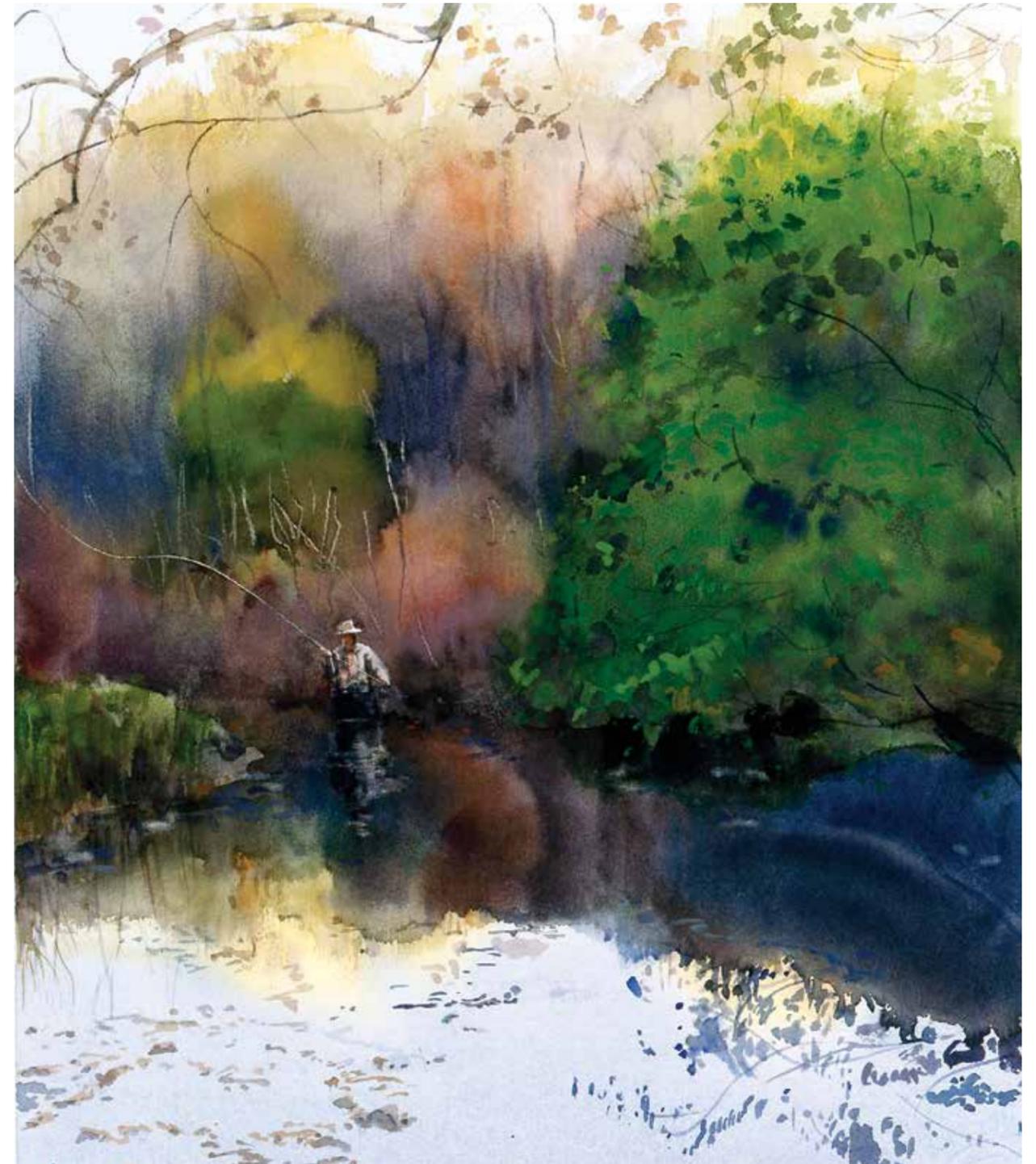


MASTER OF COLOR AND LIGHT

Watercolorist Arthur Shilstone creates a sense of place that connects subject and viewer.

BY FRED POLHEMUS



◀ MORNING MIST

The Adirondacks in the summer, awash in an early morning veil.

▲ IN THE FALL

Shilstone has documented sporting scenes from hunting woodcock in upstate New York to fly-fishing in Alaska and Scotland.



► **THE WOODCOCK HUNTER**

Hunting in upstate New York in autumn.

◀ **FISHERMAN**

A portrait of a fisherman. A lifelong angler himself, Shilstone's passion took him to fishing landscapes from Canada and New England to Montana and Alaska.

In the world of sporting art, there are few who might be considered “masters” among their peers. Arthur Shilstone is one such individual. The distinguished position he holds, developed over a seven-decade span, sets him apart and is uniquely reserved for his name. The story of his rise to international recognition is as fascinating as the man himself.

Shilstone's beginnings were like those of many of his generation who experienced first-hand the hardships of the Great Depression. Arthur was born in 1922 into a wealthy community in Essex County, New Jersey. His early childhood was not unusual until the 1929 stock market crash forced his family to downsize and relocate to their summer home on Lake Mahopac, New York. Arthur didn't mind and, in fact, spent his early years bass fishing, hunting upland game and ducks, and becoming a proficient sportsman. During this time he also began drawing. A high school art teacher opened Arthur's eyes to the world of commercial illustration, and Shilstone enrolled in Brooklyn's Pratt Institute in 1941.

World War II soon interrupted his education and, when the United States entered the war, Shilstone enlisted in the Army. After a short time, he was assigned to the 603rd Engineer Camouflage Battalion. This battalion specialized in deceiving the enemy through the use of special effects and the deployment of inflatable tanks, trucks, and artillery. Throughout his tour, Shilstone captured everything around him—his battalion members, the bombed-out villages, and the machinery of war—with an India ink fountain pen and dab of spit on his thumb to produce

Arthur Shilstone



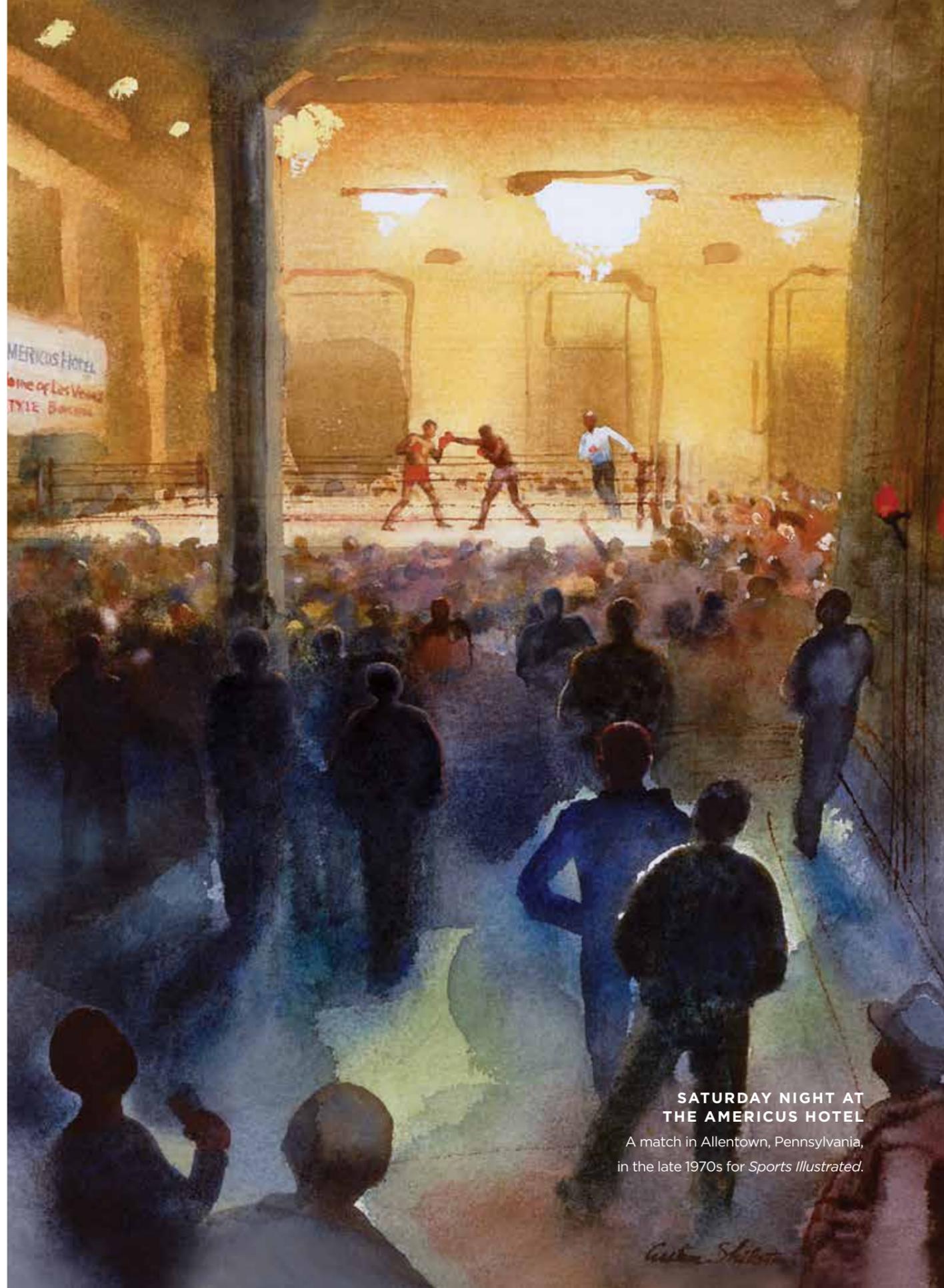
the soft washes that evolved into signature elements of his sporting art watercolors.

After the war, Arthur returned to his studies in illustration and commercial art, graduating from Pratt on the G.I. Bill just as young artists of his generation were being scooped up by the publishing and advertising giants along Madison Avenue. During the glamorous era of prestigious mass circulation magazines, Shilstone's work appeared in more than three dozen publications, from *Life*, *Smithsonian* and *National Geographic* to *Sports Illustrated*, *Gourmet*, and *Field & Stream*. While working for *Life* magazine, he was assigned to cover several significant events, including the Dr. Sam Sheppard murder trial, the funeral of Senator Joseph McCarthy, an investigation into the sinking of the *Andrea Doria*, and school integration argued before the Supreme Court. His 12 years as a freelance illustrator with *Life* resulted in countless evocative images that forever changed the way readers viewed the subjects.

Other projects ranged from book jackets and album covers for artists like Billie Holiday to on-location assignments for

clients like Varig Airlines of Brazil, and annual reports for major companies such as Exxon, U. S. Steel, and AT&T. Shilstone captured the Military Air Transport Service evacuation of wounded soldiers during the Korean War, and he was selected by NASA to chronicle the Space Shuttle's maiden voyage, as well as a half dozen subsequent launches and landings (the original paintings hang in the NASA Museum at Cape Canaveral). Throughout his career, Arthur Shilstone witnessed many of his generation's greatest moments, and he recorded these events with his signature style of tightly composed illustrations blended with loose washes of color.

Arthur and his wife, Beatrice, a fashion editor at *Women's Wear Daily*, moved from the fast-paced city life to Connecticut, where he set up his studio in an old converted barn, complete with a massive wall of paned glass on the north face, perfect for the constant and unvarying north light illustrators seek for a studio. The backdrop of several untamed acres that surrounded him—where grouse still strummed in the woods and good trout fishing in local streams was just down the



SATURDAY NIGHT AT THE AMERICUS HOTEL

A match in Allentown, Pennsylvania, in the late 1970s for *Sports Illustrated*.

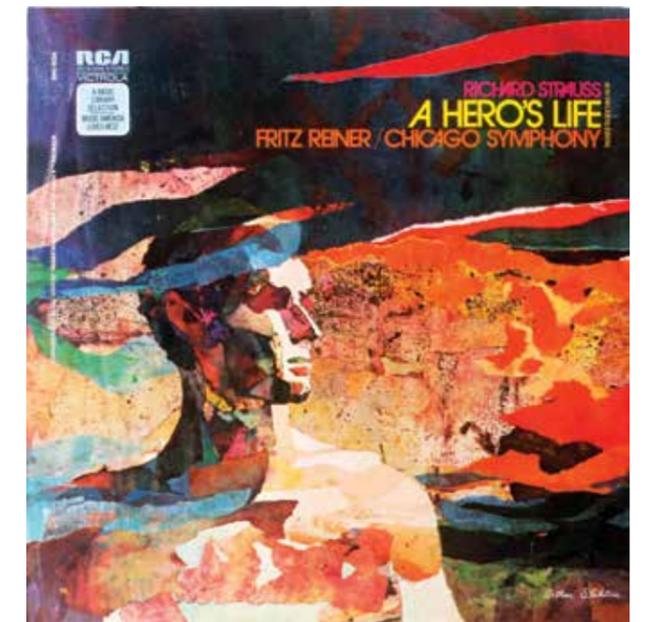


▲ 1:07:22 AND COUNTING STS 1 MAIDEN VOYAGE



▲ TREVIERS, FRANCE, JUNE 1944

As a soldier in his early twenties, Shilstone documented WWII on location, capturing the “fleeting moments of war,” through a soldier’s eyes. He, like others, was recruited for his artistic skills and became part of a specialized American unit that worked to deceive the enemy in creative ways. (Top) Shilstone was commissioned by NASA to document the space shuttle program. Here he captures the scene of the launch at Cape Canaveral in April of 1981.



▲ A HERO'S LIFE

This album cover was created by a collage, using torn pieces of pigmented paper—rather than watercolor and brush—to create dramatic imagery very different from much of the illustration work of the 1960s. Collage was one of many techniques in Shilstone’s “quiver” of offerings for art directors during this time.



▲ GROUSE

Among Shilstone's portfolio were projects for books, including works for Alfred Hitchcock, and ones created for Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*. Loose washes in the background create mood and counterbalance to "heavier" foreground—an illustration that became a harbinger for Shilstone's sporting art techniques decades later.

road—set the stage for and inspired his sporting art.

Shilstone spent his off time experimenting as a fine art painter, and entered various competitions. In his "wet-on-wet" watercolor technique, paints are applied to paper brushed wet with water in order to create diffuse, irregular areas of color. By the late 1950s, he was an exhibiting member of the prestigious American Watercolor Society and Society of Illustrators.

As advances in photography began to influence the media's taste in most major publications, and illustration work was harder to come by, a friend asked Shilstone to paint a sporting scene at his place along Montana's Yellowstone River. Soon after, a hunting trip on Maryland's Eastern Shore reminded Arthur of his passion for the outdoors, and thus launched his sporting art career in earnest.

Shilstone is a transparent watercolorist, using a technique developed in late 18th and early 19th century England, in which the white the viewer sees is the paper itself and not watercolor. His use of the negative space of the unpainted areas, sometimes prominent in the foreground or background, expresses swaths of snow, water, and sky. This controlled negative space contrasts dramatically with densely pigmented areas and shadowed space.

His strong, clean design—born from a firm foundation in draftsmanship, figure drawing, and masterfully crafted compositions—balances varying proportions of foreground to background, and of woods, open fields, and sky. These elements form spatial zones further established by a sharply focused foreground of vegetation that gives way to hazy horizons in the distance. Somewhere in the middle, as a focal point in the surrounding landscape, is the sportsman, highlighted with a hint of red, in a shirt or cap, his size and clarity establishing the viewer's point of view and distance.

Like his most celebrated predecessor, Ogden Pleissner, to whom he has been most closely compared, Shilstone creates mood by blurring details in mists and skies. Tight details, such as fins and feathers, are not priority subjects in his work. He uses his brush to convey the story of men in pursuit of their game, capturing an upland meadow or wooded lot at a particular time of day and bathing them in the light of seasonally color-rich vegetation. 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 crystalize the moment. Shilstone eternalizes that moment in a way that allows sportsmen to place themselves there. This rare connection between subject and viewer results in a unique and unmatched approach to his work.

Shilstone designs a painting in many steps. He works directly from nature's never-ending source of inspiration. He relies on preliminary photos to create initial framework, and contemplates how to approach his subject. He then creates small studies to define perspective values, color, and composition, before creating a finished work. The final painting begins as a landscape, to which he adds the details and figures to create the focal points that capture the viewer, carefully combining every artistic skill he has developed over the last 75 years. ✨



▲ LATE SUMMER ON THE RIVER

A recent work of Shilstone's, on the Housatonic River in Connecticut.

◀ GUN DOGS

Hunting in northwest Connecticut. Shilstone wants the viewer to focus on the dogs, where the action is taking place, and a flush is imminent. The hunters, a secondary focus, recognize what the viewer sees.

Fred Polhemus is the author of Arthur Shilstone: A Lifetime of Drawing and Painting.