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ARTIST LEWIS SCHEFFEY

Photography by Fred Collins



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Article by Nanci Race
Photos by Fred Collins

I met Lewis Scheffey, an extremely prolific artist living in Monterey, Massachusetts in a renovated farm house, with his wife Joyce. I sat at a small table and talked with Lew about his work and his life. He tells me that he has a space in the barn where he likes to work but with the cold weather he's moved into a mid-sized room in the house that is filled with natural light and views of the surrounding property. He says he doesn't need much space to work. Lew works with oils and watercolors and he prefers to use Hahnemühle's German Etching 310gsm, an acid free fine art etching paper, for both mediums. Most of his paintings are landscapes done "en plein aire", ie outside.

Although he has painted in many locations he says that most of his work was inspired by the Berkshires. He takes me to his inside space to show me more of his work. An unfinished painting rests on an easel; a container with several brushes is on the floor nearby. More of Lew's paintings hang on the walls, many of them are earlier works when he painted more realistically than he does now. More of his work leans against the wall, two of them unfinished but he tells me he'll work on them for awhile then go on to something else until he's ready to paint more on the unfinished work. He points out some smaller works on a shelf. Some are his; a couple of others on display were done by other artist friends. We spent several minutes in the room discussing art and even looking through some of his books filled with information and paintings done by artists whose work he admires.

Although in some of his later landscapes are done in more muted shades, most of his paintings are alive with vibrant colors that caught my eye as I walked into the room. A few days after talking to Lew I visited the Iris Gallery and found the same was true of the paintings displayed in the gallery. Most of the paintings are landscapes; however, hanging on a wall by itself, is a depiction of Indira Ghandi. The painting is quite different from Lew's other work. The only other portrait in the display is a self-portrait of Lew.

Lew tells me he moved to the Berkshires in the 30s. He used to spend summers on a farm near his present home. He eventually ended up at Williams College and fell in love with the area. He also says that he's lived in the Berkshires more than anywhere else although he has done a lot of traveling. He spent some time in the Pacific in the Marines. Lew also spent a substantial amount of time in Europe, where he had clients for whom he managed financial portfolios. He has done paintings in Greece, Italy, Germany, England, and France.

I asked him to tell me about his home with the dark exposed beams in the ceiling in the room in which we're seated. Lew renovated it from cellar to roof; new foundation and all. The winter winds, as he tells it, lifted the rugs on the floor. There were and are two upstairs bedrooms (all renovated) and an added guest room in another part of the house. All the work was done between 1978-1980 between working, and painting. He began further renovations in 1981, which continued over the next 25 years. He adds that he once built a house when he lived in Pennsylvania, a small starter house near to his work. He laughs that it took him 50 years to finish getting it to look like it does today but he loves old houses and doesn't want a newer house.



LEWIS SCHEFFEY, HAYBALES

Nanci Race: Let's talk about your background. How did you get started as an artist?

Lew Scheffey: I became interested in art through the Barnes Foundation. It's a wonderful collection that Dr. Barnes collected years ago. It's now being moved to the center of Philadelphia where it will be a focal point. The collection is mostly European art. It was quite a good start for a collection. At the Barnes Foundation we didn't have formal classes but we had many discussions. I began painting at that point and I've been doing it ever since. Many of the paintings in the other room are things I've done over the years.

NR: You said you started painting after getting involved with the Barnes Foundation. How many years have you been an artist?

LS: I started painting in the 50s and early 60s. I was selling and producing art but it's not how I made my living. I was in the investment business. I was a broker for awhile, then I ran a mutual fund, and after that I went out on my own. I may not have been making a living with art but it has made my life.

NR: Where do you display your work?

LS: The Iris Gallery owned by Alison and Fred Collins on Railroad Street in Great Barrington, above what was Pearl's Restaurant. Fred is a marvelous fine art photographer; a perfectionist who makes exceptional Gicleés. The Collinses have become good friends and supporters of my work. We met them last spring when I decided I would like to have some prints made so I wouldn't have to sell all my originals. I didn't feel there were that many of them and hated to part with them. We tried to find a print maker and discovered that the people who owned the Iris Gallery make really wonderful Gicleés. It's difficult to tell the prints from the paintings. In some ways the prints are better than the originals. And that's how we got involved with the Iris Gallery. I appreciate their input.

my paintings are gone but there are several displayed throughout the house as you've seen in my work room and the room we're in now. I've given a lot of things away over the years.

NR: What motivates you?

LS: I'm very interested in color.

I do a lot of outside painting, especially in the spring and summer. I paint a lot of landscapes and so forth. But my paintings are becoming more and more abstract. My paintings have evolved from being very realistic to becoming more and more expressionistic. I'm

not trying to recreate reality.

I don't duplicate what I'm looking at but I get inspired by what I'm looking at.

NR: Can you tell me about your process? How do you conceptualize a painting before you actually work on it?

LS: I go outside and select the area I want to focus on to get a feeling of the space and the design. I use a lot of light colors in both oils and watercolors. I don't really have a preference but watercolors are much more spontaneous so they're easy to do. I have a collection of brushes and I find that I paint from my gut. I feel that I use my arm as much as my fingers so it feels as if the brush is an extension of my arm so to speak. My motion for painting starts with my shoulder.

NR: When you've been working on a painting and you stop for a break

is it hard to get back into the feeling of the painting?

LS: No. I can usually jump right back in. I have one here that has been sitting here for a month and I work on it from time to time.



LEW'S BRUSHES, FRED COLLINS, PHOTOGRAPHER

NR: You become attached to your work so that it's hard to let it go?

LS: Yes. I do. I have a lot of it in drawers that I look back on from time to time. Many of

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LEW SCHEFFEY, POPPIES



LEW SCHEFFEY, RIDERS FROM THE SEA

NR: What do you do when you get tired? How do you keep your interest high?

LS: When you finish one you start another. When I'm tired I just stop and take a nap. But I don't think I'm ever too tired to paint. At least it's not something I've ever said. But I don't paint profusely.

NR: Do you feel that you bring something extra to your viewers in your paintings that a young artist might not have because of inexperience?

LS: I really don't think about what I bring people who look at my paintings. I really kind of paint for myself; I think. I have no message, or anything I want to tell. I have nothing against social justice painters, but I just don't do that. I love when people come to see my work and I get to look at it again and hear their comments. Sometimes they have more insight than I do. And sometimes someone will see something in a painting that I completely missed. It's amazing to me. You hope, always, they'll get that zing....that joy, the feeling I get when I look at Matisse's Dancers, for instance. A lot of people appreciate it and I don't think I'm an amateur. I don't really have any professional connections though. I don't belong to any art leagues or clubs or anything else.

NR: Who are the painters who have most influenced you?

LS: Every painter you look at influences you, I think. The ones I like and thirst to look at are, Emil Nolde, all the German Expressionists, the Fauves, and then Picasso, Matisse, and Bonnard; the great breakthrough artists. The Great American watercolorist Jean Marin, and of course Winslow Homer....and Albert Pinkham Ryder, who used such bad paper and pigment and made such great paintings that just didn't hold up. His work just doesn't last.

There are so many. I like basically to look at all art....good and bad. The good are thrilling and the bad instructive in some way. And then, of course, the great moments when you are suddenly knocked for a loop by a painter or group you never heard of. This recently happened to me with the Canadian "Group of 7." They are quite wonderful. It's kind of the thing that I do. It's close to reality but much more individualistically styled. I also like the more modern paintings of Georgia O'Keefe.

NR: Is painting something you've always wanted to do and did you ever think you would get to the stage where you are today with your life and your art?

LS: I never dreamt about it. It wasn't an objective. It just developed from my soul. The more I painted the more I became involved. I hope to achieve more of the same in the future. I started painting and attending Art Appreciation classes at the Barnes Foundation in my 30's, when I was a young Dad running a Mutual Fund in Pennsylvania. I used to draw. I'd never taken a proper art class. I'm actually "a self-taught painter." The Barnes Foundation really made a difference in my life. We lived within walking distance of the Foundation.

NR: I see that your wife is very supportive. You mentioned having three children. Are they equally supportive? Have any of them followed in your footsteps?

LS: They are very supportive. They don't live nearby but they come by quite often. Our family is very close. But none of my children are painters. One son is a lawyer, one works in public relations in New York. At present he works for G.Q. and my other son is in the investment business, just like me. He works for himself and runs portfolios. My wife is not a painter but she is very interested in art. As far as artist friends, the artist I have the closest contact with in terms of discussing art is a wonderful artist who lives in the next town. Her name is Kate Knapp. She has quite a variety of art work and it's not dissimilar to what I'm doing. I think I've been painting longer than she has but she works harder at it than I do. "She owns the Front Street Gallery in Housatonic and teaches classes.

NR: Would you say that you have more fun with your work?

LS: Actually I have more fun with my work. I don't think anyone has more fun with painting than Kate. Kate does a lot more; many hours a day and at the drop of a hat—a good sunset and she's out there and dinner waits. She also has a lot of passion. I usually paint for a half a day one or two days a week. And when I'm not painting I think about it. I read about it. I like to paint outside, there's so much going on out there, but I also like to paint inside.



LEW GOING TO HIS WORK, PHOTOGRAPH BY FRED COLLINS



LEW SCHEFFEY, SPLIT RAIL FENCE

NR: How does being older affect your work?

LS: Well, you sure figure it's about time to get down to it and figure out what you're doing. Seriously, except for physical handicaps, being older is much easier in many ways. You know your palette, you know your brushes...you know your medium, or mediums. A young artist may worry more. It's hard getting it just right and can be hugely frustrating. I remember when I was under orders by Ms. DeMazia, to reproduce a Daumier that hung at the Barnes Foundation, how hard it was. But the elation when it was suddenly there made it well worth the frustration. Being young and studying is a wonderful thing. There are so many revelations.

As a young person I didn't have the patience to get it all together and often "made do" without some important element. The more time you take in assembling your things the more time you save in the long run and the more successful is your picture. My advice to a young artist would be to read some art books, buy art supplies and get at it!

And if you paint outside, like I do; know how to take care of yourself. If you plan to spend a few hours in hot sun, or freezing cold make yourself comfortable. I once painted

a "valentine" of our house in the Berkshires to send my wife who was in California. I wrapped myself and especially my hands in wool and plastic. I sat on a hilltop a long way from the house looking down at it. I had to work fast to keep it all from freezing. There was lots of snow and it was very cold. It's a small painting and hangs in our kitchen.

And of course the more you know the more you know, so to speak. Being older brings a certain accumulation of knowledge and perhaps bad habits too. I suppose one has to be careful about that.

The Iris Gallery of Fine Art Images is located at 47 Railroad St, 2nd floor, Great Barrington, MA 01230. For more information call 413-644-0045

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