

PORTRAITS OF THE SKY

For several weeks this Spring of 2009, the morning sky all around the valley has had three or four cumulonimbus clouds towering over huge herds of smaller swelling cumulus. As the day progresses, these clouds fill the sky and eventually let loose torrents of rain. Later on the sky clears, but not completely. This leaves dramatic cloud formations. I get 360° degree panoramic views of all of this from on top of my mesa in northern New Mexico.

Why do I call my paintings “portraits” of the sky? A portrait is a painting of a specific person at a specific moment. It is concerned with features, color, expression, personality and mood. My paintings of clouds portray specific clouds, cloud formations, details, colors, and the mood of the sky in a unique moment. The area where I live is especially full of these special moments.

I have done some research about clouds and the sky. (My favorite book is *The Book of Clouds* by John A. Day, 2003, Silver Lining Books, NYC.) This has led to some interesting conversations with meteorologists. Because this is mountain country, we get some clouds that are not found in other areas. Particularly, we have lenticular clouds that look like flying saucers and cap clouds that literally sit on the peaks. (I have had a meteorologist tell me that the lenticular clouds sometimes drift east to the western plains of Oklahoma.)

One of my favorite types of clouds is called mammocumulus or mammatus. These look like breasts or clumps of tennis balls hanging down from a cloud shelf. They are associated with heavy storms including tornados, though we don't get tornados in Taos Valley.

Of course I paint sunsets as well as storms and fair-weather clouds. Taos is famous for its sunsets; how could I not paint them? (The mountains are named the Sangre de Christos, or “Blood of Christ Mountains” because of the colors of the sunsets.)

How do I paint such accurate portraits of clouds with such believable detail and complexity? I use photography, of course. This enables me to capture an exact moment and also to enhance the color, light and shadow, and play with the composition if I feel it necessary. I have a large library of photos that I go back to regularly to get new ideas or to see an image in a different way. Sometimes I travel with a camera in the car and pull over to get a picture. And for those plain air purists who frown on painting from photography: *clouds don't hold still.*