

Interview with an Artist

Charles Reid



Joseph Wolfskill
24 x 18

Ahhhh Charles Reid...

I'm crazy about how he lays down paint, his masterful drawings, and his beautiful, clean colors. Charles is a master watercolorist, art instructor and author, known around the world.

When he agreed to participate in this interview I was as giddy as a school girl. Am I gushing too much? No. Not at all.

Tell us a little bit about your background.

I was born in Cambridge, New York. With the encouragement of my parents, I started drawing and painting at 14 and I was given a room for a studio. My father provided art materials and a library of illustrated history books along with books about Charles Russell and Frederick Remington.

I was keen on horses and my parents arranged to have me take care of a neighbor's horses in return for boarding an ill used cow pony that my father found some where.

I was only interested in drawing cowboys and Indians and probably would not have become an artist without this interest.

My father also enrolled me in a correspondences course at The Famous Artists School, where I later became an instructor.

I attended South Kent School and The University of Vermont. I left Vermont after two years. I had a delightful time at UVM and met my future wife, Judy, there. But South Kent and Vermont had no art programs so I moved to NYC and enrolled at The Art Students League. There I studied with Frank Reilly in a very academic illustration program.

How did you come to pursue a career as a painter and instructor?

I've been lucky in my painting life with supporting parents, a wonderful and very supportive wife, and getting a job as an instructor at the Famous Artists School when I was 24.

I was a slow starter and not good enough to get illustration work. I was hired on a trial basis because they were desperate to fill a slot in their painting department. Famous Artists was a correspondence school and as an instructor there, I corrected student paintings by doing a "visual" correction on canvas skin paper (if working in oil) and a correction on watercolor paper if working in watercolor) along with a letter of suggestions.



Keep your hand on the paper so that you can vary the line strength as you draw.



Dip the brush in water, shake it out, dip it into the paint. Put it on the paper. Mix your colors on the paper.



If an area looks dead, put on a color wet on wet.



Finished painting.

Interview with an Artist

Charles Reid

After about four years of doing oil lessons, my supervisor asked me to do watercolor figure lessons.

I was trained as an oil painter. My only experience with watercolor had been on the island of Madeira where Judy and I had spent a year on our honeymoon.

My supervisor, Frank Jones, called me in and gave me a watercolor demonstration of a tugboat. He showed me how to soften an edge in the smokestack and how to create the illusion of smoke with the wet-in-wet technique.

Frank thought that a week of my doing the tugboat lesson would be sufficient training in the medium before I had to start teaching watercolor figure lessons. Frank didn't paint figures so it was up to me to come up with an approach. Thus I began my search for lessons in figure painting than didn't include a tugboat.

An artist, George Jacobs, traveled about Europe making pen and ink drawings and coloring them in with watercolor. Geoge took me aboard his van and I copied his style for a month as we sketched around an island.

This type of watercolor didn't lend itself to painting a figure without the benefit of a pen line. At that time there wasn't much watercolor figure work to look at that was understandable.

Happily I had admired the fashion illustrations of Dorothy Hood. Her illustrations were magnificent in their simplicity and directness.

She used just two values in the skin, light and shadow, and didn't bother much with softening edges.



Favorite Painters
19.5 x 28

Interview with an Artist

Charles Reid



Arapaho
22 x 30

I adapted her simple approach of painting a first wash, allowing it to dry and then adding connected shadow shapes. I started going to a weekly sketch class, and the work I produced there became the basis for my first book, *Figure Painting in Watercolor*.

This approach was easier for students to understand than the difficult “modeling” technique that other instructors used.

The Famous Artists School closed due to poor management and sadly, but fortunately, Judy went back to teaching Kindergarten to support us.

I joined several other ex-instructors from the school and we rented a large studio space in Westport, Connecticut. We paid the rent by teaching classes.

I began doing large figure paintings in oil and continued doing watercolor figures at our weekly evening sketch classes.

I began winning awards with the American Watercolor Society, Allied Artists and The National Academy.

I was invited to join The Roko Gallery in New York where I had my first show of both oils and watercolors. After Roko I moved to The FAR gallery and was there for ten very pleasant years until they closed in 1979.

What makes a painting successful?

An old saying: “Don’t compete with the Masters” helps when judging the success of a painting.

We should judge our paintings in terms of our “personal best.”

Always try to find even a small success in a painting no matter what your level. As a teacher I usually start a critique by asking the student what she or he likes and dislikes about their picture. I never allow, “My picture is terrible.”

In order to improve, you must find something successful in a painting for you, at your level of skill. Then you must pinpoint something “off” in your picture and make it your goal to improve that single problem.

With experience you will become a better judge of your successes and failures.

How do you define success?

I feel successful as a teacher as long as I don’t have “ordinary” or “average” written in my evaluations.

Which artists and art movements inspire you?

I found that my oils reminded others of Fairfield Porter. I was very influenced by Mr. Porter. He was a subtle but wonderful colorist.

Alfred Chadbourne, at the Famous Artists School, had introduced me to the work of Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard. They were among Mr. Porter’s favorite painters.

It’s important to study painters of all persuasions, not only the ones you wish to emulate. I learn from painters as different as Joan Mitchell, Willem de Kooning, Richard Diebenkorn, Henri Matisse, Andrew Wyeth and Norman Rockwell.



Joseph in his Cavalry Jacket
17 x 24

Interview with an Artist

Charles Reid



I don't follow the current art scene since I don't understand it.

Tell us a little bit about your current working style, your process and time management.

I was intrigued by Bonnard's use of warm and cool colors throughout a painting. I don't have any other color theory.

Both Vuillard and Bonnard avoided having a center of interest and used a two dimensional picture plane rather than a three dimensional picture plane. They discarded the idea of warm colors coming forward and cool colors going back and cool colors in shadow and warmer out in the light .

I have never consciously changed my approach but in looking back I see that my older paintings were not as colorful as the work I produce today.

I use an *alla prima* approach in both oil and watercolor and avoid glazing and over painting in both mediums. **I work very slowly, which may come as a surprise because most people think I paint loosely. That's an illusion. Each stroke counts. Fewer strokes with more thought is better.**

I don't want my paintings to look too practiced or repetitive. I'm not happy with mistakes, but they are essential to retain a sense of freshness.

I switch back and forth between working in oils and working in watercolors and I have tried to keep my approach in oil and watercolor as similar as possible. For some reason it is more difficult to switch from watercolor to oil than to switch from oil to watercolor.

I do work more in watercolor than oil since most of my teaching is done in watercolor.

What drives you to teach watercolors?

Teaching is fun and I love to figure out new ways of making watercolor more simple and manageable. **I think there is too much mystique in watercolor.**



Interview with an Artist

Charles Reid

You should pay attention to getting a good value range and not bother with too many colors. It is said that Sargent used only six or seven colors.

Many students use a wonderful assortment of colors then over mix on the palette making a muddy puddle. **Partially mixed colors, mixed on the paper, are more interesting than thoroughly mixed colors from the palette's mixing area.**

Basically it's all about getting the correct ratio of paint to water in your brush.

What is it like to write instructional books on watercolors?

I love writing the books.

It's problem solving: How do I express myself more succinctly?

I don't think the books have affected my painting, but they do show me how important brevity is. Brevity is important in writing and in painting. The two cross over, and I try to keep them both as simple as possible.



Big M
30 x 21



Amsterdam

Is your work viewable in any current or upcoming shows?

I am represented by the Munson Gallery in Chatham, Massachusetts, and the Stremmel Gallery in Reno, Nevada.

*Interview with Charles Reid
by Charlene Collins Freeman
Editor, Hot Press*

Charles has authored eleven books on painting. His books are directed toward students at all levels. He has released numerous DVDs as well, several of which are available through the NWWs Digital Library.

His two most recent DVDs include: "Charles Reid, Painter: The Figure in Watercolor" and the "Brand New Complete Course in Watercolor," with ten lessons, each

followed by assignments. Both of these DVDs are available on his website at www.charlesreidart.com.

He is a member of many prestigious organizations including the National Academy of Design and The Century Association.

He has won numerous awards, including the Childe Hassam Purchase Prize at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Academy of Design and the American Watercolor Society.

In 1980 Charles was elected to the National Academy of Design. Public collections of his work include Smith College, Yellowstone Art Center, Brigham Young College, Roche Corporation, and the National Academy of Design.

www.charlesreidart.com