



Nicols' impressions of Southern landscapes have garnered him acclaim. Shown are "The Warmth of Autumn," and "Living on the Outskirts."



# living landscapes

by kelli bozeman | photography by tom joynt

*The natural beauty of Mississippi's great outdoors springs from artist Alfred Nicols' paintings.*

Amateur artists often say they find their hobby "relaxing," but you won't hear a comment like that from Alfred Nicols. After 45 years of painting, the Jackson native says his artistic efforts are more a struggle than some sort of spa treatment.

"Ten and a half straight hours standing up in front of an easel making hundreds of critical decisions along the way... When I finish a painting and wash up the brushes, I'm exhausted," Nicols says. "I've given it all I've got... After all, we call it the 'works' of Monet, not the 'relaxations' of Monet."

Relaxing, it may not be, but rewarding is certainly the right word to describe Nicols' affinity for painting the lush landscapes of his home state. He may not pull as many all-nighters in the studio as he did years ago, but the end result of his hard work more than justifies the sore joints he still feels after each grueling session.

Nicols' celebrated oil and acrylic creations capture the subtle details that make natural life in Mississippi so

magical—a sunrise over Copiah County pastureland, tall cypress trees reflected in swampy waters, the sky after a summer thunderstorm.

"Somehow I always seem to come back to the Southern landscape, back to the images that haunt me," Nicols notes on his website, appropriately called [www.southernlandscapeart.com](http://www.southernlandscapeart.com). "Always the objective is to simplify and amplify so as to portray the essence of the land in such a way that viewers can apply their own memories and feel a connection to a special time and place of their own."

Viewers have indeed responded warmly to Nicols' painted recollections, and his works have become treasured both locally and much farther afield. His lifelike oil and acrylic landscapes, some as large as five feet wide, hang in federal and state court buildings, U.S. Senate offices, banks, universities, and hospitals. He has been a calendar artist for the University of Mississippi Medical Center's



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Nicols has been painting for 45 years. He spends a considerable amount of his time in his newly constructed studio on his farm in Covich County.



Candlelighters calendar each year for the past decade and will be the featured artist for the cover of the 2010 calendar.

Bringing nature's beauty to life has always been Nicols' passion. As a young child growing up in Morton, he molded elaborate three-dimensional worlds filled with little twig trees, blue clay streams, and scale-model squirrels and birds. "Quite a production for a second-grader," he recalls.

Artistic endeavors moved to the back burner during Nicols' high school years, when his extra-curricular time was dominated by sports. At Ole Miss, he "tried" football and baseball for two years "until I realized that this league was a bit above my talent level," he says.

It wasn't until he was a young adult that he stumbled back into a more creative pursuit. "My wife and I were walking through one of the early malls in San Antonio and passed an art supply store," he says. "A beginning painting set caught my eye... I bought it, and it all started. From the beginning, it just seemed something I could do."

Within months, Nicols was producing "reasonably credible" paintings of scenes like an osprey clutching a fish and a group of duck hunters silhouetted against a sunrise. His two years of Army service provided more diverse subject matter, including Korea's Inchon Harbor.

Back in Mississippi, Nicols divided time between a successful professional career and late nights and weekends spent before the easel. "When other people were watching TV, playing golf or tennis, fishing or hunting, going to the movies, and—all too often—getting a good night's sleep, I was painting," he says.

Word about his talent spread, and interior designers began commissioning works for their clients' homes and offices. He also donated many paintings to charity auctions, which in turn led to more exposure in local galleries.

Now retired from his "day job," Nicols is free to pick up the brush and palette more often. He has the ideal space in which to do so—a newly constructed studio he designed himself at his family's Covich County farm, featuring a 17-foot vaulted ceiling and a "whole wall of north light." He paints many of his landscapes there, using a combination of site sketches, photos, and memories of a scene ("photos alone just don't work—I need to have seen it, felt it, smelled it...") or going strictly from memory. "So many of my better paintings are done that way," he says. "It helps me to get rid of the extraneous details and focus on what's important in a scene."

Much of Nicols' current inspiration comes from the natural world surrounding his 450-acre farm, as well as the



flora and fauna he happens upon in other parts of Mississippi. He sometimes paints on site, though he says that this *plein air* method with the constantly moving sun causes the light and the shadows to change too quickly. “I am almost always interested in capturing the landscape in a fleeting moment... when it has a unique beauty to me,” he says. “This is gone before you can get your easel set up and your paints laid out. But I can sit and study the land, embrace the moment, remember the essence, and paint from that.”

Asked to name his greatest artistic accomplishment, Nicols discounts obvious choices like the 2008 one-man show sponsored by the Greater Jackson Arts Alliance, or even the sheer volume of paintings—around 1,000— and prints—more than 5,000—he has created over the years. The support his family, including wife Mary and sons Lee, a surgeon, and George, an attorney, has given him as he toiled is a treasure of its own, indeed. But the proudest achievement for this artist, he says, is “that people know my art when they see it, without needing to look for a signature.” Having such a distinctive style and look comes from “years of struggle, years of trial and error, years of trying to create and communicate a vision, a message.”

Never formally schooled in art, Nicols has nevertheless worked diligently on his craft with help from books and magazines, video demonstrations, and trips to museums. “I guess you can say I have studied very hard under some of the best artists and art teachers around,” he says. “I just have never been in the same room with them, and they don’t know I exist.”

Nicols’ approach to bettering his technique is methodical. He identifies something that an accomplished artist is doing “that is better than what I am doing”—maybe dramatic textures, drawing skills, or hard and soft edges. Next, he pulls together books and articles on that topic, studies and learns about it, and focuses on applying it to his own work for as much as a year or more. His current focus is on using colors based on triadic and split complements on the color wheel. Perhaps after studying that for a while, he’ll put it to use in another new endeavor he has set his sights on—a triptych of 40-inch square paintings that will one day emblazon a huge wall with the mood of a sunset over the riverbanks or a morning in the deep woods. For this artist, the hard work is never quite done.

“I’ll always want to get better,” Nicols reflects. “I’ll probably always see that as the best way to do it.”



TOP TO BOTTOM: His pieces feature everything from the Mississippi Delta to the state’s prominent bodies of water. Shown are “Golden Sunset on the Big Muddy,” “Red Twilight on Mighty Pearl,” and “Out from Belzoni.”

Alfred Nicols’ paintings are available in galleries including Nunnery’s Gallery, Jackson; Jackson Street Gallery, Ridgeland; Na-Ann’s Interior Design and Custom Framing, Oxford; and the artist’s own home studio and gallery. For details and to see more than 80 of his works, visit [www.southernlandscapeart.com](http://www.southernlandscapeart.com).