



by Lucy Gordan

Suzanne Ferrell Nicholson

"It's Better To Paint In The Morning"

Born at West Point, New York, half a century ago, and a 1966 graduate of Vassar College with a major in art history, Suzanne Ferrell Nicholson has been an artist all her life. In 1967 she married James Nicholson and followed his career moves from admissions officer at the United States Military Academy at West Point, to lawyer and successful real-estate developer in Denver, to chairman of the Republican National Committee in Washington D.C., and, since 2001, the US ambassador to the Holy See. Sitting under her oil painting of Garrison, New York, at Villa Richardson, the embassy's residence on the Janiculum Hill above Vatican City, she recently discussed her own successful career and her life in Rome with *Inside the Vatican*.

Your bio says that you were born into a family of artists. Can you tell our readers about them?

SUZANNE NICHOLSON: My parents were both artists. My father went to architectural school for a couple of years and my mother studied fashion design. My mother's aunt, Mary Hicks, a painter, was the first woman to graduate from Cooper Union, and a cousin of my Dad's was the first woman to graduate



from Syracuse University School of Architecture.

Growing up, my younger sister and I always thought of our mother as the primary artist in the family until, as teenagers, we saw some of Dad's drawings. He would have been a great architect! Instead, after World War II when he served in the Army Air Corps, he became a civil service employee in a town which adjoins West Point, Highland Falls, New York, where all my grandparents came from.

When and how did you realize that you wanted to be an artist?

NICHOLSON: I don't ever remember not drawing. In fact, if you look at the encyclopedias in my parents' house, on the frontispieces my sister and I drew princesses, jewels, and Eva Peron. We used all the blank paper we could get our hands on, including in books.

Was it always painting or did you sculpt, make pottery...?

NICHOLSON: Yes, drawing and painting.

Were there a lot of paintings in your family home?

NICHOLSON: Yes, mostly by relatives.

You studied with noted portrait artist Herb Abrams, with Jim Vallone at the Rocky Mountain School of Art, with Doris O'Brien in Denver, and with Pat Mercer Hutchins at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C. Was one of them your mentor?

NICHOLSON: I don't think I have a mentor exactly. I had wonderful painting instructors at Vassar.

Do you have a favorite painter?

NICHOLSON: I really love the early Renaissance Italian painters: Masaccio, Masolino, Pinturicchio, Perugino.

A favorite painting?

NICHOLSON: The frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence.

Why did you study art history instead of studio art?

NICHOLSON: That was all that they offered then — a major in an academic discipline. I took as many

courses as I could in studio art, but I wanted an academic degree.

A thumbnail sketch of your painting career?

NICHOLSON: I currently exhibit my oils and water colors at the Foxhall Gallery in Washington, D.C. Over the years my work has been included in many shows in New York, Denver, McLean, Virginia, and in Washington D.C. at the Corcoran and the National Museum of Women in the Arts. In 1998 I participated in an innovative event in Washington called "Anacostia: A Place of Spirit." It took place in three venues, including Union Station during Black History Month. Anthony Williams, D.C.'s mayor then,

chose framed posters of my oil painting "Martin Luther King Blvd." to give as gifts to other mayors at national meetings, and also used it for his personal Christmas card. Other paintings I displayed at "Anacostia" helped raise money for "Art in the Dark," an art program for at-risk children.

I also designed the Christmas cards for the Republican National Committee from 1997-2000: elephants with a Christmas motif. Since coming to Rome I've used my paintings on the embassy's Christmas card: St. Peter's dome, Villa Richardson, and St. Peter's from the Tiber.

How has your style changed over the years?

NICHOLSON: I suppose it's freer and probably more colorful. But when I have long periods of not being able to paint, then I have to work

hard to get over "painter's block," a sort of a stiffness. I need to loosen up again, spend some time doing things fast and throwing them away. One of my wonderful teachers, Doris O'Brien, said it was really OK for artists to have dormant periods. Painting is something that you can always pick up again. She knew this from personal experience because she too was a busy woman. Like me, she had more time to paint during some periods of her life than others. I thought and still think that hers was very good advice. You can evolve as an artist even though you are not painting.



Suzanne Nicholson (in the straw hat) with her husband, Jim (far left) and their two sons and daughter. Below, with President Bush and John Paul II



What do you enjoy painting most, portraits, landscapes, still lifes, abstracts...?

NICHOLSON: Cityscapes. Landscapes with buildings.

Do you prefer oil to watercolor?

NICHOLSON: I like them both.

How do you choose which medium?

NICHOLSON: Can I afford to be messy? I haven't really been able to be as messy as you need to be to paint oils, since we've been in Rome. I'm taking a lot of photographs, hoping that someday I can turn them into oils.

What time of day is your ideal time to paint?

NICHOLSON: It's better to paint in the morning when you have a lot of natural light. At least for me.

If you could have studied with two painters of the past, who would they be and why?

NICHOLSON: Pinturicchio and Perugino. They used lines beautifully, but Masaccio has that wonderful sculptural form. Masaccio is a genius for creating form. He was revolutionary in that way.

Anyone else?

NICHOLSON: John Singer Sargent because he painted a lot of watercolors in Italy.

A woman painter?

NICHOLSON: Mary Cassatt.

Have you passed your gift of painting on to any of your three children?

NICHOLSON: We have two boys and one girl in that order. Our oldest son is very artistically inclined, but none of the three studied art.

Speaking of family, how did you meet your husband?

NICHOLSON: We met in 1966 when he was a captain in the army. He'd been assigned to West Point. I'd just graduated from Vassar. We didn't actually meet at a wedding. We had a recognizance at one. His secretary was my best friend's sister so we got introduced. We married in 1967.

Why Denver?



Two of Suzanne Nicholson's watercolors: Villa Anderson (the ambassador's residence) and a view of St. Peter's, both used on the embassy's Christmas cards. Below, Nicholson with Lucy Gordan during the interview

NICHOLSON: Although he continued as an army reservist for 22 years, after he resigned from active duty in 1970, Jim went to law school at the University of Denver. The day before he matriculated into law school we had our second baby. He worked full-time, went to school full-time, and was in the army reserves. It was a busy time.

And you were painting?

NICHOLSON: Not much. A dormant period.

In Denver you also had your own successful business?

NICHOLSON: Yes, for 10 years a bedding plant business called "Gift Basket" and "Petal Pushers."

When did you move to



Washington and why?

NICHOLSON: In 1997 when Jim was elected chairman of the Republican National Committee, which is like chairman of the Party.

What do you admire most about Jim? He about you?

NICHOLSON: I don't know what he admires about me, but I admire his character the most: his honesty and strength.

How did you find out you'd be coming to Rome, to the Holy See?

NICHOLSON: Jim was appointed by the president, I think in January 2001, and then the process of getting confirmed and submitting all the required

documentation takes a long time, but we came two weeks after he was confirmed. The rules are that you can't make any firm preparations until after Senate confirmation, obviously.

Why the Holy See and not another embassy?

NICHOLSON: The president asked Jim what he wanted to do in the administration and actually offered him the ambassadorship in quite a large country, but my husband requested of the president

ambassador to the Holy See?

NICHOLSON: One because he views it as a very important post; it has worldwide influence. A paradox because Vatican City is such a small territory, but decisions made here affect people who live all over the world. Two, because as a Catholic, he thought it would be personally rewarding.

Your husband wrote a book about the history of US-Holy See relations; how can *Inside the Vatican*

An exhibit poster displaying one of Suzanne Nicholson's oil paintings



that he appoint him ambassador to the Holy See. The president asked him to consider the alternative venue. Then he called the next day and, "Well, Jim, have you thought about it?" Jim said "Yes, I want to be ambassador to the Holy See," so then the president answered, "Well then, I want you to be ambassador to the Holy See."

How many times had you been to Rome before?

NICHOLSON: A couple of times, once married and once as a student.

Were you raised a Catholic like your husband?

NICHOLSON: Yes.

Why did your husband want so much to be

readers obtain a copy?

NICHOLSON: Yes, it's called *The United States and the Holy See: The Long Road*. It was first published in 2002 as a supplement to former Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti's magazine, *30 Days*. It's now in its second edition, but it's not for sale. Your readers can download it from our website <http://vatican.usembassy.it>.

A typical day for you as wife of the American ambassador to the Holy See?

NICHOLSON: Sometimes I find myself doing the same things as Jim, explaining American foreign policy, ethics, etc. but usually to women's groups. I try to run the house efficiently. We do lots of enter-

taining. Most of what I do is in support of Jim's work. Each day is different. For example, over last weekend we had house guests; then Monday we had an official lunch, followed by a reception for the bishops from New York. This is the year for all of the American bishops to come to visit the Pope. They come region by region. I think there are 14 groups all together and yesterday's group was the 10th. We entertain almost every other day.

With your embassy duties have you had a chance to paint at least some watercolors in Rome?

NICHOLSON: Not many.

Where do you usually paint?

NICHOLSON: Here in the garden. Or as I said, I take photographs to paint oils later. Watercolors are easier to close up when you only have an hour to paint. They'll also be easier to transport when I go back home.

Your best experience or experiences here in Rome?

NICHOLSON: Our meetings with the Pope have been memorable. We'd only been here a week when 9/11 happened. My husband was due to present his credentials to the Holy Father on the 13th, which he went ahead and did. The Holy Father was as upset as we were by the events. We had been really looking forward to the ceremony and having all our family with us. Of course, they could not get here, but it was comforting to know that the Pope was praying for us, for our country, and for humankind. He said to my husband: "It's not just an attack on your country, but on mankind." It was a really perceptive remark for him to have made so soon after. He definitely did not see it as an isolated incident, but as an attack on civilization.

Did he have an interpreter?

NICHOLSON: No, he speaks English.

You have met him other times?

NICHOLSON: The Holy Father greets the diplomatic corps once a year. I also went once with Vice-President Cheney on January 27, 2004, with the president on June 4, 2004, and we had a family audience at Christmas last year.

How do the official audiences work? When President Bush was here in June, did he speak to the Pope alone or was your husband with them?

NICHOLSON: President Bush and the Holy Father had a private meeting. There was a lot of outreach and respect on both sides. It was misrepresented in the press. They reported on what was said in private, but how does anyone know that anyway? It's outrageous. The press interpreted the meeting as a papal scolding. It wasn't that at all. The Vatican was very open, very positive towards the president. The body language, the atmosphere. The Pope invited absolutely everyone from the president's entourage, which is very large, including all the press, up to meet him and to receive a gift from his hand.

Other special experiences besides your visits with the Holy Father?

NICHOLSON: We've been very impressed by all the clergy we've met. Such well-educated, warm, talented people, really impressive.

Of the 100 or so cardinals, how many have you met?

NICHOLSON: Oh dear, I don't know, quite a few, but they don't all reside here in Rome, of course.

The Curia can be fairly Byzantine, sometimes difficult to fathom and penetrate, but that doesn't seem to have been your experience.

NICHOLSON: I don't suppose everyone in the Curia telegraphs their agenda totally, that's true. However, when you come into contact with people who've risen to the office of archbishop or cardinal, you immediately understand why because they're wonderfully educated, wonderfully intelligent.

They have great pastoral abilities at the same time, so they are very sympathetic individuals. They have the good of the world in mind. It's not an obscure agenda; it's a non-political kind of overview.

Would you say then that they have an international spiritual view of the world?

NICHOLSON: Yes, absolutely, a positive predisposition and openness towards the United States, towards mankind.

Your favorite church in Rome?

NICHOLSON: One is Santa Maria in Trastevere because the morning sunlight comes in and hits the mosaics in the apse just right. We also love to go to the Byzantine Mass with beautiful music held there on Sunday evenings.

Any others?

NICHOLSON: We've gone to the Station Masses during Lent. They are 40 mostly very early medieval churches, an official one for each day during Lent. Many of them are off the beaten track: Santa Prassede, Santa Maria in Cosmedin, San Clemente, Santa Sabina... (Note: For more information on 40 Stations of the Cross churches, contact Lori Mondaini at the North American College, tel. 011-39-06-68493825.) We also belong and go often to Santa Susanna, the American community church.



Your favorite museum in Rome?

NICHOLSON: The Capitoline.

Your favorite museum outside Rome?

NICHOLSON: I love the Bargello in Florence.

Outside Italy?

NICHOLSON: The National Gallery in Washington.

Any particular painting there?

NICHOLSON: Gilbert Stuart's *The Skater*.

Has being in Rome strengthened your religious faith? How?

NICHOLSON: Yes, by going to Mass so close to the roots of the Church, the historical nature of the

Are you going back to Denver or Washington or do you aspire to another ambassadorship elsewhere if Bush is re-elected?

NICHOLSON: We're going back in January. We haven't figured that out yet between Denver and Washington. Maybe a combination of the two. Not another ambassadorship.

How do you see America? Is it still a Christian country, or a "secular empire" with some Christian roots?

NICHOLSON: I think the United States has firm moral underpinnings. Its Judeo-Christian tradition really sustains it. I think it's an important part of our responsible democracy. There is a good deal of trust of one another, that people should behave and do the right thing.

My husband and I did a lot of traveling when he was chairman of the Republican National Committee to all parts of the country, to areas that weren't destination resorts, just ordinary places, with great differences in geography, economic conditions, ethnicities and so on. There was a thread that ran through every place and that was a belief in the value of hard work and the ultimate reward that people could get in our country for hard work and personal effort.

It's really a wonderful quality which has religious beginnings, faith in humanity, perhaps flawed but worthy.

In the United States everyone is considered worthy, the man who sells the newspaper as well as someone who has a big income. Americans believe they

should make their country and the world a better place for everyone.

What advice would you like to give to your unknown successor?

NICHOLSON: Well, of course, we'd be congratulating them. We'd also tell them that there is nothing not to like about Rome, that it's a fabulous place for its simultaneous intellectual and spiritual stimulation. It's a confluence of international issues, interaction and discussion.

Thanks to the Vatican there's also the overview of the longterm. In contrast to Americans, the Roman Curia has a long view of the world. Like Americans, the Curia thinks of the best for all.



Suzanne Nicholson, in the garden of the residence of the US ambassador to the Holy See

prominence of Rome, and the wonderful clergy we've met here.

Before we came, some people warned us that we would lose our faith by coming here, the way Martin Luther did. You know, when you get up close, you see the flaws, the wrinkles. For us, it's been the contrary. Our faith has been reinvigorated.

You and your husband have decided to leave Rome even if Bush is re-elected. What will you miss most?

NICHOLSON: The wonderful people we've gotten to know here, the lovely life, the beautiful buildings, the food...

