

Don Li-Leger
GREAT BLUE HERON

Great Blue Heron

BY CAROL PROKOP

Artist's Statement (2004)

DON LI-LEGER



Great Blue Heron

by Carol Prokop, 2006

The drawing *Great Blue Heron* typifies Don Li-Leger's approach to creating nature artwork. Embedded in the native habitat of this wary bird, he captures with pencil and paper the subtle movements of the expert fisher as it lays in wait for its prey. Working quickly and economically, he records the momentary lull

Don Li-Leger
Great Blue Heron, 1991

graphite pencil drawing
on paper
(30 x 19.4 cm)
SAG 1996.06.01

Photographs by Cameron Heryet



Don Li-Leger, *Great Blue Heron*, 1991, graphite pencil drawing on paper (30 x 19.4 cm) SAG 1996.06.01

before the kill. It is a scene that has been played out hundreds of times during the career of this prolific artist.

In the world of nature painting, B.C.'s Don Li-Leger is acknowledged as one of Canada's most accomplished artists. His career spans three decades and during that time he has built a dedicated following of both private and corporate collectors, exhibited widely (including exhibitions at the Surrey Art Gallery in 1984 and 1994) and been an environmental activist and staunch supporter of environmental organizations.

He was born Don Leger in 1948 in North Vancouver, B.C. As a child, he later moved to Haney (Maple Ridge, B.C.) where he went to public school and spent his leisure time exploring the natural environment around his home. These early outdoor forays were the beginnings of a lifelong love of the natural world. They were also the springboards for a nascent artist. While still a youngster, Li-Leger became interested in art, and instinctively turned his eye on the world around him for subject matter.

In the early 1970s, Li-Leger began alternating formal art training with travel and studies in ecology. From 1969-1970 he was enrolled at the Vancouver School of Art, where he studied with Don Jarvis and Bruce Boyd. In 1971, he embarked on his first trip around the world visiting major art monuments and landmarks, an experience that was to have a profound affect on his choice of career as an artist. In 1972-1975 he attended Simon Fraser University, specializing in plant ecology. In 1975 he attended the Banff School of Fine Art where he also met Cora Li, a young artist from Minnesota, whom he eventually married. In 1977 he studied printmaking at Okanagan College and Chinese brush painting in Vancouver. (Davison, p. 23).

After finishing his studies and completing ecological reconnaissance for environmental research consultants, Li-Leger began making art on a full time basis; exhibiting his work in group and solo exhibitions. His depictions of birds and mammals, flora and fauna revealed Li-Leger's impressive skills as a draughtsman as well as his mastery of composition and media. They also exemplified Li-Leger's respect for nature. To accomplish these meticulously detailed pieces, Li-Leger spent countless hours in the field, observing, photographing and making drawings of wildlife. He also devoted time to research, exploring the library or talking to wildlife experts and studying the works of other artists. Li-Leger was particularly interested in the work of John James Audubon (1775-1851), Robert Bateman (b. 1930) and Fenwick Lansdowne (b. 1937) whom he has cited as important influences, as well as the work of Japanese and Chinese artists (conversation with Don Li-Leger, February 2005).

Although Li-Leger was primarily known as a nature artist at that time, he did not confine his practice to realist painting. He had always been interested in abstract art and in the work of artists like Kandinsky, Rothko, Mondrian and Dibenkorn. He was particularly interested in the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of their art. Throughout his career, he painted abstract and semi-abstract artworks and in 1999, he began to focus almost exclusively on that genre of work.

In 1987, Li-Leger and his family moved to South Surrey, B.C. At the time, Surrey was beginning to experience significant land development. Li-Leger had settled on a large and rather secluded lot and set up a studio adjacent to his home. Over the next 18 years, the area was to radically change as residential subdivisions, town house complexes and shopping malls began encroaching on the forests and woodlands.



Don Li-Leger, *Great Blue Heron* (state proof #1),
etching with aquatint; ink on paper (40 x 30.5 cm) SAG1996.06.02



Don Li-Leger, *Great Blue Heron* (state proof #2),
etching with aquatint; ink on paper (40 x 30.5 cm) SAG1996.06.03



Don Li-Leger, *Great Blue Heron* (state proof #3),
etching with aquatint; ink on paper (40 x 30.5 cm) SAG1996.06.04



Don Li-Leger, *Great Blue Heron* (state proof #4),
etching with aquatint; ink on paper (40 x 30.5 cm) SAG1996.06.05



Don Li-Leger, *Great Blue Heron* (state proof #5),
etching with aquatint; ink on paper (40 x 30.5 cm) SAG1996.06.06



Don Li-Leger, *Great Blue Heron* (state proof #6),
etching with aquatint; ink on paper (40 x 30.5 cm) SAG1996.06.07

Scattered among these developments were parklands and ecological reserves where Li-Leger continued to spend time photographing and sketching birds and mammals. *Great Blue Heron* was one of many drawings Li-Leger made in the early 1990s while sketching in Boundary Bay Regional Park, and along Mud Bay in Surrey. Although he regularly used his camera, Li-Leger continued to make drawings because of their immediacy and because drawing was more than a tool for recording a subject - it was a way of representing a visceral impression, a sentiment similarly expressed by Henri Matisse in 1939: "I have never considered drawing as an exercise of particular dexterity, rather as principally a means of expressing intimate feelings and describing states of mind..." (Henry Matisse quoted by Jack D. Flan, p. 81). Li-Leger never thought of the drawing as a finished product, but as a working sketch, part of a process of visual webbing, like "...the intimate dialogue of my eye with what I draw." (Franck p. 10). He relied on it as a compositional tool, where problems could be worked out and where there was no intermediary between the observer and the observed. As he later remembered: "This was a study for the etching but was not done as a drawing to be put in a show. It was about working out some compositional issues. It was more of a working drawing than meant to be a finished product." (Don Li-Leger, *Artist's Statement*, Nov 2004).

In 1992, when Li-Leger began to make etchings of wildlife on a regular basis, he returned to the drawing *Great Blue Heron* as the starting point for a print. Unlike drawing, etching is a laborious engraving technique and the process can be repeated many times until the desired effect is achieved. In the case of *Great Blue Heron*, the etching, ten "proofs" were drawn until the final etching was completed, each proof building upon its predecessor. As in many



Don Li-Leger, *Great Blue Heron* (edition print 40/40),
etching with aquatint: ink and coloured pencil on paper (40 x 30.5 cm) SAG1996.06.08.

cases, the final etching looked significantly different from the original drawing that inspired it. Not only was the etching much larger in size and now monumental in feeling, it contained many more details.

Despite its modest size (approximately 11 inches x 7 inches), the drawing *Great Blue Heron* occupies a unique place in the collection of the Surrey Art Gallery. Not only is it an object held in trust; it is a graphic link to Surrey's heritage and its sense of place.

Bibliography

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Flan, Jack D. *Matisse on Art*. Berkley, California: University of California Press, 1994.

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Artist's Statement (2004)

November 17, 2004

The drawing, *Great Blue Heron*, was one of many that I did as studies for paintings and I spent many cold hours observing these birds hunting and catching voles. The drawings were more than preliminary drafts, they were a way to capture their essential characters - their gestures, their slow methodical manner of diving for prey, and their ungainly take offs into the air. The drawings were also a way to demonstrate how integrated these birds were with their environments - even the movements of the grasses or reeds seem to echo their plumage.

Why go out into the cold wet marsh? We often have fleeting glimpses of herons, by the side of the road and they are majestic. However, to watch them up close, in a blind, seeing them in their habitat undisturbed, gives you a whole new perspective and appreciation. It is an awe-inspiring experience being close to a heron as it captures its prey.

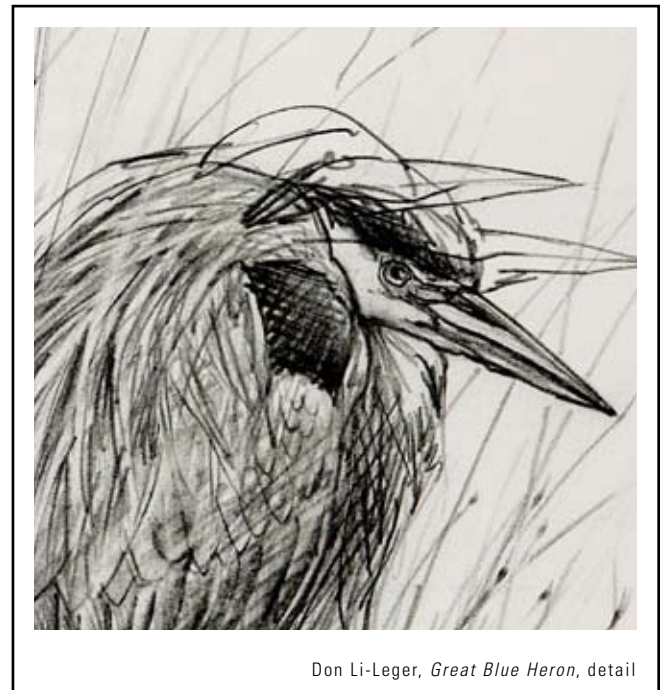
The heron, to me, has a real oriental look to it and images of herons, egrets and other similar types of birds appear often in oriental painting.

Although herons are every elegant, they often look forlorn - dripping wet and sitting in the same spot for what seems like hours. This drawing focuses on the heron's ability to compact itself - like a coiled spring - about to erupt into flight or to capture its prey.

Other drawings focused on different aspects of herons - studies with their neck extended, and pulled in; studies of them flying, walking, stalking. I also referred to a cadaver of a great blue heron that I kept in my freezer, its legs ready to spring out on the unsuspecting.

This study was for an etching but was not intended as a finished drawing. It was about working out some compositional issues. It was more of a working drawing rather than a finished product.

Hérons are very much a part of our environment here in Surrey, so this drawing is also a recording of our environment and how we relate to it as observers. The more we know about our natural environment, the more we will respect it and preserve it.



Don Li-Leger, *Great Blue Heron*, detail

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An Open Book

a catalogue of artworks from the Surrey Art Gallery's Permanent Collection
 ISSN 1910-1392 ISBN 978-10-926573-11-3 Published 2008



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