a northeast Ohio advertising agency. She has since gained ground in graphic design and broadcast and print art direction. As an art director she interacted with nationally renowned illustrators, photographers and designers affording her experience that has extended past her retirement from freelance advertising. Three years ago she returned to her first love, painting and portrait illustration.

She does not consider herself a professional artist but rather a "painter with a passion". Although her professional career curbed her personal expression, her position at Heinen's has allowed her to once again build spiritual connections with her artwork. Harris' own proposal to hang artwork in Heinen's has provided her with a gallery for herself and other artists.

"I rejoice in growing my interpretations of "American Beauty" through my paintings of both the human and environmental landscape," Harris expresses. Private collections across America feature her commissioned biker portraits. Her interest in "cycleportraits" stemmed from a respect for bikers' strength, independence and spirituality and has culminated into a business run through [cycleportraits.com](http://cycleportraits.com).

Harris is intrigued by the relationship between bikers and their bikes, noting how the motorcycle reflects the personality of its owner. Together they form a representation of the biker culture that she can bring to her viewer's attention. It is for a similar reason that Harris is attracted to painting from life. "Painting outdoors, and in virtual time, adds a freshness and honesty to my work that goes beyond the recording of a visual setting." It gives Harris the opportunity to more precisely share that moment with her viewer.

Nature, and maintaining a connection to it are really important to the artist. In light of the great destruction of beautiful landscapes across America, she is glad to show her appreciation through art. Travelling with her husband to Idaho, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Oregon, and Utah, she has been able to capture diverse images of natural life in acrylics and plein-air watercolors.

Harris has also painted models in studio as part of the Akron Society of Artists and taught adults beginning painting and drawing as part of the Cleveland non-profit organization Arthouse. Her cycle portraits have been featured in mainstream biker publications and motorcycle venues in North Dakota, Florida and Nevada. To view her collections visit Heinen's supermarket in Aurora, Ohio or her website [www.cycleportraits.com](http://www.cycleportraits.com).