

All photographs of Shapiro are courtesy of the American Academy of Art.



THANK YOU MR. SHAPIRO

Tom Francesconi tells the story of the Chicago watercolor artist known for the grace of his paintings, as well as his exceptional gifts as a teacher and mentor.

By Tom Francesconi

Perhaps you can remember a time when someone made a difference in your life, someone outside your primary circle of family and friends. People are always moving in and out of our lives, often with little or no effect, but once in a great while someone leaves an indelible mark. Whatever the reasons may be, we never forget that person. Irving Shapiro was one such individual for me. He changed my art—and my life—forever.

A Chicago native and a devotee of the city, Shapiro studied at The Art Institute of Chicago and The American Academy of Art in Chicago. He began teaching watercolor at the American Academy of Art in 1945, shortly after he graduated, and continued his association with the institution for almost 50 years—a truly remark-



Taken in the '50s, this is the earliest known classroom photo of Shapiro. Note future instructor, author and oil painter Ted Smuskiewicz in the back row, center.

“It wasn’t in Shapiro’s makeup to be average—he was an intellectual and the consummate artist.”

able tenure—serving as the Academy’s president and director from 1971 to 1989. Though he never retired, his teaching load lessened in later years. He died in 1994.

One might describe Shapiro’s painting style as loose yet representational. When combined with his creativity, his mastery of the medium prompted results that are stunning. His paintings have a rich and juicy appearance, an element of visual delight. They draw the viewer into a world unknown, one that’s difficult to leave. For Shapiro, it was all about perception, his interpretation. His color sense was unique and he was an expert at playing up contrasts. His brushwork was confident, controlled and deliberate.

During his lifetime, Shapiro’s work received many awards that serve today as a tribute to his creativity and his mastery of the craft. He was a signature member of the American Watercolor Society—one of the youngest artists to receive the distinction at the time it was awarded—and also the recipient of several of the society’s top honors. He served on the boards of a number of organizations, including the American Watercolor Society, the Midwest Watercolor Society (now the Transparent Watercolor Society of America) and the Palette and Chisel Academy of Fine Arts in Chicago. His work has been featured in numerous books and periodicals, and—although out of print—his popular book *How to Make a Painting* (Watson-Guptill, 1985) still remains on many painters’ wish lists.

Perhaps most important, though, is the impact Shapiro had on his students. A significant number of today’s well-known artists studied under him and have attributed much of their success and recognition as



Students submitted work to Shapiro to earn a spot in his class.



Shapiro was known for his riveting in-class demonstrations.



Untitled (watercolor on paper, 23x34) is one of several Shapiro works that hang in the American Academy of Art in Chicago.

painters to his teaching. He's an artist known for the grace of his paintings and also his exceptional gifts as a teacher and a mentor.

Not Your Average Artist

My own exposure to Shapiro began in the spring of 1984. After majoring in art in college, I'd taken work in advertising. I was teaching myself how to paint in watercolor and I'd become increasingly frustrated with my lack of success. On my route to work one day, I passed a well-known gallery in Chicago and a painting in the window caught my attention and held me spellbound. It was so masterful I could hardly believe my eyes. I remember wondering how anyone could do that with paint. As it turns out, the painting I'd been staring at was a Shapiro and the gallery was hosting an exhibition of his work. I revisited that exhibition many times as a source of inspiration. Little did I know that my true enlightenment was about to begin.

After the gallery experience, I knew I had to get into Shapiro's class at the Academy. In order to be considered, I had to arrange an interview and portfolio presentation. I'll never forget the evening of my interview. By then I'd become acquainted with the full magnitude of this man's

reputation and I was beginning to feel a little apprehensive. I was directed into a very small and unpretentious office and invited to take a seat. Shapiro took his place behind a desk and I sunk into a low, worn-out couchlike piece of furniture that faced him. Not a word was spoken as he leafed through my portfolio, which I thought was pretty good. It seemed obvious that he had a different opinion. Realizing that even my best work had failed to impress him, I tried to prepare myself for the worst. But when he finished his review, he raised his head and said, "We'll see if we can get you to loosen up." I asked him whether that meant I'd been accepted, just to be sure. When he responded in the affirmative, I was ecstatic, but I didn't let it show.

Shapiro was a man of few words, and those he did speak were always well-chosen. The way he put words together to convey his point was only surpassed by his ability to use paint to express his feelings. I often asked myself why he didn't just say it how everyone else said it, but now I realize that was the whole point. Why be like everyone else? It wasn't in Shapiro's makeup to be average—he was an intellectual and the consummate artist. He was also a caring man with a wonderful sense

of humor. The more I came to know him, both in and outside of the classroom, the more these traits became apparent. And knowing Shapiro outside of the classroom was indeed a privilege.

One of my most treasured memories of Shapiro involves my wife, Barbara. She surprised me one Christmas with three matted full-sheet Shapiro watercolors from which to choose. I was wide-eyed with surprise and asked her where on earth she'd found them. She went on to tell me about how she'd called Shapiro and introduced herself. She told him of her interest in purchasing a painting as a gift for me and he invited her to meet him at his downtown studio where she could peruse some of his recent works. On a windy day in December, Barbara drove downtown to meet him. She struggled to choose among three particular paintings, but with characteristic generosity, Shapiro told her she could take them all home. Because of the lack of room inside our small car, she proceeded to lay the paintings in the trunk alongside the disarray of jumper cables and other typical trunk clutter with Shapiro standing beside her in the frigid weather. How I wish I could have been there to see that.

Afterward, Shapiro invited her to the Tavern Club where he had other paintings on exhibit. This would offer her the opportunity to see more work from which to choose. When Barbara told me about their little secret and their day together, I was surprised and a bit envious of her. As it turns out, we were both invited to return to the Tavern Club to see his work and our eventual pick came from that group of paintings. *October* (on page 40) is a phenomenal painting that has hung in our living room for years and still speaks to us of the man, his incredible watercolor mastery and that one very special evening.

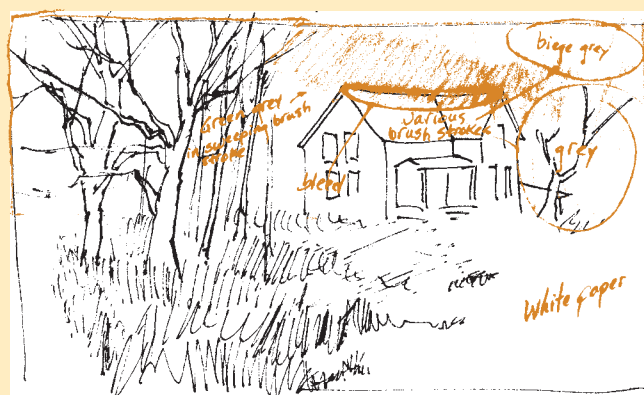
A Shared Legacy

In his classes, Shapiro stressed the importance of planning through the means of preliminary sketches. He often emphasized the significance of shapes and value patterns to create a well-planned design and encouraged exploration and risk taking. He taught a bold approach to painting, one that was geared toward helping students overcome the common tendency to be timid and fearful of paint. Uncomfortable with the idea of allowing oneself to become too content or stagnant, he believed a dedication to continual personal study was the way to growth and achievement. He had a great deal of respect for pure enthusiasm and dedication, and wasn't easily moved by raw talent.

Shapiro commanded respect wherever he went and those who didn't know it were quick

to find out. On one particular occasion in class, a new student—old enough to be my father and certainly equal in age to Shapiro—interrupted a demonstration by raising his hand to ask a question. Shapiro lifted his gaze over his bifocals and said, “Yes?” The new student asked how he should address Shapiro. “Do you prefer ‘Irv’ or ‘Irving?’” he asked. With that, Shapiro peered over his bifocals, and said, “You can call me *Mr. Shapiro*.”

Sketchbook Spotlight



I completed this sketch during one of Shapiro's classes in 1986.

Though now more than 20 years old, my notes from those days reveal lessons that are still as vital as ever. I've collected some of the highlights from my sketchbook to pass along to you:

- Don't be rigid in your interpretation of subject matter.
- Be bold in your attitude, forceful in your thinking.
- Tension is an energy and a necessity in painting.
- Create, where you can, illusions of simplification.
- The more complicated your subject, the more you should attempt to reduce it to interesting, simple forms.
- Let your color mix on the paper—the vitality of your color will be measurably advanced by doing so.
- Know the character of what it is you're painting.
- Consider connections in your painting—cohesion.



What are the most famous mentor relationships in art history? Visit our website at www.watercolormagic.com/mentor to find out and to add your own story to the mix.

Courtesy of Betty Mohr



In *Listen Listen* (watercolor on paper, 24x34), Shapiro's unique sense of dynamic design and bold use of color are apparent.

Courtesy of Tom Francesconi



Shapiro's painting *October* (watercolor on paper, 24x34) still hangs in a place of honor in Tom Francesconi's home.



Untitled (watercolor on paper, 18x27) shows Shapiro's skilled use of a broad range of brush techniques.

A long silence ensued. Shapiro was a confident man, one who was fully aware of his status. It was important to him that everyone share that awareness and address him accordingly.

Looking back on those two years at the Academy, it seems an all too brief period of time to me. The classroom experience was a treasure. I gained so much from my exposure to Shapiro and his teachings. His demonstrations were priceless and never to be missed—how they inspired me. I sketched his demos while he painted and I wrote down almost everything he said (see examples of class notes on page 39). Those were special times—I knew it then and I wasn't about to waste a moment of it.

Shapiro's determined and bold approach to painting spurred me in directions I'd never before gone. He opened doors I'd never known existed and changed my whole way of thinking about painting. It's true that much of what I've gained, I've gained through old-fashioned hard work, but I know in my heart that Shapiro's teaching played a pivotal role in my development as a painter. I entered his class as a neophyte with a spark for watercolor and when I left, the fire was raging and there was no stopping it. I felt

as though I'd been called to paint and so it all began for me.

Shapiro taught me that there are no secrets to be uncovered about watercolor, but rather discoveries to be gained through curiosity and application. One of the most important things I learned from him took me some time to fully realize: The gifts that are shared with us are not meant to die with us. Shapiro's teachings serve today as a springboard for countless artists who have gone on to become notable in their respective fields. His influence endures and is manifested through their works. It's a legacy we all share. Since those halcyon days in the classroom, it's given me great satisfaction to have grown as a painter and to know that his spirit is alive in my paintings and in my teaching. Thank you, Mr. Shapiro, thank you very much. 📌

Tom Francesconi (tomfrancesconi.com) paints and teaches watercolor in Chicago. His work has appeared in more than 35 national exhibitions.

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