

# JUNKO ONO ROTHWELL

*An artist learns to balance academic  
method and artistic freedom.*

By Caroline Purtell

*Before coming to the United States in the late 1970s, Junko Ono Rothwell received her art degree from Okayama University in Japan. A master pastel ist of the Pastel Society of America, Rothwell has shown her work in the American Artists Professional League National Exhibition, at the Pastel Society of America in New York and at the Pastel Society of Japan in Tokyo. She won second place in the abstract category of the Fifth Annual Pastel 100; her work is represented by Lagerquist Gallery in Atlanta and Spruce Creek Gallery in Nellysford, Virginia. To see more of her paintings, visit <http://JunkoOnoRothwell.com>.*





Resting (at left; 19×25), Naomi Playing the Viola (above; 19×25)

I no longer feel bound by instructions," says Atlanta-based artist Junko Ono Rothwell, speaking about her biggest breakthrough as a painter. As a student at Okayama University in her native Japan, Rothwell studied traditional, academic methods where instructors emphasized the virtues of drawing correctly and painting neatly. After moving to the United States, however, she began exploring other ways of learning, eventually discovering pastels through a sketch class at the Atlanta Artists Center. Rothwell also took classes at Cornell University, participated in workshops and visited a number of museums.

"I felt that there were many ways to create art and express myself, and I started to create in my own way," she explains. "I felt that I was liberated from

my academic art training; since then I've enjoyed painting more than I once did."

It's ironic, then, that a woman restrained by formal education admits that she learned her most important art lesson in the classroom. "My junior high school teacher, Mr. Oda, opened my eyes to the beauty of ordinary things and ordinary people," she says. Charged with "observing everything in nature," Rothwell filled numerous sketchbooks during summer vacation and presented them to her teacher in the fall. "I was surprised to see how much he enjoyed them," Rothwell recalls. "Looking back on it, I realize that he wasn't so much praising my sketches as he was saying how beautiful nature is. He never directly taught me how to draw, but rather encouraged me

to see the color, line, light and shadow that nature creates."

### Seeing the World

That formative lesson continues to shape Rothwell's work, which embraces landscapes, figures and still lifes. During college, she bought sketchbooks and traveled through South America for a year. "To see a completely different world from Japan, on my own and not through books, was a liberating experience," she says. Now a member of the Plein Air Painters of Georgia and the Plein Air Painters of the Southeast, Rothwell takes monthly painting trips with fellow artists or visits her farm in Pennsylvania Dutch country.

On a typical expedition, Rothwell completes two or three paintings a day,

finishing most of them on location and touching up the rest in her studio.

Bound by windows on all four sides—the largest on the north side—Rothwell's studio houses her 500-plus pastel collection, which she organizes into three color trays: red and orange; blue and green; and earth colors such as brown, yellow ochre and gray. She regularly uses Rembrandt, Sennelier, Schmincke, Mount Vision and Unison pastels, and she prefers to paint vertically. "I always paint standing so I can move my

arms freely and stand back to check my paintings frequently," she explains.

### A Painter's Process

Rothwell works on a variety of surfaces and prepares each differently. She applies a mixture of acrylic, gesso and pumice to acid-free matboard; uses a turpentine wash underpainting for Ersta sanded pastel paper; and uses a turpentine or watercolor wash for Wallis sanded pastel paper. "I paint directly on La Carte pastel board without underpainting because it's

already colored and can't take an underpainting—a wash destroys the surface," Rothwell says.

Whatever her choice of surface, Rothwell begins with a charcoal drawing to establish composition and light flow. Next she adds color, moving from the darkest and lightest areas toward the middle values. "I lay down the basic colors in pastel and then I add washes of turpentine with a 2-inch brush, trying to establish the basic masses of shadows and light, the basic movement," Rothwell says. "I don't block each color but try to flow colors over the entire paper to create the feeling of movement." After she defines light and shadows, Rothwell adds more colors of the same value, finally adding highlights—her favorite part of the painting process.

Although she has a well-practiced routine, like most artists, Rothwell occasionally encounters unexpected challenges. When she can't find the correct pastel color, she often sets aside her pastels and paints an oil painting instead. "I enjoy mixing my own oil colors on the palette," Rothwell says. "When I go back to pastel, I think about how I mixed the oil colors, which helps me layer the colors in pastel."

Other times while she's at work, Rothwell finds she isn't satisfied with the composition. Once, while painting a house as seen through apple trees for a horizontal frame, she found that the shape of the house didn't quite work. Instead of working through the piece, she turned the paper on its side and staffed over again: "Turning the paper gave me more space for the sky over the house because I had fewer trees in front. The composition was much simpler, and it fit well."

### Inspired by the Ordinary

The artist's inspiration often comes from the ordinary things around her. Most of her still life subjects, such as bamboo baskets or old kimonos, come from Japan, but she also paints flowers that remind her of her childhood home and vases that her sister-in-law fires in her own kiln. The artist admits, however, that the

Seated Model (27×21)





Old Barn in the Mountain (13×17)

human figure is her favorite subject: "I think the human body is beautiful, and I've always been fascinated by the movement that the form creates, the lines of the body, and light and shadows. The figure is the subject that has inspired artists from ancient times to the present."

Working with the figure, Rothwell organizes two classes a week. "Besides those classes, I occasionally hire a model at my house and I also ask my friends and my daughters to pose for me, too," she explains. "When I did a series on musicians, I asked my daughter's friends from the high school orchestra to come to my house with their musical instruments." Naomi Playing the Viola (on page 29) is one of the results.

Some of the most significant lessons Rothwell has learned, regardless of the subject matter she's painting, have come from time spent admiring the work of artists such as Rembrandt (1606-69) and Sorolla (1863-1923). "Visiting

museums has helped me to improve the most as an artist," she says. While living in Washington, D.C., Rothwell had ample access to the Smithsonian, the National Gallery and the Phillips Collection. "At first, I thought going to museums was like going to a classroom," she says. "I tried to learn from every painting in the museum, but I soon gave up that idea. I found that some paintings 'talk' to me, and others do not. Looking at the former opened my eyes and my mind, and I feel as if I have permission not to admire all the so-called great



Junko Ono Rothwell

masterpieces that my professors were so enamored of."

Of course, Rothwell, does, indeed, appreciate the masters (*The Tub*, by Edgar Degas, is one of her favorites) but feels that she can now admire work on her own terms. "I'm free from the academic traditions, which are still emphasized in Japan," she says. Such artistic freedom has greatly influenced her. "My old work is tighter, more academic. Now my style is freer and more colorful."

Surely, Mr. Oda would be proud to see his former student continuing to "observe everything," even in a nontraditional sense. "I just paint the things I see around me," says Rothwell. "I think academic training is important, but so is a sense of freedom and joy—the trick is to balance the two." •

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