# ART MEETS WETLAND CONSERVATION IN CHAKCHIUMA SWAMP, GRENADA, MS

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## "I'VE FOUND MY PEOPLE!"

This was Robin Whitfield's reaction to the enthusiasm for wetlands that she encountered at her first SWS meeting in October 2024. Robin was invited as our first-ever Artist-in-Residence at the fall 2024 meeting of the South Central Chapter in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Robin earned her bachelor of fine arts degree in 1996 from Delta State University in Cleveland, MS, and right away set up shop in Grenada, MS, where she still maintains a private art studio. Robin draws inspiration for her watercolor paintings of wetland scenes from an approximately 300-acre wetland that lies a short walk north of her studio in downtown Grenada. In fact, Robin does much more than receive inspiration from this wetland; her paintings are created with natural pigments taken directly from the wetland. For example, she might use iron oxides for browns and reds, fruit of pokeweed or elderberry for purples, goldenrod flowers for yellows, or leaves of pokeweed for greens.

Robin developed such an attachment for this wetland that she organized a group of local volunteers, Friends of Chakchiuma Swamp, in 2009 to promote conservation of the wetland. The name "Chakchiuma" is meant to honor the native peoples of the Yalobusha River watershed, where Grenada and the wetland are located. An early result of Robin's actions was the swamp's designation as an Outstanding Natural Area by the Mississippi Natural Heritage Program in 2009. In 2018, Robin formally established the Friends of Chakchiuma Swamp as a nonprofit organization.

The following year, the Friends group and the Chakchiuma Swamp faced a major challenge: the City of Grenada listed the trees of the Chakchiuma Swamp for sale to raise funds for the City budget. Robin and the Friends undertook an effort to raise funds to adopt the trees. Their work eventually attracted a donor whose matching funds allowed the Friends of Chakchiuma Swamp to enter into a 60-year lease with the City to protect the Chakchiuma Swamp. This effort also resulted in the area taking the name of Lee Tartt Nature Preserve, in honor of a local law enforcement officer killed in the line of duty.

The conservation and education work by Robin and the Friends of Chakchiuma Swamp caught the attention of the SWS South Central Chapter Board of Directors when the conservation efforts were featured on a local television news program. Chapter Special Issues chair and former board member Chuck Walker brought this work to the attention of the executive board and suggested formally recognizing Robin's wetland conservation work. When board members discovered Robin was not only actively working to save wetlands but also was a professional artist, we extended an invitation for her to attend the fall 2024 conference as Artist-in-Residence, which included delivery of the meeting's opening plenary address.

Robin gave a moving plenary, detailing her emotional and artistic connections with the Chakchiuma Swamp and describing the artistic process of selecting (sometimes accidentally) natural materials for her work. One of the early examples came when her watercolor paper canvases were blown onto the water by a gust of wind. The wetland's oily sheen surface "contaminated" the face of all her papers, but she quickly found that she could use this material as part of her art. This led to Robin exploring other natural materials provided by the wetland, which deepend her connection with the ecosystem.

At the conference, Robin reported that she had "found her people," and conference attendees found another way to be excited about our love for wetlands.

The South Central Chapter Board of Directors seeks to identify future Artist-in-Residence opportunities and urges other SWS regional and national meetings to pursue this. We encourage SWS members to suggest

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2 US Army Engineer Research and Development Center, Vicksburg, MS, USA
3 HDR Engineering, San Antonio, TX, USA

artists or other creative folks to enhance our meetings and our membership.

You can find more information about the Chakchiuma Swamp and Robin's art at these URLs:

Friends of Chakchiuma Swamp:
https://www.friends-of-cs.org/

Robin Whitfield Studio:
https://www.robinwhitfield.com/

## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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*Figure 1. Robin's use of natural materials in her watercolor paintings was inspired when some of her canvases fell into the wetland and picked up a coating of "oily sheen," which she has since incorporated as an element of some of her work. (Photo: Robin Whitfield)*




*Figure 2. Since discovering natural wetland pigments, Robin has incorporated many materials, such as leaves, flowers, berries, and soil, into her art. (Photo: Robin Whitfield)*




*Figure 3. Robin maintains a library of natural materials, many from the Chakchiuma Swamp wetland, for use in her art and in workshops where she teaches others how to make use of these resources. (Photo: Robin Whitfield)*




*Figure 4. The efforts of Robin and the Friends of Chakchiuma Swamp led to a long-term lease agreement with the City of Grenada, MS, the founding of the Lee Tartt Nature Preserve, and naming of the preserve as a Mississippi Outstanding Natural Area. (Photo: Gary Ervin)*




*Figure 5. The nature preserve includes numerous trails, observation platforms, kayaking opportunities, and long-term photographic monitoring stations, such as FCS-101 here. See photos from this station at* https://www.chronolog.io/site/FCS101. *(Photo: Gary Ervin)*



*Figure 6. Robin, pictured above, conducts watercolor workshops in the Chakchiuma Swamp wetland to introduce other artists to the use of natural materials and to educate the public on the importance of this and other wetlands. (Photo: Robin Whitfield)*



*Figure 7. Through her art, Robin has documented years of change in the Chakchiuma Swamp. (Photo: Robin Whitfield)*



*Figure 8. One of Robin's largest pieces is the "Seasons of the Cypress" mural, which records a year of change in the Chakchiuma Swamp, using natural materials from the wetland. (Photo: Robin Whitfield)*




*Figure 9. The SWS South Central Chapter invited Robin as opening plenary speaker at their 2024 meeting in Baton Rouge, LA, to recognize her efforts at protecting the Chakchiuma Swamp and educating the public on the many values of wetlands. (Photo: Jacob Berkowitz)*



*Figure 10. The South Central Chapter presented Robin with a plaque in special recognition of her preservation efforts associated with the Chakchiuma Swamp and Lee Tartt Nature Preserve. Pictured with Robin (at right) are Special Issues Chair Chuck Walker (left) and Executive Board Member Gary Ervin (center). (Photo: Eric Fuselier)*