

# Renaissance Dawn

*Taos artist brings multiple talents to bear*

**W**hat do knowing the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City like the back of her hand, holding a third-degree black belt in Taekwondo and being the first woman camp director at Philmont Scout Ranch have in common? They are all accomplishments of Taos artist Dawn Chandler.

Chandler was born and raised in Bridgewater, N.J., and lived in the same house since she was 3 weeks



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*Betsy Carey*

old. Because they lived only an hour from NYC, her parents often took her to the Metropolitan Museum. To this day, every time she goes back East she and her father always make a trip into the city, and she said they almost always end up at the Met.

As a child, Chandler tried many extracurricular activities including piano lessons, guitar lessons, tennis, theater and Girl Scouts, but said that none of these were a good fit for her. Her mother offered her oil painting classes when she was in fifth grade because although she brought home mixed grades in other subjects, she always aced her art classes.

She began her painting lessons on Saturday mornings in the home of her teacher and received her first paint box with a set of oil paints and brushes a couple of weeks later. "I was thrilled! I still have that paint box and some of the brushes," she said. "I loved painting, and continued with private lessons for several years."

Her home was not so much filled with paintings, but with



"Yearning II," by Dawn Chandler

*Courtesy photo*

books, many of which were art books. She remembers as a young girl being quite taken by the tomes that sat on their living room coffee table — books nearly as large as her, filled with glorious illustrations of Italian Renaissance art and architecture, portraits by Rembrandt, landscapes by Van Ruisdael, Corot, Monet, Gauguin, the Hudson River School, sculpture by Rodin and the quirky mixed-media assemblages of H.C. Westermann, among numerous others.

Of note, on the walls of her home were several tall, narrow vertical paintings on silk from China. Her great-great-great-grandfather was involved in the opening of China to the Western market and he had brought these back from his travels. She said she has often wondered if her exposure to these striking tall and narrow paintings didn't somehow influence her

perpetual interest in the vertical format.

Chandler said that her public school art teachers and the classes they taught in Bridgewater were average, at best. She said her teachers were unenthusiastic and jaded and it's a wonder she persevered artistically. Although she was voted "most artistic" in her senior class, she also won the history award for the best history student.

After high school, Chandler spent her first year in college at Connecticut College in New Haven, but she then transferred to Miami University of Ohio where she earned an undergraduate degree in painting. She earned her master's from the University of Pennsylvania where the faculty awarded her a full fellowship to attend the Skowhegan School of painting and sculpture in Maine. "My art instruction from college

onward was exceptional," she said. "I had many excellent professors and mentors, as well as exceptional fellow students. Those whom I appreciated most were those who challenged me artistically and intellectually — inspiring me to be expansive in my outlook, but focused in my artistic vision and voice."

During the past 20 years, Chandler has continued to do landscapes mainly in pastel and oil and nearly all in a vertical format. She has also pursued abstract work exploring mixed media and collage, and she said her abstract work is more deeply personal and profound, her internal landscape.

Chandler first visited New Mexico in 1980 when she came to Philmont Scout Ranch where her father and her brothers had been active. Her father told her that when she was 15, if she wanted to go to Philmont, he would start an Explorer Post, co-ed Boy Scouts, so she could also go. And indeed that is just what he ended up doing.

Weekends were spent pursuing "high adventure" activities like hiking, backpacking and canoeing; summers were spent "hut hopping" in the White Mountains of New Hampshire and backpacking in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of Philmont. She said she visited Philmont three times as a participant, and then served on staff for six summers. Four of those summers she spent as a ranger, leading and guiding groups of scouts on their first days on the trail, making sure they knew basic camping and backpacking skills, map and compass, first aid, etc. Her last two years on staff she worked in Philmont's backcountry, and had the honor of being chosen to serve as Philmont's first woman camp director.

"My experience at Philmont had a profound impact on

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my life," she said. "To be at such an impressionable age, working outdoors in an awesomely beautiful landscape beside a stellar array of individuals, and to be given so much responsibility and opportunity — it was life-affirming and life-defining. For a young woman growing up in a pretty nonreligious family, Philmont — and my experiences in nature — became, in many ways, my 'religion.' "

Four years after completing graduate school, Chandler said her soul was aching for the mountains and she decided to return to New Mexico deciding on Taos because it was half way between Cimarrón and Santa Fé, where she had friends. Her first years in Taos were spent working many odd jobs including waitressing and bartending at Eske's Brew Pub and, although not a golfer but knowing how to drive a tractor, being a greenskeeper at the Valle Escondido course east of Taos.

After working odd jobs for three years, she received a call from the Philmont Staff Association. They wanted to know if she would be interested in a new position of executive director for Philmont. She ended up doing this job for more than five years, during which time the membership more than tripled, and then resigned in 2003 to pursue her art career full time.

Besides doing art, Chandler has spent many years studying martial arts and now holds a third-degree black belt in Taekwondo, which she achieved under the tutelage of Senior Master Dan Thor. With only a handful of seventh-degree black belts in the country, she said Taos is extraordinarily fortunate to have such a gifted and knowledgeable practitioner in this small town. This year however, she has been taking a break from Taekwondo in order to train for her first triathlon. As you can imagine, much of her time these days is spent running, cycling and swimming.



"Unrequited II," by Chandler

Courtesy photo

"I feel tremendously fortunate to be able to spend my life living in this beautiful place pursuing my passion. Trying to make a living and supporting myself as an artist is a perpetual struggle, but it's a struggle that I embrace on every level. To be able to wake up each morning happy to be alive and loving what I do — that's a blessing."

Chandler's work can be seen in her own small gallery, Taos Dawn Designs, located in her home in Taos Canyon. She also has work hanging at Eske's Brew Pub in Taos and at the historic St. James Hotel in Cimarrón. You can also visit her Web site at [www.taosdawn.com](http://www.taosdawn.com).



"Passion I" by Chandler

Courtesy photo