

# Finding passion in art

BY DAVID STONEHOUSE

Although long an artist at heart, Jan Traversy found herself unable to paint after taking a 12-year hiatus to raise four children.

Perhaps the inspiration wasn't there, her creativity was missing or the passion was gone.

Until she flew off to Italy.

The land of the Renaissance is where Jan Traversy got her groove back, painting for two weeks while living in a centuries-old farmhouse in Tuscany along with about a dozen people from throughout North America on a European art workshop offered by Ottawa art instructor Yves Larocque.

"I had a writer's block, but only in painting," the 41-year-old Stittsville woman recalls now. "And Yves really helped me get over that when I was over there. He really pushed me to work and that got me right out of it."

About four years ago, Mr. Larocque started *iscsis*, (yes, it's spelled all lowercase and stands for International Centre for Synthesis — Centre International de la Synthèse), the art school without walls. He offers painting workshops in art-inspiring locales in Italy and France — places like the Ile de France region where famed impressionist Monet flourished or Provence, where Van Gogh painted.

Mr. Larocque's students come to *iscsis* from all over North and South America to test their artistic talents. And then he arranges for their works to be exhibited at a gallery either in Europe or at a café here in Ottawa.

"Right now, I am organizing an exhibit for my people in France. We will have many people in Ottawa who will be exhibiting in France, and also some Americans and also a Colombian from Bogota."

The 10-day workshops cost roughly \$2,100, depending on exchange rates, plus airfare. Lodging at such unique locations as the farmhouse owned by a contessa in Tuscany or the large home near Florence owned by an Italian mon-

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signor is included, as are meals prepared by a chef he hires for each trip.

"Why do I do this? First of all, I am a Marxist at heart and I believe a culture should not belong to the elite, it should belong to everyone. That's why I am trying to keep the price very low," says Mr. Larocque, a 42-year-old instructor at the Ottawa School of Art, who also has a PhD in art history.

"The second reason is I like art very much — it is my passion. I like to teach also, I like people to learn. Maybe it is the teacher in me. I like to see people learning, smiling and acquiring culture and also self-confidence."

And the trips, he says, quite often change the people who take them. He's even seen some people who meet on the workshops marry and others go home and ask for a divorce.

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"During the trip, they are meeting people who are very open, very free. And so these people return to Canada and say 'I don't have to live the old life I was living before. There is no passion in my life.' I saw that many times."

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Those who take the workshops paint for six hours a day, stopping only for lunch and an aperitif at a local bar before dinner. In the evening, Mr. Larocque hosts a discussion on an art-related topic.

Part of the adventure for him is trying to find places large enough and nice enough for his clients to stay in. He found one of the estates while chatting up a Monsignor who ran a seminary in Tuscany who was sitting next to him on the train between Rome and Florence.

"We were talking about who will be the next Pope. We were discussing this for the whole two hours. Then he told me he has a house and to come and see it."

Mr. Larocque ended up renting the house, which at one time belonged to the winemaker at the seminary.

While she was there, Ms. Traversy found herself energized not just by the culture and the surroundings but how everything seemed to be different — even the sun took on a different hue.

"It made you feel you could understand how the old masters painted. Not just the old masters but all the famous impressionists too. They have captured that feeling in their paintings, and that is something that we got to try to do."

She worked up a slew of small sketches, which she transformed into large four-foot-by-five-foot paintings for an exhibit of works by her and her travelmates at Café ComidArt in Vaudeville.

She felt so empowered by her trip, so impassioned, she rented out her own studio in downtown Ottawa and spends most of her days painting. In August, she plans to take another trip with *iscsis*, this time to La Roche-Guyon in France.



Jan Traversy recently returned from an artists' excursion to Tuscany.

"I can't wait," she says. "It's quite the holiday and it is great inspiration when you get back."

Mr. Larocque calls *iscsis* an "art school without walls" because it has no permanent campus

and his marketing is done almost exclusively over his Web site ([www.cyberbis.ca/~iscsi](http://www.cyberbis.ca/~iscsi))

"It is not virtual — but it is a school without walls. The walls are really the world."