



An Interview With Clark Hulings

By Susan Hallsten McGarry

It's October 2006 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The road to Clark Hulings' home and studio is ablaze with purple asters, golden aspens and yellow chamisas. In his courtyard, vines crawling up the adobe colored walls are tinged red. Inside, the white walls dance with highlights and shadows from sunlight pouring over thickly troweled plaster. "When we built the house in the early 1970s," Hulings tells me, "we had to search for workers capable of plastering the walls in the old fashioned way."

Hulings has agreed to an interview concerning his upcoming exhibition, *Timeless Beauty: Pursuing Life's Textures*. As of this writing, he has completed 25 of the anticipated 35 paintings to be premiered May 8, 2007, at J.N. Bartfield Galleries, New York, NY. The images, which range from the diminutive 8-by-10-inch *Sack Burro* to the expansive, 28-by-46-inch *La Vucirria Market, Palermo*, are classic Hulings in subject matter and in his passion for finding beauty in the mundane. Inspired by decades of familiarity with rustic people and countryside throughout the world, the paintings also document his most recent travels, which include a new country in his repertoire.

Q: At this point, you have seven paintings from Romania in the show. When and why did you decide on Romania as a subject for your work?

Hulings: Friends who had visited Romania told me that there was subject matter they felt would be of interest to me, and another friend whose son and daughter-in-law had been in the Peace Corps shared information about backwoods places to visit. We drove around Romania for more than three weeks in the fall of 2004. My friends were right. When was the last time you saw men shoeing horses and women washing clothes in a cold stream or hand spinning raw wool into yarn? Many activities in Romania take place behind fences with gates that serve as status symbols, but Mary, my wife and chief navigator, managed to get us to an animal exchange and fair near the Ukrainian border in northernmost Romania, where I found the resource material I used in *Horse Traders*.



Q: You also have depicted women digging potatoes and a boy with a cow. Whether in Romania or elsewhere, a theme of your work is people who live close to the earth, often engaged in animal husbandry or agriculture. What's your attraction to such rustic scenes?

Hulings: I think of my paintings as slices of life. I'm drawn to people involved in physical labor, often with other people, because they are in a natural state and are not concerned with themselves. For the same reasons, I'm attracted to scenes that involve working animals.

Q: Over the years, burros have virtually become your trademark.

Hulings: That's true. I came to love them when I lived in Spain as a youngster. My father worked in Valencia, and our maid often took my sister and me to her household where the courtyard was filled with animals, including burros that we got to ride. They were so gentle, and I was never afraid of them. While I was working in New York, Mary and I planned to do a book on burros, but even though we got a contract for it, another book beat us to it. In researching the burro's history, we learned of their aristocratic heritage, as well as symbolic references in most of the major religions. For this show, *Sack Burro* and *A Boy and His Burro*, which is based on a famous book that everyone in Spain has read, are my nods to the burros in my life.

Q: If you have another trademark, it would have to be market scenes. For this exhibition, you have painted marketplaces in Spain, Mexico and Italy.

Hulings: Markets go back to my childhood, too. Our maid's boyfriend worked in Valencia's main market, and she often took us with her when she went to meet him. We played amidst the stalls and the clerks used to give us things. I loved going there. As an adult, I find that if I stand in a market, I get to see a parade of humanity, displaying every imaginable human quality from arguing, trying to make a decision, observing, or leading a dog. It's all there—an endless mosaic of poses, colors and shapes. One of the reasons I like to use photographs as reference tools is because they literally freeze the parade of gestures that are taking place. I can snap 25 images of two characters on a street corner talking to one another with one trying to control a child. The same is true with animals. Even though I know their anatomy, a photo gives me a feel for their body language and gestures that you can't make up.



Q: You have a smaller version of *Horse Traders*, along with the final painting. Is it a field sketch done on location?

Hulings: I try to do field sketches when I'm traveling, but in this case the smaller painting was done in the studio as a working model. I have used working models for years, but I have been doing fewer of them since I was introduced to the computer. Countless hours of instruction on Adobe Photoshop allow me to build compositions, change colors and view possibilities very quickly. It has saved me days of effort when, for instance, after drawing a figure and perhaps even painting much of it, I realize that it should be moved a little to the right or further back in the composition.

Q: People often comment on the surface effects in your paintings, whether you are conveying rich shiny wood, fresh flowers or old things ravaged by time.

Hulings: I've always enjoyed creating the illusion of textures, but my awareness of them was heightened when I studied in Düsseldorf with Hans George Lentzen in the late 1950s. Our assignments included finding natural objects in the woods or picking up castoffs discarded in city gutters, then putting them together so that they were interesting. We could change color, size, shapes or anything we wished, which forced me to think about how to make the mundane beautiful. I am especially attracted to things that reflect history. As I painted *Ancient Stairway in Calabria*, for instance, I imagined how many people, over how many centuries have trod those steps. In other cases, I piece together things from my memory, as in *Louisiana Bayou*, inventing, editing and modifying to give the scene a feeling of history.

Q: *Rainy Sicilian Street* has a number of surface effects—rain-slicked cobblestones, weathered plaster and laundry dampened by the heavy atmosphere. Was the laundry in the scene or did you add it?

Hulings: I have dozens of pictures of clotheslines, and as I noted in my book, everybody likes clothes washing because it symbolizes the twin virtues of cleanliness and industry. A clothesline is also a terrific compositional ploy, not to mention a means of adding color and texture. I often say that the washer and dryer have become the death of me since I don't see laundry flapping in the wind much any more.

Hulings

Q: Lighting is such a key element in your work—are you drawn to lighting or do you make it up.

Hulings: Both—sometimes I’m attracted to a lighting effect or I wait for a particular effect to happen. Other times, as with *Bay at Farro, Portugal*, I created a strong light effect, which brings the scene to life. The story of a painting, much like a play in a theater, benefits from the skills of the lighting designer.

Q: Many of your subjects come from fairly remote and rural areas. How do you communicate while you are in such places?

Hulings: I have a functional knowledge—which is to be distinguished from fluency—in French, Italian, Spanish and German. Using gestures and primitive language skills gets me along, and I find that most Europeans are friendly and helpful if you at least try to speak their language. I learned languages out of necessity and curiosity—I couldn’t stand not being able to understand what was going on around me. But my biggest travel asset is Mary, who has become an expert at reading guidebooks. She also studies maps to determine topography, avoiding heavily forested areas in favor of gently rolling truck-farming terrain and picturesque hilltop towns like *Longobucco*, a village in Calabria, Italy.

Q: It’s tempting to place your work in a long list of historical genre painters in Europe and the United States. Are there artists in the category that you admire?

Hulings: I really don’t know art history, but there are particular paintings that resonate with me. One of them is *Peace and Plenty* by George Inness, which I saw at the Met when I was 12. It continues to be my favorite painting. I also think of Millet’s *The Gleaners*, and what artist doesn’t list Vermeer among his favorites? I was enchanted by Breugel the Elder’s paintings when I saw them in Vienna—there are so many stories going on, and invariably there is one special vignette, maybe in the corner, of, say, a woman changing a baby’s diaper. In terms of American artists, I admire the directness of Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood and Edward Hopper, and more recent artists such as Norman Rockwell and Andrew Wyeth. I don’t put my work on their level, but like them, I admit to having a thing about people. When I’m painting a landscape, it just isn’t complete unless there is a person or animal in it. I like to relate human beings to nature.



Q: Why did you select New York for this exhibition?

Hulings: During the 1960s, I showed my work at Grand Central Art Galleries and developed a following that Mr. Barry, the director at the time, used to identify with pushpins on a map that followed the New York Central Railway to Chicago. Descendants of those buyers continue to collect my work, but I haven't shown in New York since then. At age 83 and with the encouragement of my daughter who lives in New York, it seemed like a good time to expand my market! I also love the city, and once a year I stay there for several weeks, attending life drawing sessions at the Art Students League and Spring Street Studio to keep my skills sharp.

Q: Were you doing European subjects back in the 1960s?

Hulings: Yes. Hoping to become a member, I kept offering Grand Central, over a couple of years, paintings from Europe and Mexico. Mr. Barry was not impressed, saying I should not do works containing laundry, donkeys or cathedrals. He said, "Most paintings are bought by women and women don't want clotheslines or donkeys in their living rooms and only Catholics buy cathedrals." The next painting I submitted was of the cove-shaped cathedral in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, with a clothesline alongside and a donkey in the foreground. A female customer walking nearby went to the receptionist and said, "I'd like to buy the painting they are looking at. Is it for sale?" I immediately became a member of the gallery. I learned then that you do your best work when the picture comes from deep inside you. I also learned that painting at someone else's direction is work, while painting for yourself is fun. Who wants to work when you can have fun?

Q: Contemporary art critics don't give much space to traditional fine art. Any trepidation about having your work reviewed in the press?

Hulings: I used to enjoy the reviews written by Hilton Kramer in the *New York Times*. He was open-minded and covered everything, recognizing quality no matter the style. But I don't expect to be reviewed, and I really don't care about critical acclaim. While I was illustrating, I spent some time in Europe exploring avant-garde artists such as Klimt and abstractionists such as

A stylized, handwritten signature in red ink, appearing to read 'Hwang'. The letters are thick and expressive, with some overlapping and a dynamic, calligraphic feel.

Picasso. My intent was to develop a novel approach that might attract the attention of book or record buyers. But I enjoyed what I was doing so much that there was no point in trying to be somebody else. I decided to be the best I could be in painting conventional subjects in a traditional style—that's who I am.