

A watercolor illustration of a fisherman in a hat and waders, standing in a narrow stream. The scene is surrounded by dense, dark green foliage and trees. The water is depicted with light, airy washes of white and blue, contrasting with the darker, more saturated colors of the forest. The overall style is soft and painterly.

# CLASSIC *Angling*

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**THE ANGLING ART OF  
ARTHUR SHILSTONE**

# THE WONDROUS ANGLING ART OF ARTHUR SHILSTONE

Fred Polhemus, author of a new book on the work of Arthur Shilstone, looks at the painter's watercolours on the subject of fishing, and discusses the influences and style of his pictures

**A**s demand for commercial illustration began to wane, Arthur Shilstone realised that he needed to reinvent himself professionally and turn his skills in a new direction. He decided that he might establish a niche as a painter of sporting art, an endeavour that combined his long-established art skills with his enjoyment from fishing and hunting.

The new direction was a natural one for Shilstone. Even during his busiest years as an illustrator, he often painted pictures for his own enjoyment. His love of the outdoors, nurtured while growing up in Mahopac, New York, after the Depression, became the foundation of much of the work he created for the sporting art market.

Shilstone knew fishing and hunting from years of first-hand experience. Combined with his formal art training and wide-ranging illustration experience, he could paint just about anything asked of him. Even more important, he could imagine and create paintings that contained images and subjects he was passionate about.

That combination of skill, imagination, and interest came together in him to make him one of the foremost sporting art watercolourists living today. In this genre, few painters are considered "masters" among their peers. After decades of creating critically acclaimed art Shilstone is one of those rare exemplars.

In the 1950s, Arthur and his wife Beatrice, then a fashion editor at *Women's Wear Daily*, had moved from the fast-paced city life of New York to bucolic Connecticut to raise their family. Shilstone did not know at the time that the woods would come to inspire him and sometimes even provide a backdrop for the art he was to create decades later.

He set up his drawing table in an old barn converted into a studio with a massive wall of painted glass opening to the sky, ideal for the steady northern light that artists look for in a studio. There were several untamed acres surrounding the studio, and his property



Late Summer on a Small Stream: richness of Shilstone's bankside trees and plants doesn't distract from the angler

backed on to more than 60 acres of land that would eventually be protected by the Redding Land Trust. A group of Redding, Connecticut, landowners, including the Shilstones, understood the value of keeping acres of open land in an area that was being developed aggressively.

Still, at the time Shilstone was in as rural a setting as could be found in the state. This place, where grouse still strummed in the woods and good trout fishing was just down the road, provided inspiration for much of the sporting art to come.

Arthur and Bea raised their sons, Johnny and Billy, in Redding. Early on, both boys took an interest in the outdoors, leaning how to fish and hunt from their father and to appreciate their natural surroundings. Although Shilstone knew figurative drawing and design, he believes that there is no better way to translate the body language of a sport-

ing figure than by painting from a live model. Thus, he often sketched or photographed one or both of his sons as they hunted and fished.

Whether walking through the woods with guns at the ready, fly-casting on a local stream or surfcasting on Block Island, the boys contributed to the sporting images and sometimes helped enliven scenes that sportmen and women recognise in Shilstone's art. Though both sons have gone on to careers of their own, they are raising their own families in a place not far from where they grew up.

To escape the daily routine, most of us seek place for relaxation and reinvigoration. For sportspeople, that place may be a rugged mountain stream, a placid lake or favourite coastal fishing spot bathed in the early morning sun. It could be a blind on a point as ducks fly in, on a day when the cold stabs



Trolling in the Fall: Shilstone relies on preliminary photos, and the final painting begins with an outline of the landscape, to which he adds detail and figures to establish the focal point

like a driven nail. It might be an upland meadow where dogs push through heavy growth, working to flush a woodcock, grouse or pheasant. Wherever it is, that place transports us and renews us.

Shilstone's watercolour recreate that sense of place: a sportsman or woman can experience and place himself or herself in that particular scene. Shilstone's sporting paintings are a sincere and heartfelt presentation of a personal conviction as he views his subject, designed specifically for the particular enthusiast to be drawn into the imagery to elicit an emotional response that is equally heartfelt.

Writer John Mitchell summed up Shilstone's work insightfully when he wrote in *Sporting Classic Magazine*: "In the sporting art of Arthur Shilstone, what emerges is as much a feeling as a picture... soft and fresh and spontaneous, altogether the result of a roving and resourceful eye and an immensely talented hand."

In the early years, after moving to Redding, even when demand for his commercial illustrations was still strong, Shilstone began experimenting as a fine art painter and entered his watercolours in juried competitions. He paints using a

technique called wet-on-wet, whereby an artist applies paint in layers without waiting for one colour to dry before applying another colour. Learning to control the flow of paint is challenging, but in the hands of a deft artist like Shilstone, the technique results in dramatic washes of colour and an exciting feeling on movement and life in the picture. Soon, Shilstone was invited to

**Shilstone creates mood by softening details, while emphasising form and colour. The very precise re-creation of a fin or a feather is not the key to his work**

become an exhibiting member of the prestigious American Watercolor Society and of the Society of Illustrators.

He began to feel enthusiasm for his sporting images when a friend asked him to paint a fly-fishing picture of a spot on Montana's Yellowstone River. The picture, of a hunting trio on Maryland's Eastern Shore, confirmed Shilstone's conviction that

sporting art was the new direction to take in his career. He was back in the environment he loved when growing up.

Even better, he was now earning his living by painting landscapes animated by sportsfolk. He had come full circle in connecting the worlds he knew best: art and sporting pastimes. The outdoor life he had come to know at an early age became the focus of the paintings driving his career as a mature artist. By the mid 1980s, Shilstone was painting wing shooters and hunting dogs, anglers surf-fishing for stripers on the New England coast, salmon fishing in Canada, fly-casting for brown trout along a rocky Adirondack river and hooking delicate brook trout in a clear Connecticut stream. His pictures were selling at prestigious art galleries, and he found himself making the art he loved for people who loved his work.

Like his most celebrated predecessor Ogden Pleissner, to whom he has been most closely compared, Shilstone creates mood by softening details while emphasising form and colour. Precise re-creation 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 colour combine to tell a compelling story.

Shilstone's work puts the sportsperson, both participant and viewer, into the picture. This connection between subject and observer helps to explain the public's enduring enthusiasm for Shilstone's pictures. His skill allows him to paint an image that is technically accurate while still capturing the freshness and spontaneity of the moment itself. For Shilstone, painting with watercolour has served as the medium for capturing the fleeting effects and dramatic views that are so integral to art that portrays sporting pastimes.

Shilstone is a transparent watercolourist, using a technique perfected in late 18th century and early 19th century England, in which the white that the viewer sees is the paper itself and not watercolour. His use of negative space of unpainted areas, sometimes prominent in the foreground or background, expresses swathes of snow, water and sky. This controlled negative space contrasts dramatically with densely pigmented areas and shadowed space. Shilstone's white-paper areas also artfully express the splash of a fish breaking the surface and a grey winter's glow behind an obscure sun, as can be seen in a painting like *Winter Fisherman*.

Strong, clean design is a hallmark of his work. His paintings are masterfully crafted: compositions that balance the varying proportions of foreground to background and of water, shoreline and sky, forming spatial zones further demarcated by a sharply focused foreground of river boulders or



The Bone Fisherman: those who have stalked the 'grey ghosts' on the flats will feel the angler's anticipation

woodlands that gives way to hazy horizons.

Shilstone often uses water as a way to gather light in a painting, and reflect it back into the sky, making mist sunny, as in the painting *Golden Afternoon*. Invariably in his paintings, the focal point in the surrounding landscape is the sportsman, highlighted by a hint of red in a shirt or cap., his size and clarity establishing the viewer's point of view and distance.

Shilstone designs a painting in many steps. He takes his inspiration from nature and combines it with his own long experience observing fishing and hunting pastimes. He relies on preliminary photos to create an initial framework and contemplates how to approach his subject. He then creates small

"studies" to define perspective, colour and composition.

The final painting begins with an outline of the landscape, to which he adds detail and figures to establish the painting's focal point. He wants to lead the viewer's eye through the painting. The result is an impression that is engaging, intellectually satisfying and convincing. For the sporting art enthusiast, those attributes explain why Shilstone's work is so appealing and collectable.

Over the past several decades, Shilstone has created a broad and diverse portfolio of sporting art. There are paintings from the Highlands of Scotland to iconic rivers of the American West., from duck blinds on the Atlantic Coast to bucolic upland meadows in Texas. His work includes gorge-walled waters of the Adirondacks and narrow beaches of New England; bonefish and tarpon waters of the Florida Keys, with much more in between.

If a sportsman or woman can imagine the ideal place to fish or hunt, chances are, Shilstone has painted it. His watercolours have allowed anglers and hunters to view their favourite pastimes in as way that few others in the history of the genre have achieved. The accolades for Shilstone's contributions to sporting art are well earned and the special mark he leaves on the craft will endure for generations.

This is an excerpt taken from Arthur Shilstone: *A Lifetime of Drawing and Painting* by Fred Polhemus and published by Tide-mark Press of East Hartford, Connecticut. The lavishly illustrated 156-page work, which costs \$44.95, can be obtained from the publishers at 22 Prestige Park Circle, East Hartford, CT, USA, tel +1 860-310 3370, [www.tide-mark.com](http://www.tide-mark.com)



The Surf Caster: Shilstone is equally at home with fishing on a storm beach, a small trout stream or a winter lake



Golden Afternoon: Shilstone often likes to use water as a way to gather light in a painting, and reflect it back into the sky, making mist sunny



Winter Fisherman: Shilstone's white-paper areas artfully express the splash of a fish breaking the surface and a grey winter's glow behind an obscure sun



Arthur Shilstone's *The Long Cast*. Invariably, the angler is the focal point in his watercolours

## Shilstone, an artist who truly captures the magic of water

*Arthur Shilstone: A Lifetime of Drawing & Painting* by Fred Polhemus, \$44.95 (limited edition \$150); 160 pages and 180 colour images Published by Tide-mark Press, East Hartford, Connecticut, tel +1 800 338 2508, [www.tide-mark.com](http://www.tide-mark.com)

SOMETIMES in life, you can be lucky enough to end up where you are happiest. Arthur Shilstone, now 83, still works from the barn that he converted to a studio more than 50 years ago, but perhaps more significantly, most of his work for the past 35 years has been sporting art, especially fishing and hunting scenes.

Even without his sporting art, Shilstone could lean on his shovel with the feeling of a job well done. During the Second World War, he was recruited into the famous Ghost Army, which devised everything from inflatable jeeps to tank noises to simulate a much larger force. He went on to work as a commercial illustrator, his versatile talents enabling him to work on publications as diverse as *Life*, *Field & Stream*, *Gourmet* and *Smithsonian*. He produced book covers and illustrations, and created ink drawings of court trials with strong public interest in the days when cameras were not allowed into US courtrooms.

Shilstone painted the moment when two diverse tunnels joined beneath the Continental Divide in Colorado; he was

hired by NASA to capture the launch of the first space shuttle. At a time when many illustrators were struggling to find work, Shilstone was always in demand.

But he had always been a hunter and fisherman, and while his other achievements are impressive, especially his moody jazz pictures and his collage work, it's the sporting side that will interest most readers.

The fascinating thing about his later work is that it appears to bring together the many styles he has worked with through his life, to create a wholly new aspect to his painting.

Polhemus, who has achieved that fine balance between text and letting the pictures do the talking, does not speculate about the significance of Shilstone's earlier work on his current output, but it's there to see. You can certainly admire it in this book, a generous 10in x 11.5in, enabling you to appreciate the quality of his work.

Shilstone's watercolours are still remarkably cheap. If you want a picture to convey the essence of casting under a low winter sun, or stalking the flats for bonefish, or trout rising under an autumn sky, he's your man. Few artists capture the quality of water better. He has this rare ability to a familiar scene and imbue it with magic. And if you can't afford his paintings, this book is the next best thing. Superb. **KE**