

Master of the Moment

WATERCOLORIST ARTHUR SHILSTONE CREATES A STRONG SENSE OF PLACE IN HIS WORK, FORGING A BOND BETWEEN SUBJECT AND VIEWER
BY FRED POLHEMUS

Fishing Below the Bluffs at Block Island



Arthur Shilstone, one of sporting art's masters, is a transparent watercolorist. He uses a technique developed in late 18th and early 19th century England in which the white the viewer sees is the paper itself and not paint. These white unpainted spaces, sometimes prominent in the foreground or background, show swaths of snow, water and sky. They contrast dramatically with densely pigmented and shadowed areas and can artfully express the splash of a fish or a gray winter's glow behind an obscured sun.

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Shilstone, 92 and still painting daily, was an art student at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute when the United States entered World War II, and he enlisted in the Army. Deployed to Europe with the 603rd Engineer Camouflage Battalion, he captured everything around him — the GIs, the bombed-out villages, the machinery of war — with an India ink fountain pen and a dab of spit on his thumb to produce the soft washes that later found their way as signature elements in his sporting art watercolors.

Through much of his seven-decade career, Shilstone worked as a magazine illustrator, witnessing many of his generation's historic moments and recording these events with his signature style of tightly composed illustrations blended with loose washes of color. After he finished school, *Life* magazine sent Shilstone on news assignments, including coverage of the Sam Sheppard murder trial, Sen. Joseph McCarthy's funeral and the U.S. Supreme Court's school desegregation decision. His work appeared in more than three

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dozen publications, from *Life*, *Smithsonian* and *National Geographic* to *Sports Illustrated*, *Gourmet* and *Field & Stream*. Shilstone and his wife, Beatrice, a former fashion editor at *Women's Wear Daily*, moved from the fast-paced life of New York City to Connecticut more than a half-century ago, where he set up his studio in a converted old barn with a massive wall of paned glass on the north face — perfect for the light illustrators seek — and several untamed acres surrounding him. This setting, where grouse

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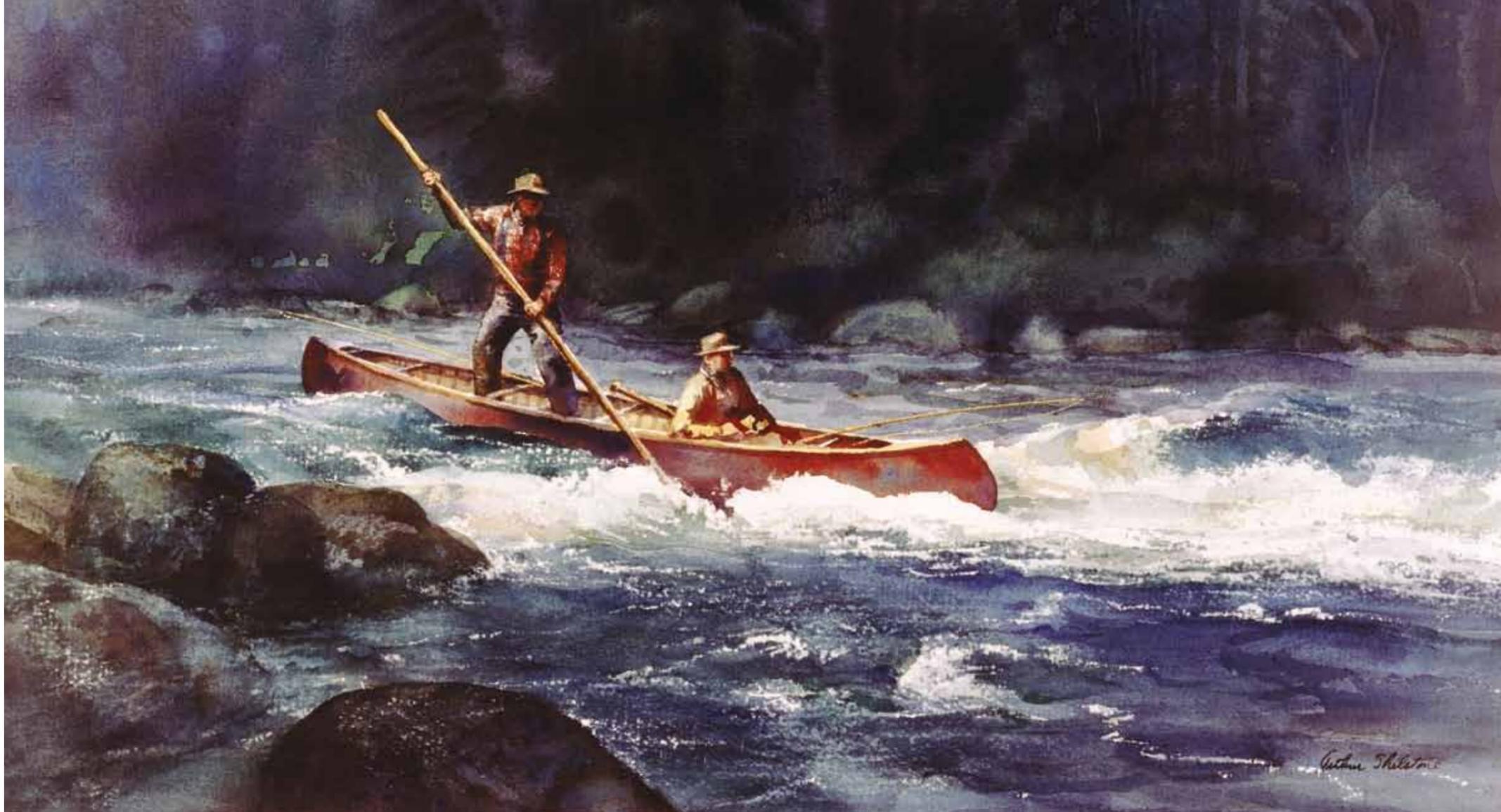
The versatile artist skillfully handles a variety of landscapes, from pounding surf and Western trout water to a shaded New England stream. Silver Creek, Idaho (left), Guide with Salmon (top), Golden Afternoon (above).

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In The Long Cast, the white unpainted paper conveying moving water contrasts dramatically with the darker background.

Arthur Shilstone



Conversation with the Artist

Q: YOUR WATERCOLORS CAPTURE the natural beauty and mood of a place. How do you fix those qualities in your mind's eye?
I think it depends on who you are and what you see, or how you see it. I've done paintings of a river or stream, and people have told me, "I've passed that place so many times, and I don't see what you see." It has to do with your interpretation of what you see — the stream, the foliage, the light — and your emotional response to it.

Q: CLEARLY YOU HAVE a real love of the outdoors. What draws you to the places you paint?
I spent a couple weeks every year for 25 years on Block Island, Rhode Island, so I know the island. Surf fishing for blues and stripers was really fun. I fished a lot with my son, who was a lot luckier than I was. He always caught fish. I caught them when they blitzed, but other times he caught all the fish, even when we fished the same spot with the same lure. I've fished all over — Canada, Alaska, out West, the Florida Keys, and closer to home, the Adirondacks. I like to fly-fish, especially for trout. The thing about trout fishing is you're doing it in all these wonderful places. You don't even have to catch anything, though that helps. Fishing these places gave me material for my painting. To do sporting art, you have to fish or you have no authenticity. Many of my paintings were inspired close to home in Redding, Connecticut, where I've lived for 57 years. I have two rivers nearby, the Saugatuck and Norwalk, where I've fly-fished. We have four seasons, so the light changes. The foliage changes. The weather changes. The mood changes. It's all here.

Q: HOW DO YOU VISUALIZE a painting before you start it?
If I find a place I like, I might sketch it on the spot or photograph it. But then I combine things. I change things around to come up with my own place. It's an idea or a very special feeling I have about a place. My paintings start with the place — a field or stream at a particular time of day, a season of the year, in certain weather. I paint the place, then put the figure in. My figures usually are fairly small. They might have a fish on the line or be shooting a bird. There is activity. But the appeal to the sportsman is he feels like he's been to this place. It evokes a special feeling in him just as it does in me.

Q: WHAT WAS IT LIKE growing up in Lake Mahopac, New York?
We spent summers at our retreat on the lake from the time I was 4 years old. My dad moved the family there in 1929 when I was 16 years old, after losing everything except the cottage in the stock market crash. Those were tough times for my family, yet for me they were idyllic. The lake community was a popular getaway for wealthy New Yorkers in summer, but the rest of the year it was shuttered. We had the lake to ourselves. I'd go fishing in the family canoe or hunt for grouse or pheasant or rabbit in the woods or fields. The opening of bass season was the second-biggest day of the year for me (after Christmas). And on opening day of hunting season, half the boys in school were out "sick" with hunters' flu. I had a whole different feeling living there than I did living near the city. Later, when I turned from commercial illustrations to gallery art, I drew on my experiences at Lake Mahopac to start painting sporting art.

Q: DO YOU STILL GET OUT to hike the fields, wet a line and hunt, perhaps?
I'm 92 years old. I don't get around as well as I used to. The stumps get harder to climb over; the streams seem to run faster. Things I liked to do I can't do anymore. But I still can do pictures of other people doing things I used to do. I still have memories of hunting and fishing, and I'm still working — every day. Someone asked me, "When are you going to retire?" I said, "When I get a lot better." I keep trying.

still strummed in the woods and good trout fishing beckoned in streams just down the road, became an inspiration for his later art. As photography began to edge out magazine illustrations, a friend asked Shilstone to paint an outdoor scene at his spread along Montana's Yellowstone River. Soon after, a hunting trip to Maryland's Eastern Shore reminded Shilstone of his passion for woods and water and nudged him into launching his sporting art career. Shilstone creates mood by blurring details in mists and skies. Tight details, such as fins and feathers, are not a priority in his work. He uses his brush to show men pursuing game and to capture a body of water at a particular time of day, bathing the scene in the light and rich colors of the season. His goal is to create a sense of place and a place of sense in which sight, sound, look, and the changing light and shadows crystallize the moment. Shilstone eternalizes that moment

in a way that allows anglers or hunters to place themselves there, making a strong connection between subject and viewer. His strong, clean design — born from a firm foundation in draftsmanship, figure drawing and composition — balances varying proportions of foreground to background, and of water, shoreline and sky. Reflecting waters tie his fishing works together, creating spaces further defined by a sharply focused foreground of river boulders or vegetation that gives way to hazy horizons in the distance. Water also serves to gather light and reflect it into the sky, making mist sunny and washing paintings with a warm glow. Somewhere in the middle, as a focal point in the surrounding landscape, is the sportsman, highlighted with a splash of red in a shirt or cap, the figure's size and clarity establishing the viewer's point of view and distance. Shilstone designs a painting in steps. He works

directly from nature's inspiration. He relies on photos to create an initial framework and contemplates how to approach his subject. He then does small "studies" to define perspective, color and composition before creating a finished work. The final painting begins as a landscape to which he adds details and figures to create focal points where he wants to lead the viewer, carefully combining every skill set he has developed during the past 70 years. 🐟
Sporting art expert Fred Polhemus is the foremost authority on Shilstone's work. He recently completed the book Arthur Shilstone — A Lifetime of Drawing & Painting (Tide-mark Press hardcover, 160 pages, 184 images, \$44.95). A special boxed Collectors Edition is available in a signed and numbered version and includes a signed and numbered, limited-edition print (\$150). Available through the J. Russell Jinishian Gallery, (203) 259-8753.



Shilstone is a master at allowing the viewer to enter the scene. Down the River (left) and The Surf Caster (above).