

# Creatures GREAT AND SMALL

WHEN PEGGY MACNAMARA WAS SEEN DRAWING REGULARLY AT CHICAGO'S FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, SHE WAS INVITED BEHIND THE SCENES FOR A CLOSER LOOK.

by Stefanie Laufersweiler

**P**eggy Macnamara was gathering reference material for painting when I called her for an interview last August. "I've been catching spiders because it's their time," she told me, and then explained that she collects them in plastic zipper bags, keeping them long enough to study for a bit before releasing them. "They're fabulous!" said Macnamara. "Their house gets destroyed, and they just build another one the next day. We're complete babies in comparison. Our refrigerator breaks, and we're out for the week."

Macnamara's enthusiasm for consuming and sharing details about the creatures she paints shows no signs of slowing: She has been the artist-in-residence at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History—one of the largest and best of its kind—for three decades. Although she has traveled near and far with the museum's scientists to paint the wildlife of the world, she began by just showing up at the museum one day, intending to sketch as a means of escape.



"I had a studio at home, but also seven children," says Macnamara. "I would get a babysitter, drive to the Field Museum and draw for four hours, and everything would hold still. For the first two or three years, I went every day and drew whatever was there on the main floors. It was heavenly. It was like going and having a drink with your friend. That's how I got into the material."

Today, a large collection of Macnamara's original watercolor paintings of insects, birds and mammals are on permanent display at the museum, and she has her own studio on the premises (see a photo of the space, page 34). Hundreds of museumgoers flock to see her on Members' Nights, when the Field grants access to areas of the museum not normally open to the public.

Macnamara's students inspire her to try new things. "When I saw the animation work they were doing, I thought I'd try to make my images move too," she says, referring to **Heron Fishing** (watercolor on paper, 30x40). "It helps to have photos that record each successive move the bird makes." Her pencil lines typically disappear under layers of watercolor, but she doesn't worry when they don't. "People tell me they love seeing the process on the paper," she says.

## SCIENCE AND ART COLLABORATIONS

In addition to her work at the Field Museum, Macnamara teaches scientific illustration as an associate professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. “I’m unusual in that I don’t do computer-generated images,” she says. “Scientific illustrators are now doing a lot on the computer. I teach a sort of Renaissance-style drawing, instructing my

students how to perfectly draw a specimen or model, and then I do some watercolor.”

The artist says she’s a “kindred spirit” with the scientists she has met during her time at the museum, and she has collaborated with a number of them on books published by the University of Chicago Press. Her latest project is a book tentatively titled *Marine Life: Shore to Floor*, which she’s working on with Janet Voight, a scientist Macnamara has known for 25 years. “Janet goes underwater in Alvin, a deep-sea apparatus that descends to the bottom of the ocean,” Macnamara says. The artist bases her undersea images on videos and images that Voight suggests, an approach that

LEFT

Artwork and specimens accompany art and animal reference books in Macnamara’s studio in the bird department on the third floor of Chicago’s renowned Field Museum of Natural History.

BELOW

“Underwater subjects brought me into a new, rich painting world,” Macnamara says. She considers *Leafy Sea Dragon* (watercolor on paper, 30x45) a depiction of “mimicry at its best, as well as a figure-ground situation with continual movement.” The artist initially painted every subject without a background. “Time and practice gave me confidence and pushed me forward,” she says.



brings different challenges from depicting animals and specimens the artist experiences in person. “Underwater subjects are definitely more difficult to paint because I’m working from a reference that’s moving,” she says, “but they’re beautifully graceful, because of the water, so I find myself wanting to show movement more” (see *Leafy Sea Dragon*, opposite).

In earlier years Macnamara became bored with seeking out and showing her work in exhibitions. “I did it, though, and went to New York because that’s what you’re supposed to do,” she says. She goes on to point out, however, that she has found working at the Field Museum to be much more fun. The key to enjoying her longtime residency is that it’s not a paid position, so the art she produces is driven by what she wants to do. “At the time I acquired the title, the city’s museums were trying to make a campus—the Field Museum, the Shedd Aquarium, the Adler Planetarium—and I was teaching at the art institute,” she says. “The exhibition department and the bird division were redesigning the Bird Halls, and the woman in charge, Debby Moskovitz, asked if she could hang my work in those revised areas. They hosted an opening and labeled me an artist-in-residence, and eventually they gave me a studio.” Over many years Macnamara has built relationships with

When COVID-19 led to shutdowns last spring, Macnamara had to shift her search for subject matter. “I was alone more and looking more,” she says. Instead of going to the Field Museum every morning, she sought subjects on walks close to home. “This nest was right above my back door,” Macnamara says, referring to the subject of *Robin’s Nest* (watercolor on paper, 22x30). “I watched nestlings hatch and wait for their mom to bring them food.”

scientists at the Field whose work constantly fuels ideas for paintings and books while feeding her curiosity.

Her 2013 book, *The Art of Migration: Birds, Insects and the Changing Seasons in Chicagoland*, was inspired by a phenomenon she knew little about before getting her studio at the museum. “I didn’t know anything about migration, and birds have been coming through Chicago my whole life,” Macnamara says. “They hit windows, they die and they get brought to the museum.” The dead birds are subsequently skinned and studied. Then they provide sustenance to the bugs in the bug room, and their skeletons are saved. “One scientist, Dave Willard, kept a record of every single bird that has come through,” she says. “That’s why I wrote that book and dedicated it to Dave. This is the life that I want to live—not in New York getting an art dealer. I want to look at Dave writing in his piles of journals.”

## Art Strips

“In graduate school I was taken with Chinese art,” Macnamara says. “The vertical and horizontal storytelling format always intrigued me. They felt like early graphic novels.” She chose a vertical presentation for *Artstrip* and *Artstrip 2* (both watercolor on paper, 40x18). “Most of the time I just take an idea and develop it, without concern for its public or purpose.” —Peggy Macnamara



### Artist's Toolkit

#### SURFACE

Lanaquarelle watercolor paper: “I use hot-pressed paper because the water slides around on it,” says Macnamara. She also points out that making corrections—scrubbing away what she doesn’t like—is easier on the heavy-weight paper.

#### PAINTS

##### Winsor & Newton

- yellow ochre
- lemon yellow
- cadmium yellow
- alizarin crimson
- cadmium red
- Hooker’s green
- sap green
- cadmium green light
- manganese blue
- ultramarine blue
- cobalt blue
- Payne’s gray
- cadmium orange
- titanium white

##### Holbein

- bright violet
- brilliant orange
- opera

#### BRUSHES

- 1-inch flats
- Nos. 3 to 10 rounds

**Note:** For skies and some backgrounds, Macnamara pours color and water mixtures, letting each move on the surface without tilting the paper or trying to manipulate the flow. “If I try to control it, then it all blends together, and that’s boring,” she says. “I let the poured mixes dry and then repeat the process, maybe 15 times, with multiple colors.”

#### More Online!

Macnamara corrects misconceptions about watercolors at [artistsnetwork.com/go/watercolor-myths](http://artistsnetwork.com/go/watercolor-myths).



**Elephant** (watercolor on paper, 42x38) shows part of the Field Museum’s famous *Fighting African Elephants* display by Carl Akeley, the museum’s chief taxidermist from 1896 to 1909. “I’ve painted the elephant dozens of times,” Macnamara says. “I’ve always painted it on large paper, sometimes 40x60 inches. Although I have to sit in Stanley Field Hall to paint the elephant, I’m usually so lost in my process that I don’t notice the crowds.”

## FINDING HER WAY

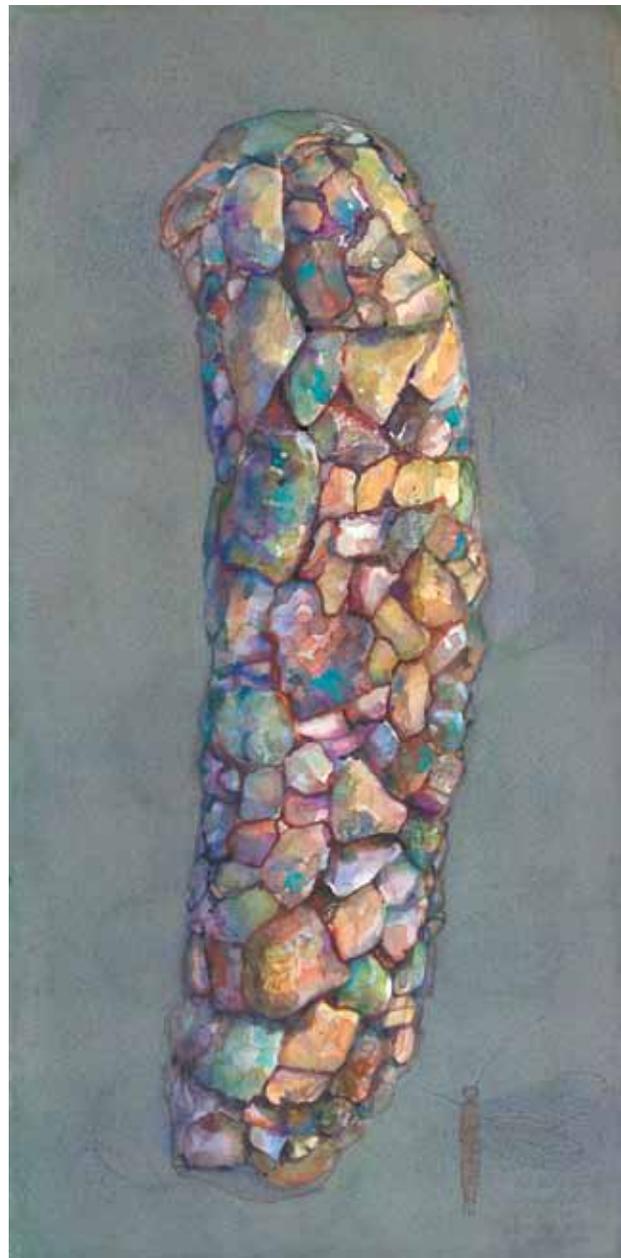
Macnamara learned how to paint in oil first but then taught herself watercolor, which is more museum-friendly. Color intimidated her, though, so she built her skills in colored pencil. “It’s very safe and slow, and you can control it,” Macnamara says. “I learned to layer complements that way. For years I did large drawings, practicing the layering of colors.” The images took months to complete and taught her patience—a trait that has served her well later in her watercolor work. “Colored pencil trained me in a unique way,” she says. “I never expected anything fast. I think of my students

who want something in a day—but if you give your work no time limit, it’s amazing what you’ll come up with.”

Because she remains faithful to the form of whatever she draws, Macnamara feels freer to push and explore her subject’s colors. “People have told me, ‘You make it so lively and colorful that it’s not really accurate,’” she says. “But my drawing is always dead-on. I respond by saying a bird looks different in different lights. My paintings aren’t just factual, and that’s fine, because I want you to fall in love with the subjects.” Her painting *Caddisfly* (page 38) features a colorful take on nests of the caddisfly, an



**ABOVE**  
Macnamara got an artistic assist from passersby as she made a life-size drawing (almost 4 feet long) of a bronze Coelacanth sculpture located outside the museum's fish department. "As the scientists came into work, they volunteered color and other details about the rare species. I wouldn't have bothered them for that, so I was pleased that my location brought me needed information," she says. She put the feedback to good use for **Coelacanth** (watercolor on paper, 18x40).



**LEFT**  
**Caddisfly** (watercolor on paper, 42x20) was inspired by a collection of insect nests Macnamara discovered in a cabinet at the Field museum while waiting for layers of watercolor to dry. "I wanted the viewer to feel like the caddisfly who'd spent his 'high school years' in these self-contained architectural gems," she says. "Best of all, these nests were built with recycled materials that each bug found around its nest."

illustration in her 2005 book, *Illinois Insects and Spiders*. "Nests are a subject I'd never considered," she says, "even though most of them are brown, and I'd always enjoyed painting brown subjects by layering complements."

Insects have turned out to be some of Macnamara's favorite subjects. She appreciates how unique they look from species to species, how easy they are to collect and study, and how efficiently and effectively they work—especially in their role of cleaning the environment. "I want to show viewers something they haven't seen much of, even if it's not necessarily beautiful," she says. Every semester, Macnamara teaches her students how to pin insects properly for observation. "I probably have 30 cicadas in my freezer right now," she says. "They're big enough to pin easily and then draw. If I find a butterfly, I'll pick it up if it's dead. Stuff that's smaller is a littler harder to work with."

Initially, Macnamara primarily studied and sketched from specimens and displays inside the museum; however, the more she grew in her work, the more she realized she needed reference photos. She also received opportunities to travel and see subjects in their natural habitats. "With the migration book, I needed to show the murmuration [flocking] of birds [see *Starlings*, opposite] so I connected with a photographer. She sends me everything she does," says Macnamara, who jokes that she herself is a lousy birder. "By the time I grab the binoculars, they're gone," the artist admits.



**ABOVE**  
**Law of Principality** (watercolor on paper, 22x30) shows starlings in murmuration—a visually stunning phenomenon of a large flock of birds in flight moving as one massive shape. "Birds work together better than most people," Macnamara says. "If only my drive downtown was made up of courteous people who'd just slow down and let me slip into their lane."

Getting the paint application right took a few tries. "I was literally flinging thick paint from a one-inch flat brush," says Macnamara. "I had to develop a system to get the curvature correct."

**LEFT**  
"Who knew that Illinois could have 1,850 species of moths!" says Macnamara, who depicted a few specimens in **Rosy Maple Moth Page** (watercolor on paper, 22x30)





TOP  
**Law of Interchange** (watercolor on paper, 30x40) depicts pelicans and cranes in a naturally occurring group—which happens to fit John Ruskin's seventh law of composition.



ABOVE  
**Ocean Gallery** (watercolor on paper, 22x30) arose from Macnamara's close encounters with the aquatic world at the Shedd Aquarium, just east of the Field Museum.

## Making Changes

"The ability to make changes," Macnamara says, "changes everything. If I get an urge to try something, I don't freak out thinking I won't be able to change my mind." When she needs to remove something she has painted, she either lifts color with a wet brush or scrubs lightly with a moist Mr. Clean Magic Eraser sponge. "If an echo of the old image remains, I just leave it," she says. After the area dries completely, she draws a new image in the area and paints it using relatively strong color. "If there are too many layers or cadmiums," Macnamara says, "I sometimes need to use titanium white with a color to make the area opaque."



## THE BIGGER PICTURE

When the topic turns to conservation, Macnamara downplays her painter-of-nature role. "The scientists who fly to South America and live in a tent for five days—that's something," she says. Sometimes, however, Macnamara's artwork of species these scientists aim to protect goes with them. The pictures help garner support for preserving natural areas. "Debby Moskovitz—the person who started calling me artist-in-residence—started the Keller Science Action Center at the Field Museum," says Macnamara. "She'll go to government meetings and pass out prints of paintings

"After seeing herds of zebras in Africa," says Macnamara, "I realized how unusual it was for me to have been able to paint **Zebra Standup** (watercolor on paper, 50x20) while sitting in front of a single specimen at the Field.

I've done of new species and say, 'You can't kill all this.' So, I've been lucky in that way, to be at the museum and able to contribute."

Macnamara also hopes that reaching a broader audience with her books will make more people think twice about the animals and natural areas that will disappear without efforts to protect and save them. "In my latest book I have a

whole chapter on the coral reef, and that reef is disappearing. I show past images of it and then what it looks like now," she says. "I'm hoping what I publish will get some people who are better at conservation work than I am to make changes." **WA**

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## Meet the Artist



**Peggy Macnamara**, born and raised on Chicago's North Side, holds a B.A. in art history from Manhattanville College, in Purchase, N.Y., and an M.A. in the same field from the University of Chicago, but she worked as a legal aide before making art her career. She has been

Artist-in-Residence at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History since 1990 and an adjunct associate professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 2001. For the past 15 years she has been a regular visiting painter at museums across North America and in Europe. Visit [peggymacnamara.com](http://peggymacnamara.com) to view the artist's videos and additional paintings, and to learn about her books and latest projects.