

**Ted Head** is so new to watercolor he says he is “still experimenting with dynamite,” yet he has already been quite successful with his paintings. That’s because of his experience as a graphic designer and pen-and-ink artist; and because of his willingness to look, study, and learn.

by M. Stephen Doherty

# Successfully Launching Into Watercolor



ABOVE  
The reference  
photograph used for  
*Better Days*.

OPPOSITE PAGE  
**Better Days**  
2004, watercolor,  
24 x 18. All artwork  
this article collection  
the artist.

Although many beginners struggle for years to master the watercolor medium, others are quick to learn how to control the fluid paint and develop a personal style of expression. The difference has as much to do with a person’s willingness to work hard, study other artists’ paintings, and look critically at his or her pictures as it does with native talent. It also helps if the person has experience in a related field, such as oil or pastel painting, graphic design, or drawing.

Florida artist Ted Head is one of those fast learners, whose paintings have already been accepted into state and local juried exhibitions, winning several awards. Having only painted for four years, Head finds his process continually filled with firsts. “When I tell my wife I don’t know what I’m doing it’s because at this early stage I’m likely to be painting my first seascape, child’s portrait, or floral still life,” he confesses. “I’m pleased with my progress, but that

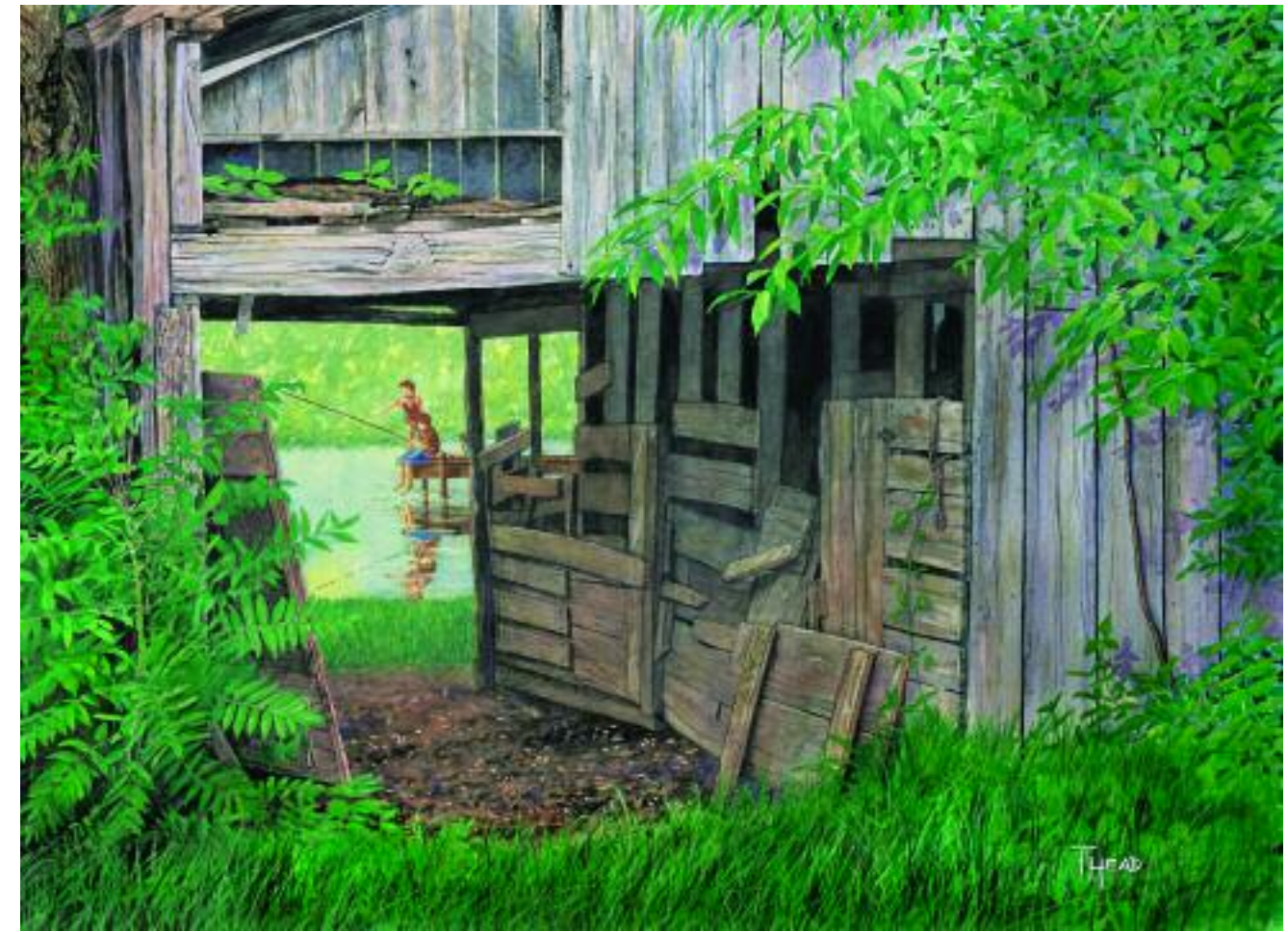
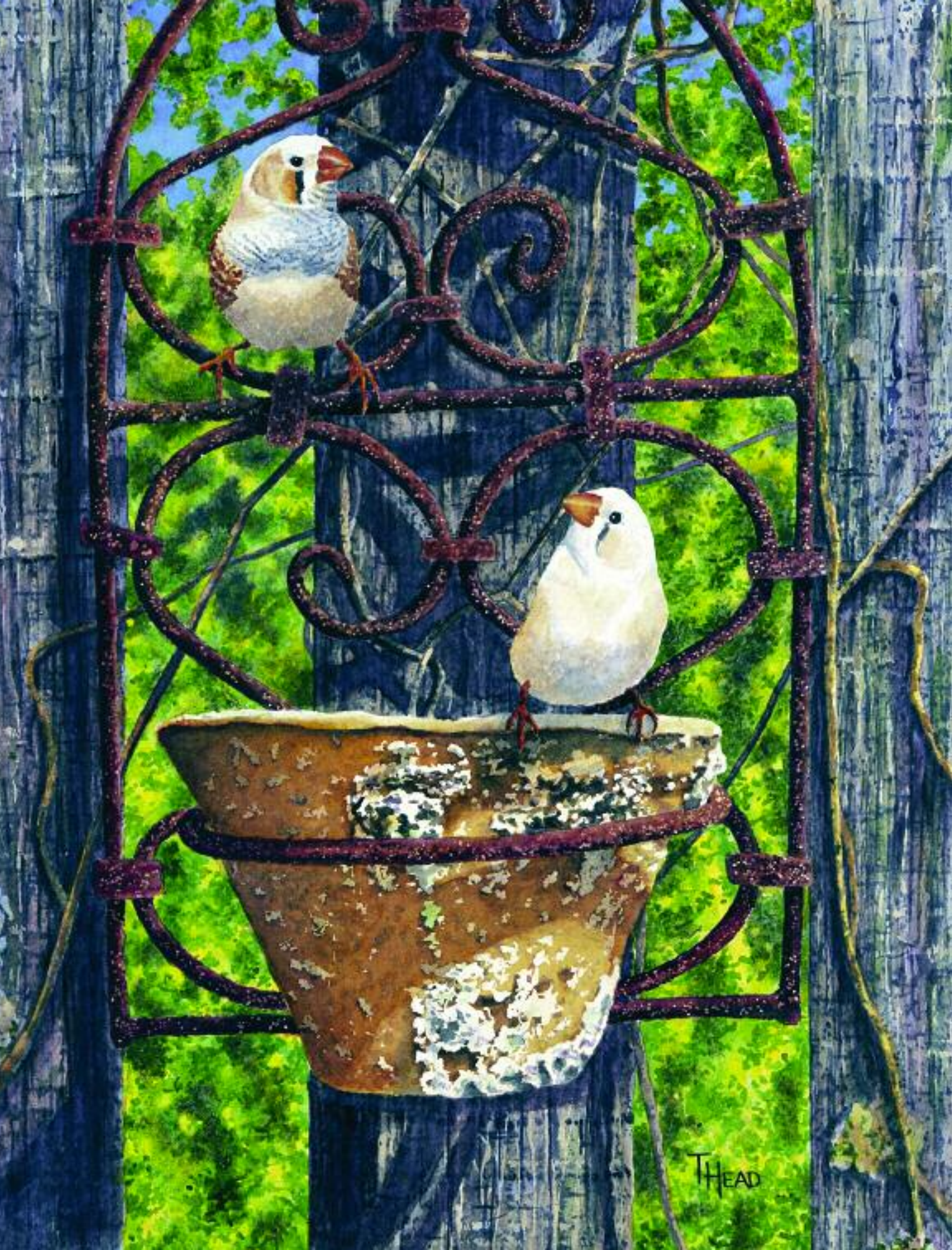
satisfaction doesn’t compare to the excitement I have about the future paintings I haven’t yet considered.”

The fact that Head is excited about his future work goes a long way in explaining why he has already been successful: He is constantly looking forward to better paintings and isn’t complacent about his current skills and understanding. He continues to read books and magazine articles on watercolor technique, study paintings exhibited in galleries and juried art shows, and look critically at his own work.

Head also has more than 30 years of experience as a graphic designer and understands how to compose images to communicate effectively. Additionally, he is a pen-and-ink artist who can elicit emotional responses to pictures made with carefully managed value contrasts. Both aspects of his background help him select and organize elements to be included in a watercolor.



THEAD



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But if you ask Head to identify the one attribute that has been most important to his rapid progress in watercolor, he will immediately say it is his recognition of the importance of looking versus seeing. "Meaningful art comes down to not only how we look at a subject but also what we really see," he explains. "We have to get beyond the obvious and beyond our preconceived notions. As artists, we have the ability to turn the ordinary into something extraordinary by seeing more than what is there. For example, in my painting *Better Days*, I studied the intricacies in the weave of the cane-back chair and seat, as well as the light and dark value patterns established by the strong sunlight. If the painting succeeds, it is because I looked

deeper into the subject to determine how it should be painted."

Another dimension of *Better Days* that would have been the downfall of most inexperienced watercolorists is the choice of colors used to establish the value pattern Head describes. Most novices would not have looked carefully enough to see the subtlety in the gray shadows. Instead, they would likely have been so heavy-handed with their application of dark, dull mixtures of complementary colors that the cast shadows would have been harsh and unappealing. When asked how he knew to exercise moderation and balance in his rendering of the shadows, Head explained that he learned about appropriate color mixtures from



**TOP**  
**Fishing Buddies**  
2005, watercolor,  
18 x 25.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
**First Date**  
2006, watercolor,  
24 x 18.

**ABOVE**  
The photograph of the artist's grandsons that he used in completing *Fishing Buddies*.

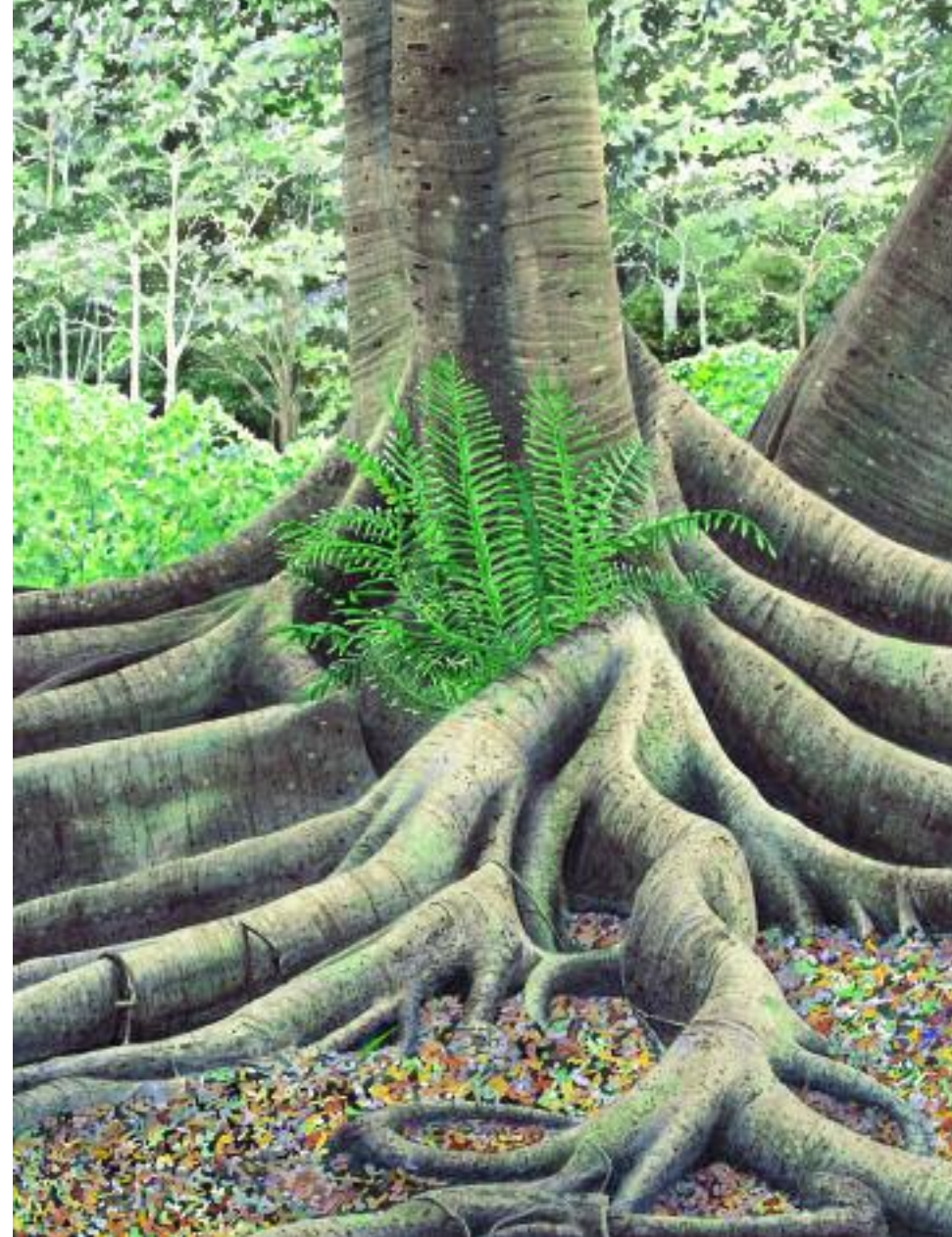
BELOW LEFT  
**Night Light**  
2005, watercolor,  
24 x 18.



BELOW RIGHT  
The reference  
photograph Head used  
in painting *Night Light*.



OPPOSITE PAGE  
**Banyon Beauty**  
2005, watercolor,  
24 x 18.



reading articles and books and not being afraid to experiment and take chances. “In my dynamite analogy, the painting either succeeds or blows up in your face,” Head shared. “But that’s part of the learning process. Besides, it keeps painting fun and challenging.

“I’ve made mistakes, but I’ve tried to overcome them by taking advantage of all the advice available from more experienced artists,” Head says, explaining how he came to gain control of his palette. “For example, several watercolorists cautioned against using ivory black or Payne’s gray, so I rarely use those in my paintings. Beyond that, I spend a lot of time out in nature looking at potential subjects and noting the

colors. For example, when determining how to paint *Fishing Buddies*, I sat outside, looked into the shadows, and realized they were made up of a variety of colors. A photograph alone wouldn’t have given me that important information. In fact, it probably would have averaged the colors in the shadows and exaggerated the darkness of the value.”

Head does use photographs of his potential subject and often reworks them in his computer. For example, as he began painting the barn in *Fishing Buddies* he knew it needed more emotional impact. Digitally photographing his grandsons while they fished, he placed the image of the boys in the space visible through the doors of the

barn. “The No. 1 thing I begin with in designing any painting is establishing a strong focal point,” Head explains. “The opening in the barn was obviously the best place for the focal point, with all the wood angles and tree limbs directing the viewer’s eyes right to it, but I couldn’t decide what to put in that space. I knew I wanted a nostalgic feeling to the piece, so I took a number of photos of the boys. The one I liked showed one boy fishing and the other pointing to the water. Is it a big fish? Did they catch it? I love the unspoken narrative, and the gesture added an element of action to the finished painting.”

Now that Head has some experience with watercolor, he is thinking more

**“As artists, we have the ability to turn the ordinary into something extraordinary by seeing more than what is there.”**

about the next paintings he will undertake. He is interested in painting subjects not yet attempted so that he feels more confident about his ability to adapt his skills to a variety of challenges; and he wants to tackle a theme or location that will allow him to generate a series of paintings. “When I first attempted watercolor I was happy to just paint pretty pictures,” he remembers. “Now my goal is to create something dynamic, unusual, and emotional.

I want to stir something in the viewer and elicit an emotional response. For example, an ‘unusual’ treatment might be to assume an unexpected vantage point or circumstance for viewing a subject, such as the nighttime setting in *Night Light*. A ‘dynamic’ composition is one based on strong tonal values, good design, and a definite focal point. And an ‘emotional’ composition is one I develop with a specific word in mind, such as *peaceful* or *nostalgic*.”

## About the Artist

**Ted Head** established his own graphic-design firm, Head Design Group, in 1977. He continues to design websites, advertising, and collateral material through that company while expanding his career as a professional artist. Head’s watercolors have been included in juried exhibitions organized by the Florida Watercolor Society, the Jacksonville Watercolor Society, and the Jacksonville Coalition for the Visual Arts. He holds memberships in the Jacksonville Watercolor Society, the National Watercolor Society, the Florida Watercolor Society, the Transparent Watercolor Society of America, and the Jacksonville Coalition for the Visual Arts. For more information on the artist, visit his website: [www.tedheadwatercolors.com](http://www.tedheadwatercolors.com).

Finding it difficult to part with his originals at this early stage, and to make his work available to a larger audience, Head bought an Epson Stylus Pro 7800 printer to create limited-edition prints. “I have high-quality drum scans made of the paintings and then output them onto archival-quality watercolor paper,” he explains. “I’ve started exhibiting in outdoor shows, where I can sell a few of the originals as well as the prints. I’m a people person and really look forward to talking to collectors about my work. And I hope to be doing this for a long, long time.” ■

*M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of American Artist.*