

Angling Art

With Warren Stern

Arthur Shilstone's *Evening Light*



This is the first of several essays on angling art that will occasionally appear in these pages. I am a lifelong angler, now in my mid-sixties, who wonders why I and so many others have pursued a boyhood pastime so avidly throughout our lives. After all, there is no material gain—we don't sell the fish we catch; we don't even keep them for the table; in fact, at least in my case, often there is no catch to be released. And most of us shun competitive fishing, except, perhaps, for the friendly wager or the rare instance in which entry fees might benefit a charitable cause. There are some rewards, of course—sometimes we find ourselves in the company of like-minded friends and family, but more often, many of us prefer solitude.

So why do we do it? I found part of the answer when I came across a brief, beautiful essay by Winston Churchill, "Painting as a Pastime." I cannot do justice to this work in a few words. All I can say is that it encourages us to emulate Churchill in pursuing a hobby as a "companion with whom one may hope to walk a great part of life's journey." Churchill found this companion in painting, proclaiming, "Happy are the painters, for they shall not be lonely. Light and color, peace and hope, will keep them company to the end, or almost to the end, of the day."

Churchill encourages us to take up painting at any stage of life, notwithstanding lack of formal training, relying only on “Audacity” to “content ourselves with a joy ride in a paint-box.” This will be “great fun,” Churchill assures us, and among other intangible rewards will help us appreciate great artists through a “heightened sense of observation of nature.”

I’m not so sure that “Audacity” is enough to make one enjoy taking up painting at a later stage of life, but I do think that “a heightened sense of observation of nature” is one of the reasons why we pursue angling as we age and come to take our world less for granted. Perhaps for that reason, I have started to pay greater attention to angling art, not as a collector, but rather as an observer curious about what makes a particular work appealing, at least to me and probably to others who love to fish. And as I think about this, I have come to believe that one reason—or justification—for idling away time on this pursuit is because we believe, or at least hope, that our participation in the natural scene will somehow complete it, making it more appealing to an artistic eye.

But what natural scene? I thought the first place to turn would be works that invoke the atmosphere, mood, and emotions of the streams and rivers frequented by TGF members—those to be found in the greater New York area, especially those fished by our namesake and his contemporaries. So I sought guidance from our friend Fred Polhemus, an angling expert on sporting art who represents a number of artists through the J. Russell Jinishian Gallery in Fairfield, Connecticut. For this initial essay, Fred recommended the works of Arthur Shilstone, an artist whom Fred has represented for many years. I visited Fred’s beautiful gallery and selected one work that I believe provides a good platform for this essay. The work is *Evening Light*, reproduced here and also found at page 86 of Fred’s book, *Arthur Shilstone, A Lifetime of Drawing & Painting*, published in 2015.

Those interested in Shilstone’s biography will find the details in Fred’s book. For my purposes, it suffices to note that Shilstone was born in New Jersey ninety-six years ago, showed artistic talent from an early age, received professional training at the Pratt Institute, and worked as a commercial artist from 1947 to 1985, taking on diverse assignments from

the leading periodicals of the day. His work, both professional and personal, involves an enormous variety of subjects and styles, including pen-and-ink sketches composed while serving in combat in Europe during the Second World War.

Shilstone left New York City for Connecticut in the 1950s, setting up his studio not far from the woods and streams where he and his sons loved to hunt grouse and fish. He turned to creating sporting art in 1980 and soon received accolades from critics and collectors. Wingshooters, hunting dogs, surfcasters, salmon fishing, and, of course, trout fishing all found their way into his work. He is a watercolorist and paints “wet-on-wet,” applying layering colors without waiting for others to dry, a technique that, when done correctly, produces a dramatically colorful sense of movement and life. To quote Polhemus,

Shilstone creates mood by softening details while emphasizing form and color. Precise recreation of a fin or feather is not the key to his work. He uses his brush to tell the story of human beings in pursuit of game, picturing woods and water in light and shadow throughout changing seasons. He strives to create a sense of place where light, shadow, form, and color combine to tell a compelling story.

Let’s turn to the “mood” and “story” of *Evening Light*. At this point, though, I must make a confession. I approach this exercise with the “Audacity” commended by Churchill to amateur painters. I am not an artist, I have no art training, and I can’t paint or draw worth a damn. But I try to understand what I like and what I don’t and to put the reasons in words that permit me to share them with others and learn from their reactions. It is in that spirit that I approach these essays.

Evening Light tells the story of a lone angler casting far and fine to a shadowy pool at a bend on a stream as the sun sets. There is nothing to indicate the location of the stream, though I like to think that it can be found somewhere in the Catskills. Nor are we told anything about the angler—he seems to be neither old nor young, garbed in plain clothing and using a rod and reel of timeless style and type. Nor do we know whether he is starting his time on the water, looking for the evening bite, or finishing

what I hope was a rewarding day. The lush greenery and the angler's clothing suggest that he is fishing in late spring, casting to a fish perhaps rising to a Green Drake or Sulphur as darkness falls. He casts an open loop that is captured in a moment of time, leaving the viewer to wonder whether his efforts will be rewarded.

So, what makes this conventional sporting scene a work of art? Several features, in my untutored opinion. The composition, for one thing. The picture is composed in a curved form that begins on the lower left, sweeps somewhat diagonally to the middle part of the right edge, and then curves back to the upper left in a shape defined by the stream's edge, the highlighted reflections on the water, and, most strikingly, by the arc of the fly line. Color and contrast reinforce this sense of movement through the scene and spatial depth. The greenery is dappled with white flowers in the left foreground, then takes on a darker shade as the eye moves along the lines created by the composition, then descends into darkening shadow in the background. Details grow dim in the setting sun, as they do whenever we look into the distance, and are almost totally

obscured in the highly lit pool almost dead center in the frame. Adding to the sense of depth and spatial definition are the well-defined trees forming the left frame and the sparse, lighter-colored tree growing into the fading sky adjacent to the hilltop in the upper right.

The light-blue sky, set off by the yellow glow from the setting sun, draws the eye farther into the frame, while the contrasting yellow-orange sun advances forward, reminding us that the action takes place in the "golden hour," when shadows grow longer, deeper, and less distinct. Here, we see sharp contrast between the glimmering patches of light in the path of the sun and the subtle gradations of shades, moving from yellow-tinged brown in the middle of the distant woods through larger shades until we reach the nearly black foliage on the left and right borders of the frame.

It is impossible to look at this work without being reminded why so many of us insist on fishing at the beginning or end of the day. True, the bite might be better then, but the real reason, I suspect, is that the play of light and shadow reveals a world far more beautiful than we deserve. 

2018 Founders Fund Scholar

Our 2018 Founders Fund Scholar is Evie Brahmstedt. She is a Ph.D. student in environmental science and engineering at Clarkson University's Institute for a Sustainable Environment. Her thesis title is "Mercury Cycling in Riparian Wetlands along the St. Lawrence River." She has a B.S. in biology and environmental studies from St. Lawrence University, where she received the Presidential Merit Award from 2013 to 2017 and was on the Dean's List for that length of time. She has copublished several articles with titles such as "Environmental Factors Influencing the Copepod *Agladiaptomus* leptons in a Northern New York Kettle Bog Lake." In the future, she hopes "to be researcher studying freshwater wetlands, a professor inspiring students, and a communicator in management groups." She wants to conserve freshwater wetlands and their resources. She's also a marathon runner.

Her recommendations are outstanding. 

Smith River Talk

On April 19, 2018, David Brooks of Montana Trout Unlimited delivered an illustrated talk at the Fifth Avenue Orvis New York store on threats to the Smith River (and eventually to the Missouri River) posed by the proposed copper mine on Sheep Creek, a Smith River tributary. (See the Winter 2018 issue of *Gordon's Quill*.) The talk was sponsored by Orvis and the

Theodore Gordon Flyfishers. Those in attendance overflowed the available space and enjoyed the beer and pizza provided. In

addition to elaborating forcefully and eloquently on the points made in his piece in the last issue of the *Quill*, Brooks fielded numerous questions that expanded participants' understanding of the issues and challenges and Montana TU's efforts to deal with them. 

