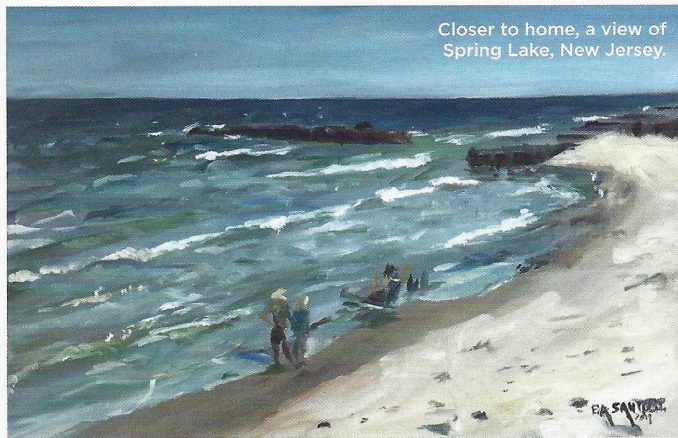


In Monet's garden.



Closer to home, a view of Spring Lake, New Jersey.



A courtyard window in Giverny.

IN THE GARDENS OF Giverny

BY ERIC ALEXANDER SANTOLI

PHOTOS BY ERIC ALEXANDER SANTOLI

As an artist, I always search for interesting and unique scenes to capture on canvas. So I was thrilled to be invited to apply for and receive a prestigious Munn Fellowship from the Versailles Foundation which granted me the opportunity to live as an Artist-in-Residence at Claude Monet's estate, Giverny, from May to August 2023. Every artist knows Monet's famous gardens, but I never dreamt I would have the opportunity to stand on those grounds, creating watercolors and oil paintings in such a stunning setting.

I paint *en plein air*, a style of painting outdoors rather than in a studio, absorbing images directly from nature. When *en plein air*, your subject is never static but always moving in the breeze or changing in the light, so what you capture in your art is what you see and filter through your eyes. Impressionist artists, like Monet, represented their subjects, but focused more on the feeling and the atmosphere, the artist's memory of the moment. I lived a stone's throw away from Monet's house in an 1800s farm building that used to have pigs and chickens running around it. Today, it is converted into an apartment/studio space. It was amazing to be given a key to the garden so I could come and go as I pleased.

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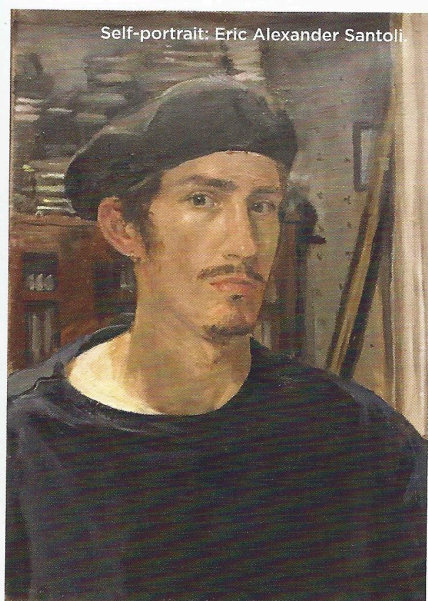
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Self-portrait: Eric Alexander Santoli



Art imitates life in Giverny.



My day-to-day life was simple but idyllic. I woke around six and had coffee and a *pain-au-chocolat* from the local bakery. I would gather my supplies and walk over to the garden to paint by seven a.m. At nine, the tourists started to come in and I had to skedaddle. If I needed to shop, I would take a late morning excursion to the market in Vernon, riding my bike or walking an hour down the road. The route was beautiful. Back at Giverny, I usually ate lunch with the gardeners and we might play chess together. Only a few spoke English, but that was fine because it forced me to speak French. I also learned about flowers from them. There was no WIFI in my apartment so I checked my email only once a day, allowing me to focus on my art. My work can be seen on my website, ericasantoli.com where I also accept commissions for portraits, including pets, as well as homes, gardens and anything else.

I cooked for myself almost every night with delicious local produce and meats. My evenings were very quiet. The sun went down late, around 10:30, so I would often paint again in the evening or just stroll through the gardens and watch the sunset over Monet's lily pond. I enjoyed the smell of the garden in the evening when the white flowers released their scent. I would head back, write in my journal, then read and go to bed. Weekends were a bit different. Sometimes I would head to the local pub, La Guinguette, where I made friends with the bartenders and often got a free beer.

There were two other artists-in-residence during my stay: Jorge Hernández, a painter from Mexico, and a photographer from Finland, Jorma Puranen. Jorma's wife, also an artist, accompanied him, so it felt like a small art commune from 100 years ago.

My style became more my own during my stay. I learned that I need to paint things that excite me and not choose things randomly. But that doesn't mean that everything I paint must be a beautiful subject because I find beauty in many places. Each painting is a challenge that can be rewarding but also frustrating. As with anything, it is important to practice your craft. I always tell my students that I'm in the trenches with them, constantly learning. I have taught at Ridgewood High School, Bergen Community College and the Ridgewood Community School. I appreciate that Ridgewood appreciates art.

Eric Alexander Santoli, whose favorite artist is John Singer Sargent, graduated from Ridgewood High School in 2009. He has a BFA from the University of Pennsylvania and a Certificate from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art. He is currently working toward his MA in Fine Arts from Jersey City's Florence Academy of Art. His mother, an artist, lives in Ridgewood.

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