

Artist inspired by English painter

By LUCILLE RUSSELL
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Reading derogatory remarks about the English painter Joseph Mallard William Turner sent an American artist now living in Munich, Germany, in pursuit of Turner's work. John B. Wetstone said he liked Turner's watercolors so much the disparaging comments got his "dander up."

Wetstone was in Albany this week as the guest of long-time friends, Alan and Rachelle Bitterman, and talked about his work. He left the United States for Europe in 1974 and retraced Turner's steps to the places the artist had painted. It wasn't until Wetstone arrived in Europe that he learned his birthdate, Dec. 19, was the death date of Turner, which he agrees is rather singular but, in his consideration, "fun."

Wetstone, although largely self-taught, studied Turner's work for a period at the British Museum in London. At the time the Tate as well as the British Museum had the greater bulk of Turner's work.

"The British Museum, in addition to drawings and prints, had around 160 boxes of Turner's watercolors," Wetstone said. "Now they are housed in an extension of the Tate, in the Clore."

Wetstone has also done studies of Turner in Oxford, England's Ashmolean Museum. During his travels to the locations Turner painted, he was given the chance to paint in the studio of Paul Cezanne and in the gardens of Claude Monet in Giverny, France.

In Europe, the first place he settled was in Holland, where he remained for four-and-one-half years. Then he was invited by friends to Chiemsee Lake near Munich.

"I met people there from a record company, made friends with some of them, and ended up moving to the city of Munich," Wetstone said. "Basically I stayed in Munich where I could be successful in sales of my work."

He lives almost in the center of the city in a house built in 1875, which has been converted into rental apartments. He also has his studio there.

"If I hadn't lived there so long, I couldn't afford to live where I do because it is very expensive in that section," he said.

The World Bank Art Society invited him to exhibit his work from



JOHN WETSTONE
Artist makes home in Munich

Jan. 13 to Feb. 14, 1992, at the World Bank in Washington, D.C. Because he wanted to have his work reproduced on a larger scale for the exhibition, he chose to have their duplication done in tapestries and contacted some artisans in Brno, Czechoslovakia, to do the weaving.

"I drove right there from Munich after they opened all the borders, and it was 12 hours driving there and 12 hours back," he said. "It is almost on the border of Poland."

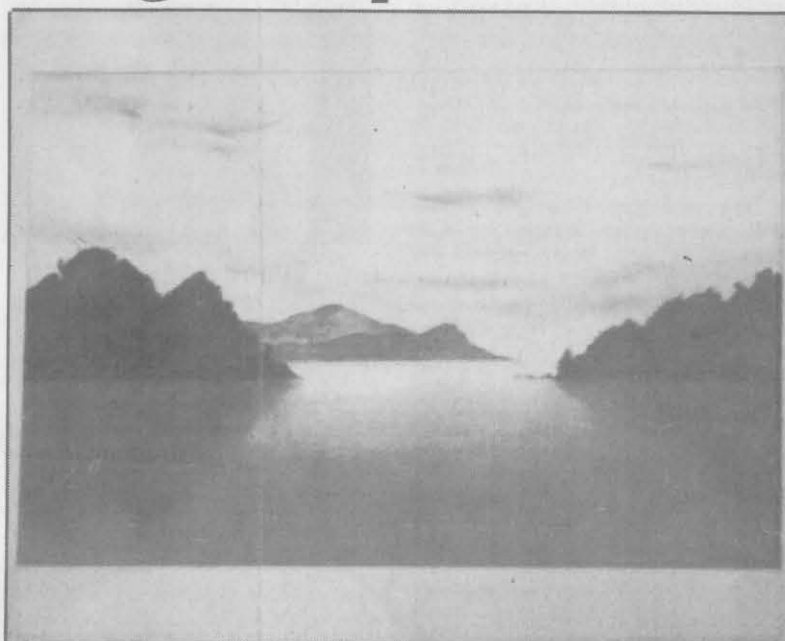
Wetstone said he sent the artisans color cards showing the colors used in his paintings.

"The wool is hand-colored, and it must be colored exactly to my color cards," he said. "Then they lay the wool on jute, and it looks like angel hair."

He said 500 needles are used to achieve the design, which is planned beforehand.

"The closing of the stitch is when you push the needle through, and it comes back out, and it takes six people to work on one tapestry," he said.

The tapestries, some as large as 70x62 inches, were hung on the top floor of the bank where suites are available for the presidents of the different countries represented by the bank. The floor beneath the top one is occupied by the offices of the bank's directors and other execu-



(Special Photo)

Many of John Wetstone's works, such as this watercolor reproduced on tapestry, are done in the style of English artist Joseph Mallard William Turner.

tives. Sixty of his watercolors were shown on this floor, although he had come prepared to hang 150.

His trip to the United States this time is part pleasure, part business. Wetstone for the past two years has been working under the aegis of the German government in presenting art classes for adult education. Now, he said, he wants to go international.

In his classes he basically uses what he learned from an across-the-street neighbor some years ago — how to take Turner's work apart and redo it in watercolor. Now he teaches students how to do the same thing with any composition, using his own color theories.

"In fact, some of my students do it so well, I'm ashamed of myself," he said. "I studied Turner's last period of his life very intensely and tried to take that as a basis for my own work and work out my own color theories based on an aerial perspective, from sunrise to sunset, moonrise to moonset."

Wetstone plans to approach the Smithsonian Institution with an offer to set up similar classes. He also is interested in investigating the possibility of an exhibition at the Smithsonian or elsewhere of the work of the late Max Dorner, a German artist.

"One of my friends in Germany owns all the paintings left from

him, whom we might categorize as an impressionist, and we have tried to arrange an exhibition in Munich with no luck," he said. "She is also the woman who financed the tapestries, because I couldn't have afforded them, since they cost a fortune to make."

In the mean time, he enjoyed visiting with the Bittermans. He first met Mrs. Bitterman in Atlanta.

"His mother, Jan Wetstone, rented space in a business owned by my mother, Frances Piel," Mrs. Bitterman said. "It was a paint, wallpaper, interior design sort of business."

They became good friends and have remained so through the years, although they have only seen each other briefly at airports since he moved to Europe.

"We used to hang around together in Atlanta, and even after Alan and I became engaged, the three of us would go places together," Mrs. Bitterman said.

Wetstone left Albany to visit his sister, Linda Sherman, in Atlanta before traveling on to Washington.

"I'll be there for the inauguration, which I will enjoy, but will leave the United States Jan. 25," he said. "I do hope there's not too much red tape involved so that I can achieve success with the Smithsonian."