



AN ARTIST'S LEGACY

Frank Mason taught me to see, not just to look'

BY KAYLA COLLIER

Franks Mason was one of Stowe's best-kept secrets — although that certainly wasn't his fault.

Mason, who carried the torch for classical, realist painting, taught a monthlong course in Stowe every June for 40 years. Students came to hear his wisdom about capturing the light as they painted outdoors.

The Stowe course was huge for Mason's students; many say Mason changed their entire approach to art.

Still, the course was a low-key affair — unless you happened upon one of his outdoor classes.

Mason's flamboyant personality was on display in Stowe four weeks a year, and locals and tourists could spot him along the roadside, dancing, singing and screaming — paintbrush in hand — amid about 40 students with easels scattered across the landscape.

"He was like a 12-year-old; he wouldn't walk places, he'd run places. And he could wear you out," former student Robert Schneider recalled.

Mason was 88 when he died in 2009, but his work and legacy live on.

The Bryan Memorial Gallery in Jeffersonville has curated a show with 22 of Mason's paintings, alongside works of 50 of his students.

The show opens today, and a reception and artists round table will be held on Sunday from 1 to 4 p.m.

Classical style

In a world that began to appreciate more abstract art than realist interpretations, Mason kept traditional, academic painting alive.

In fact, when Schneider found him in the late 1960s, Mason was one of the few artists in the Northeast still teaching the classical style, and he maintained a vibrant connection to the artists of the past.

Born in 1921 to artist parents — his mother was a violinist and pianist, and his father was a Shakespearean actor — Mason began painting as a child. At 16, he was accepted to the Art Students League of New York, where he trained under Frank Vincent Dumond until Dumond's death 15 years later.

In 1951, the student became the teacher, taking over Dumond's position in the school, where he continued to teach for half a century.

Mason was deeply dedicated to his teaching, and classes were filled not only with painting techniques, but also with stories of past and present artist conquests.

"These moments of outrageous stories interwoven with serious instruction were a common occurrence in his classes,



and a wonderful break from the passionate and invaluable instruction he provided for us," said Jan Brough, who studied with Mason for a decade.

Mason began his annual treks to the Green Mountain State in 1969. He was looking for a place to paint landscapes, and one of his students dragged him to Stowe, where he fell in love with Vermont's rolling hills and the light. Mason loved Stowe, he said, because you couldn't kill the mountains.

Soon after, he began bringing his students.

The man behind the easel

In the summer, the students would meet at 4 a.m. at their outdoor painting destination to set up at least an hour before Mason arrived. They'd follow written directions given the night before and, carrying palettes with colors pre-mixed by Mason, they'd all get started on their scenes, lined up along the roadside.

The sunrise sessions could be tough. There were cold, rainy mornings in early June. And at 4 a.m., the hills were still dark under the drizzle.

"We were trained to show up rain or shine, and in the event of rain, to soldier on under umbrellas in our rain gear, and with plastic over our easels. So we did," Shari Dukes Kiener said.

"Then it was astonishing — without fail — when Frank would arrive to join us, the rain would stop."

Mason would set up his own easel next to his students, grab a loaded brush, and turn to his canvases, saying, "The light effect is the most important thing in painting," one student recalled.

His words would reverberate through the quiet morning landscape, waking up all the painters. But some may not have understood, at first, how important the light effect was.

Mason loved the light effect, because without light you wouldn't see anything, and in the early morning or just before sunset, a more radiant glow moves through the landscape.

Schneider recalled one of the first Mason classes he attended. They were painting en plein air with oils as the sun slowly rose over the Green Mountains, casting a beautiful light — a light that each artist hoped to capture in his own way.

Mason, standing behind Schneider to view his work, grabbed a paintbrush loaded with almost all of the white paint and globbed it onto the canvas. Then, streaking it across the scene, he told Schneider, "You need more light!"

Schneider worked under Mason for only a few summers, but he said the traditional painter was the biggest influence on his work, especially when it came to thinking about the big picture rather than getting stuck in the minor details.

It didn't take long for Schneider and his peers to understand.

"To this day, I cannot sit on a bus looking at my fellow passengers or look out a window at the passing scene or walk through the park without looking for the light effect," Corinne Russo said.

"Frank Mason taught me to see, not just to look. He gave me the gift of painting and hunger for knowledge," Anne de Varennes said.

He inspired his students with his passion for life, his great laugh, his encouragement and his stories, she said.

And now the students' work will hang proudly next to their teacher's.

Curating the show

According to Mickey Myers, executive director of Bryan Memorial Gallery, this is the first time an exhibit like this has been curated in Vermont.

The show was recommended by Fiona Cooper Fenwick, a former Mason student who's now the Bryan Gallery curator. "It's been a fascinating experience curating this show," Myers said. "The students' devotion to Frank is overwhelming."

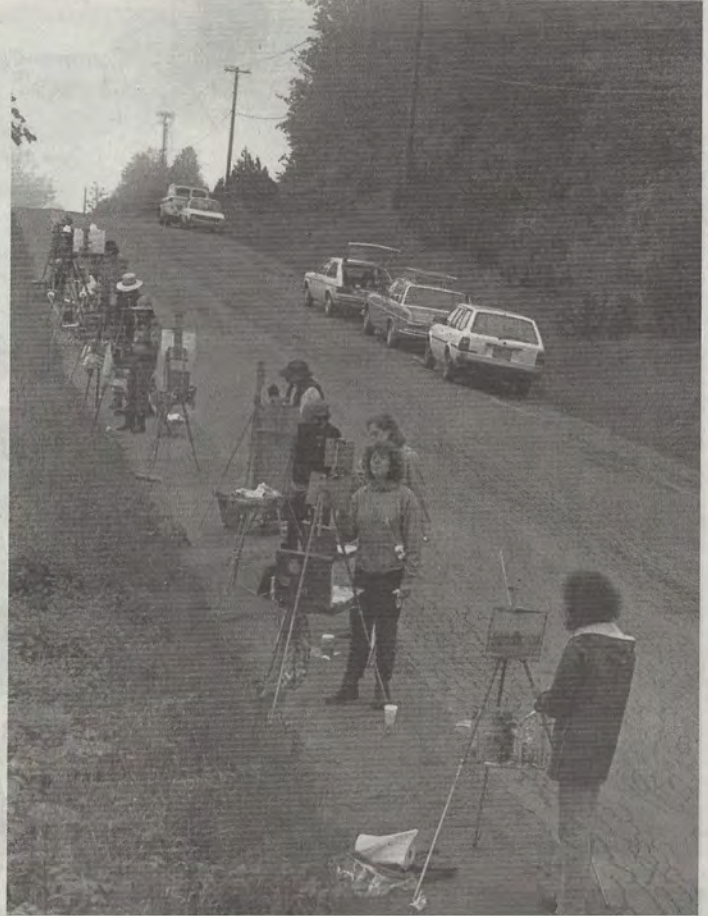
Bryan Memorial Gallery sent Cooper Fenwick to New York to make arrangements and pick up artwork. Before they did anything, they had to get permission from Mason's wife, Anne, who still lives in their New York apartment, and a grandnephew who has control over Mason's estate.

Reaching out to his students, though, took the most work; they were difficult to reach via phone calls or emails.

In honor of their teacher, a dedicated group of Masonites still continues to meet in Stowe every June to paint, reminisce, frequent the old hangouts, and critique each others' work as Mason would have done.

And last Thursday, a small group of students met in Waterbury for an evening of painting.

There's the legacy.



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At top, Frank Mason taught painting at the Art Students League of New York. Sometimes, class was at the beach. For 40 years, he would line up to 40 students along Stowe roadsides for en plein air painting. Below, Mason died in 2009, but a group of his students continues to paint in Vermont during the month of June. They were in Waterbury last week.