

ATENAS TODAY



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***ATENAS TODAY** is a free English language newsletter for the residents and potential residents of Atenas, Costa Rica. It contains informative articles and creative compositions submitted by our readers, and is distributed via email approximately once a month to over 350 email addresses. To get on the distribution list or to submit material, please send an email to Fred Macdonald at fredmac222@yahoo.com.*

Compositions from back issues are archived by category on the Atenas Chamber of Tourism and Commerce website, www.atenascatuca.com. Click on the English version and then [Atenas Today](#) on the business page.

Atenas Today Interviews Al Alexander

Semi retired professional artist in Atenas

AT: Are you telling me that you actually made a living as a professional artist?

Al: (Laughs) Yes, I really did. But it wasn't easy.

AT: How and when did you get started?

Al: I was born and grew up in Columbus, Ohio. I started drawing as soon as I could pick up a pencil.

AT: Were your parents artists?

Al: No, not at all. But my mother encouraged me to pursue an art career.

AT: Did you get any formal training in the Columbus schools?

Al: The high school had no art courses to speak of, but I was able to get some training on Saturday mornings at the Columbus Art Museum.

AT: What happened after high school?

Al: For a year and half I attended the Columbus College of Art and Design. But then I wanted to try a different place, and with a couple of friends I went to Los Angeles, where I enrolled in the Art Center College of Design and eventually got my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

AT: So then you were ready to begin your career as an artist.

Al: Well, not quite. The year was 1967 and I was drafted the day after I graduated.

AT: So you went to Viet Nam?

Al: Yes. I was stationed with an army artillery battalion that was supporting the Marines in some pretty hot areas. My job was to be a forward observer, so I ended up living with the Marines. However, my interest and skill as an artist eventually got me a much safer assignment.

AT: How so?

Al: I spent my spare time drawing and painting on anything I could find—boxes, boards, etc. Eventually it got noticed and I was sent to Saigon to do illustration work. I remember the day the officer came up to my post in a jeep and said, “You lucky bastard, get in, you are going to Saigon.” In the end I was sent to Washington, DC, where I finished out my term doing artwork for the army.

AT: I'm glad to hear that our military takes advantage of people's talents. What did you do after you were discharged?

Al: Like many would-be artists, I headed for New York City. I worked in various jobs, sold a few paintings, and taught some art classes. With the GI Bill I was able to attend Long Island University and got my Masters in Fine Arts. Needless-to-say, I was living as cheaply as I could.

AT: Did you enjoy living in New York?

Al: It was a great time. I lived the good life of a poor twenty-eight year old in the exciting atmosphere of New York. At one point I met a wealthy London art dealer, who hired me to go to England to paint and exhibit with him. I spent two years there, doing mostly painting, but some remodeling work on his 54 room mansion. The money turned out not to be what I expected, and I returned to New York, essentially broke.

AT: You must have been discouraged about the artist's life at this point.

Al: For sure. In fact I was just about to give it up and go back to Columbus when a friend introduced me to a gallery owner in the Soho district, and I was hired by the gallery and also did some teaching. That gave me the income and the time to paint, and I was able to start selling some pictures. Then I met my wife Jean, and we enjoyed the New York life together.

AT: When did you start to make serious money from your painting?

Al: My big break finally came when I sold a painting of the front of a Chinese grocery store to a manager at the Merck Pharmaceutical Company. This painting was displayed in one of their offices, and it gave me exposure to people who would pay good money for art. I sold works to a big law firm, to Burlington Mills, and to Malcolm Forbes.

AT: How would you describe your painting style?

Al: I paint realistic pictures, containing lots of detail and color. However, I am not of the school who try to make paintings look like photographs, a photorealist. I often work from photographs, but I edit them to add my own interpretations.

AT: You must have dozens of paintings here in your house in Atenas. I see landscapes, waterscapes, city scenes, portraits—a great variety of subjects. These paintings of the Brooklyn Bridge have incredible detail; every cable and railing is defined.

Al: I do like detail and variety, and I am not happy unless I can spend some time painting every day.

AT: What type of painting commissions did you find the most lucrative?

Al: I have to credit my wife Jean for pushing me into the area that really ended up making it possible to earn a living, and that was painting wall murals. In 1987 a friend recommended me to the GTE Company, who wanted a large mural in the lobby of their data center in Tampa, Florida. We had just moved to New Jersey, and I did not want to do it. Jean urged me to go, and the project was a big success. Since then I have done all kinds of murals: a baseball scene in a sports bar, a 55 foot long scene on a hospital wall, and even Pompeii-like murals on the walls of a Roman style house in California.

AT: Have you worked with any big name architects in doing murals?

Al: Yes. One of my early, big projects was working for Michael Graves to do over one hundred murals on the walls in the Swan and Dolphin Hotels that he designed for the Disney Epcot Center in Orlando.

AT: Did you do all the painting yourself on these murals?

Al: No way. These things are huge. I usually directed a team of five or six artists.

AT: What are some other special projects you have worked on?

Al: In 1999 the White House Historical Foundation, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the White House, decided to do a commemorative calendar. They wanted a painting by one artist from each of the original thirteen states featuring the White House. I was chosen as the artist to represent New Jersey. Jean and I were brought to Washington and I was given a special tour of the White House. I did a painting of FDR and Churchill sitting in the Blue Room.. The painting was a success, as was the calendar. I had my picture taken with First Lady Hillary Clinton, as did all the artists. President Clinton was going to come but was with the Chinese Premier. I must say that the whole experience was most gratifying. The paintings were on display in the White House Visitors Center and then toured all of the Presidential Libraries throughout the country. I believe they are now back on display for public viewing at the White House Visitors' Center in Washington, D.C..

AT: What made you give up that glamorous life to move to Costa Rica?

Al: Well, it wasn't all that glamorous, and although it paid enough to meet our expenses, we could not save enough to be able to retire in New Jersey. Both of us were self-employed (Jean was a landscape architect), and taxes and health insurance were eating us up. Also, we were getting tired of the winters. When a friend told us we could live in Costa Rica for \$600 a month, we came to take a look.

AT: That friend must have been living rent free and growing his own food. How did you happen on Atenas?

Al: It was quite a coincidence. On our first trip we were staying at a hotel in Nosara in Guanacaste and we met some people who had been visiting you in Atenas. They were very enthusiastic about Atenas, and on our next trip we came here and knew immediately that this was the place we wanted to be.

AT: I remember our friends telling us about you. When did you actually move?

Al: We bought this property in 2006 and lived in the existing guest house until we finished building our present house last November.

AT: I see that you have a studio set up in a separate building. Are you selling paintings and taking on commissions?

Al: Yes, I have sold a few paintings and done a couple of portraits.

AT: What do you charge for a painting?

Al: It depends a lot on the size, but in the \$2,000 to \$5,000 range. A 12 inch by 16 inch portrait would be \$2,000 plus.

AT: Are you also interested in teaching?

Al: By all means. I have had quite a bit of teaching experience and enjoy it. An ideal arrangement would be to have a group of three or four students come here for two hours a couple of times a week. I would charge around \$40 per person per hour.

AT: How should people contact you if they are interested in buying a painting or in art classes?

Al: They can call me at 2446-7081, or email me at jeanandal@gmail.com.

AT: I really like the painting that you did of the Friday farmer's market in Nicoya, and I am including a picture of it with this interview. It is 25 inches by 35 inches. What would be the price for this painting?

Al: \$3,500.

AT: Someday hopefully there will be an art gallery in Atenas where everyone can see your work, and that of other artists in this area.

Al: That would be wonderful.



Two More Poems

by Diane Holman

Credo

To know the roots of my faith you have to look to Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself".

You have to know the exuberance that filled me at age 14, heading out alone to the Friday night football game across town.

You have to understand the excitement I felt at the prospect of moving to California, the awareness I had that my children and I would prosper there.

You have to taste the bliss I experienced in my early 60's, driving my Winnebago across the United States.

You have to grasp the confidence I had moving through the process of retiring and moving to Costa Rica.

The roots of my faith are the certainties of my soul: that life is good and that joy is our birthright.

Morning, Once Again

Cows stationary as statues stand against the cant of rolling hill. Melody of birdsong threads the silence of daybreak.

A brazen yellow-bellied kiskadee settles into the center of the dewy lawn of my backyard, unaware of or indifferent to Hera's predatory intent. Hera herself, and Hecate, lie pooled—one black as oil, the other golden ochre—next to my feet. The paper-thin lavender flowers of the *jalapa lila* tremble slightly in the almost-nonexistent breeze.

I write the morning because that is who I am, a woman possessed by words. In this way I am able to feel equal to the beauty I inhabit.