

# AMERICAN ARTIST

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COVER: HARLEQUIN (DETAIL), BY SHELDON TAPLEY

## Where the Past and Present Meet

By Bill Creevy

*Sheldon Tapley was born in Maracaibo, Venezuela, in 1959 to British parents and was raised in Europe and the United States. After receiving his B.A. degree from Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa, the artist earned a M.F.A. degree in printmaking at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. His work is in museum, corporate, and private collections across the country. In 1998 Tapley received an Al Smith Fellowship from the Kentucky Arts Council. He currently teaches painting and drawing at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, and is represented by Tatistcheff Gallery in New York City.*



Looking at a still-life pastel by Sheldon Tapley is like listening to a jazz trio play variations on Vivaldi. Although the notes may have been composed centuries ago, the feeling and interpretation of the music is entirely fresh and original. In a similar way, Tapley, who teaches painting and drawing at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, and exhibits at Tatistcheff Gallery in New York City, masterfully blends the discipline of a hard-earned classical technique with a vision that is thoroughly modern and personal in his pastel still lifes.

Working in a demanding realist style, Tapley paints with all the authority and craftsmanship of such 17th-century Spanish still-life masters as Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664) and Juan Sánchez-Cotán (1561-1627). In his exquisite pastel *Contemplative Still Life*, for instance, one can easily detect Tapley's connection with the work of Sánchez-Cotán, a Carthusian monk who was himself an artist famous for the spare, almost monastic restraint of his still-life compositions. Tapley picks up on Sánchez-Cotán's ascetic mood and applies it to his own work, but this is where his homage to the past ends and his originality begins. Dazzling the viewer with the beauty and





*Harlequin*, 1998, pastel, 30 x 42. Private collection.



*Vessel*, 1998, pastel, 15 x 16. Private collection.

virtuosity of his illusionistic technique, he not only employs *trompe l'oeil*, but pushes the illusions even further by delivering a small self-portrait as a distorted reflection in the blue vase, much like the style of the Italian Mannerist Parmigianino (1503-1540).

All of Tapley's work is marked by a unique poetic quality in which the past and the present simultaneously exist. But although still life is an art form that easily lends itself to allegory and symbolism, Tapley is quick to point out that a literal or symbolic reading of his painting is misleading. "Reason can dry out a picture," he contends. "If you're not careful, allegory can become too mechanistic and lead to message making. And if the viewer can read the message, who needs the painting?"

Tapley relies instead on his intuition when selecting the imagery for his paintings. His choice of objects, while not necessarily random, is based either on what he finds aesthetically pleasing or what happens to be available in his studio, which is an abandoned high school classroom on the Centre College campus. Occasionally the school's theater department, located nearby, gives him discarded props and tables that he recycles into his still lifes.

Once he has decided to include a particular item, such as the Matisse print in *Vessel*, which he added simply because he was fond of the painting, that object will often inspire other ideas and inclusions. Because the nudes in the Matisse print are feeding a turtle, Tapley added an empty turtle shell he had recently found on a neighbor's lawn. The turtle shell, in turn, led to an affinity with the shape of the orange jug newly purchased by his wife from the local flea market.

Like many artists who have mastered their craft, Tapley, a former printmaker, has returned to a fundamentally simple approach to pastel painting. First of all, because he works directly from setups in his studio, he spends a great deal of time



*Contemplative Still Life*, 1998, pastel, 15 x 16. Private collection.



*Dance*, 1998, pastel, 20 x 26. Courtesy Tatistcheff Gallery, New York, New York.

arranging and rearranging his arsenal of objects. Art reproductions, workman's tools, flea market vases, and a never-ending supply of fresh-cut flowers from the family garden often find a place in his work.

When he does decide to do preliminary drawings or sketches, he keeps this early material near his easel for reference throughout the painting process. But more often, he creates his composition simply by arranging and rearranging the actual

objects and rendering an occasional drawing.

Tapley works exclusively on white Arches cover paper, a heavy sheet with internal sizing that can handle all the rubbing, scraping, and drawing that comes in the natural course of a pastel painting. But before he turns to pastel, Tapley works up the picture entirely in vine charcoal, which affords rapid alterations as it can be easily erased.

After he is satisfied with the char-

coal drawing, he blows as much excess charcoal off the paper as possible, leaving just the barest ghost of the image. This trace of an image then serves as a guide for his pastel work. Using only Schmincke pastels, which he prefers for their softness, size, and color variety, he builds up his initial layers with a lot of blending, mostly with his fingers and the palm of his hand. The artist employs all sides of the pastel stick to make his marks: He uses the tips for most



of his strokes and the sides for the larger areas. For fine details, he finds that the little knifelike edges of freshly broken crayons give him the best results.

When he needs to make corrections in the pastel work, he uses a straight-edge razor to scrape the color off, usually down to the very surface of the paper itself. For very small areas, he breaks off the ends of razor blades to make tiny scrapers.

Once satisfied with the composition, the colors, the degree of illusion, and the textural surfaces, he considers the work finished. Only then does he fix his pastel painting with several light coats of Blair pastel fixative. Tapley's images extend to the very edge of the sheet of paper and are framed so that the deckled torn paper edges are visible.

Tapley is an artist who has fully realized his artistic roots and is now working at the peak of his craft. His paintings display a technical virtuosity as well as an intellectual acuteness, and his true talent rests in combining these two qualities into a personal art that leaves us with a strong humanistic impact. ■

*Bill Creevy is an artist and author of The Pastel Book and The Oil Painting Book, both published by Watson-Guption Publications in New York City.*

**Above: *Peony & Rhinoceros*, 1997, pastel, 20 x 20. Private collection.**

**Left: *Cotopaxi*, 1998, pastel, 15 x 16. Private collection.**

**Opposite page, above: *Temporary Arrangement*, 1997, pastel, 25 x 36. Private collection.**

**Opposite page, below: *Cairn*, 1997, pastel, 30 x 42. Private collection.**

