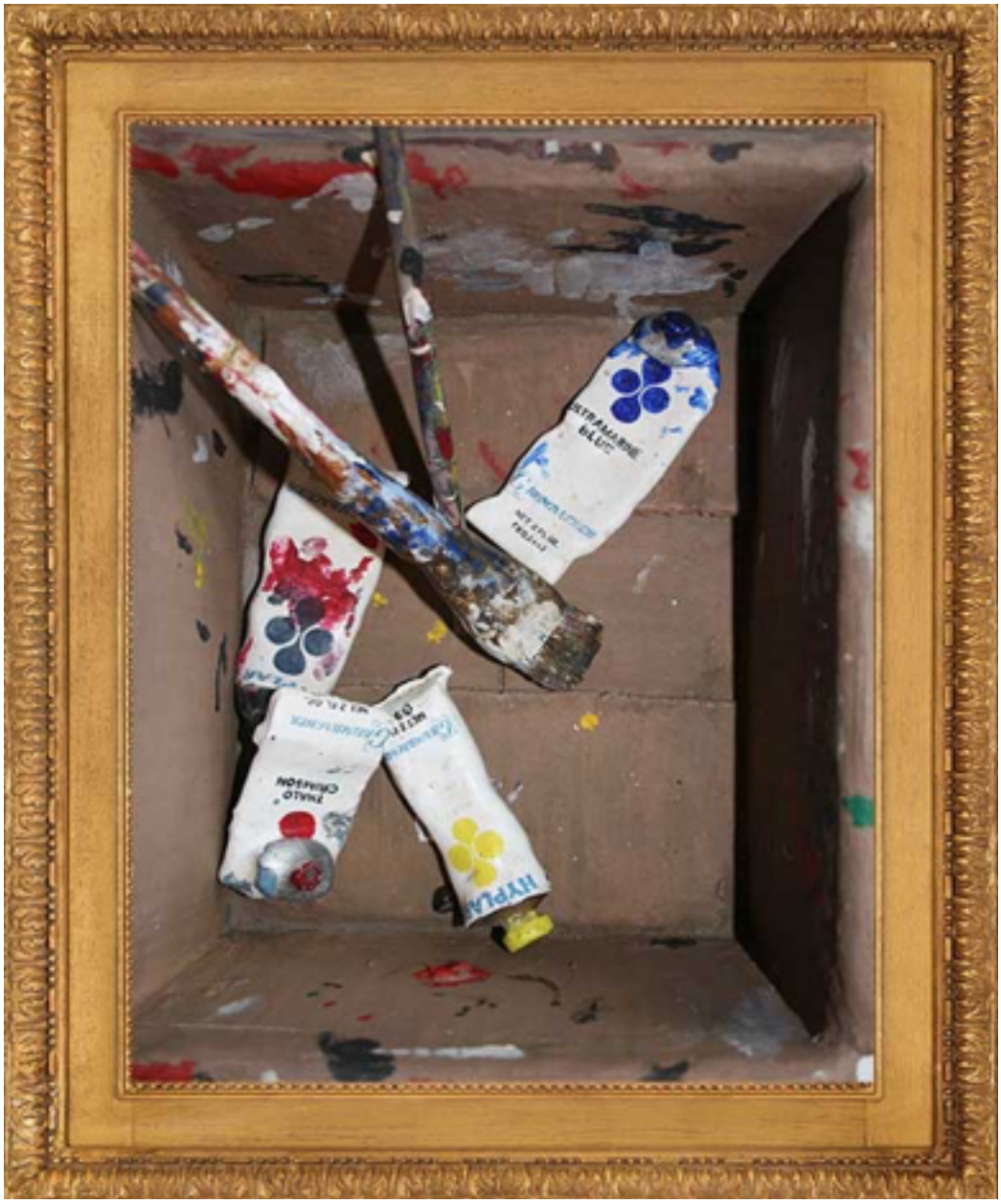
Ceramics class

With Gill's help, we began a pottery program. I fan-dangled a Duncan kiln and started to learn the art of a potter's wheel. My attempts on the wheel were all failures. I saw the pottery of an artist named Marilyn Levine in a back issue of Gill's *American Craft Magazine*. Levine had fashioned leather coats and jackets of fired stoneware hanging off a wall hook like something you'd find in an entry hall. I was mesmerized at the thought of mimicking real objects in clay. I didn't need the potter's wheel, I realized. I could make fine art by being clever. It was an important thing to understand that early in my art career.

On a frustrating day of teaching, I said to the students, "Let's take all the sad, squeezed acrylic paint tubes out of the cardboard box and reproduce them in clay. Your job as artists," I told them, "is to pinch and squeeze a piece of clay into the shape of that sad, flattened, nearly empty tube, careful to fashion the circle of metal near the neck." As I picked up their confused attempts to mold the shape of a tired, spent tube of dried paint from a lump of clay, I would quietly manipulate the real tube they were copying until it looked like the finger-pinched clay of each student. I was manipulating the subject into the student's attempt to capture it. "Look how close your creation to the original!" I would exclaim, it being my job to instill success at any level.

Later I spent after school personal time pushing and rolling slabs of clay into the shape of the beat-up cardboard box that had contained the paint tubes. I hand molded the flat sides into an exact clay replica of that tired, veteran container. I decorated the flaps with paint the students had left as they wiped their brushes, like the original. I made Jack Gunter versions of the paint tubes the students had experimented with and rolled clay into two ceramic paint brushes, their bristles filled



with dry paint. It made it to the Fitchburg Art Museum where it won the pottery award. It was an omen.

We held an opening of my student's paintings at City Hall. The mayor showed up and congratulated students he would have crossed the street to avoid on any other occasion. Gill and I were becoming close friends. We both had partners, each with issues. As we sipped wine at the Fitzwilliam Inn after class and planned projects, a powerful bond began to form.

The chemist/science teacher/writer/auto mechanic paints a picture

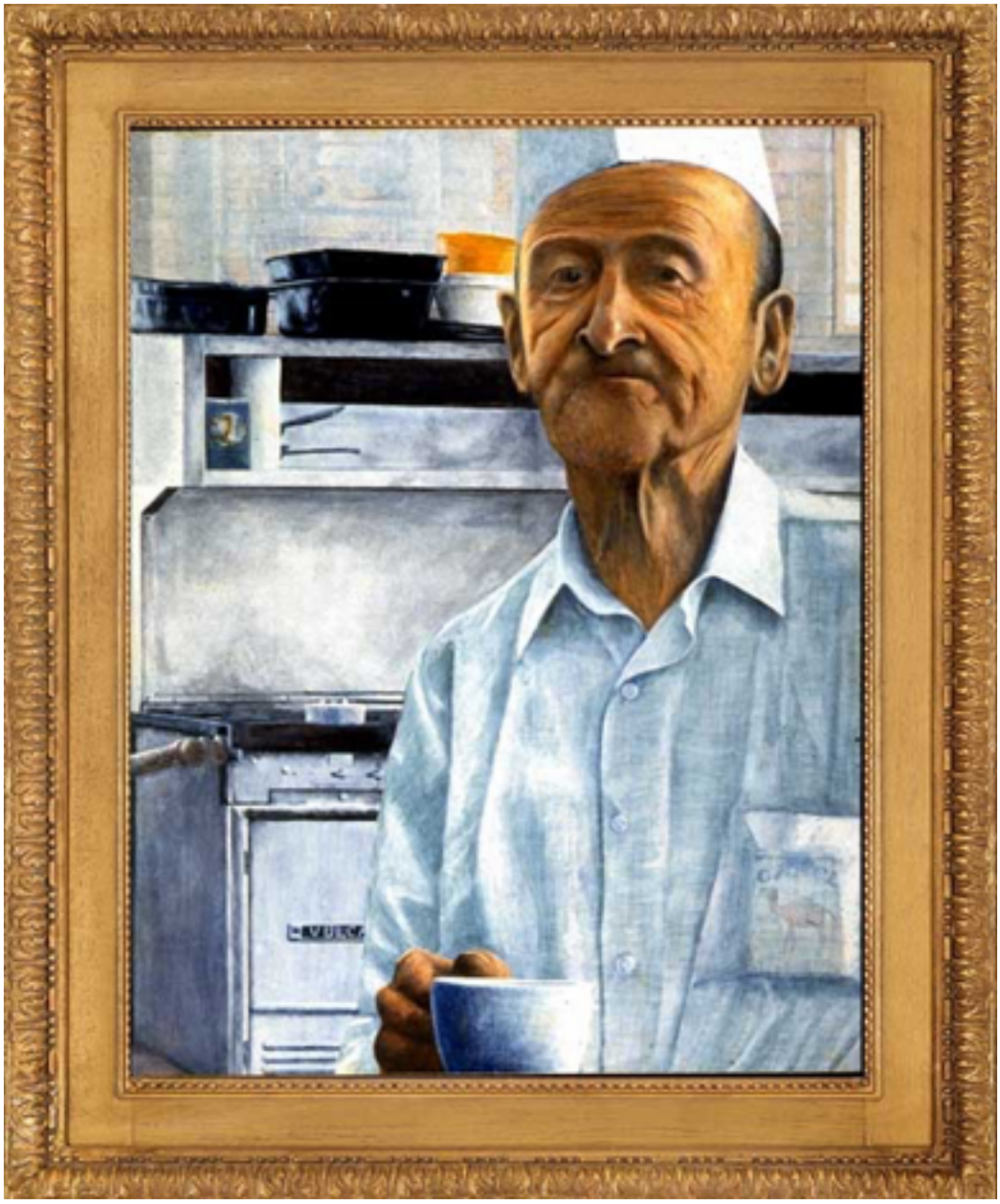
After teaching painting for three years and impressing the mayor, I thought I should try a painting myself. I selected a slide by the science teacher shot at Sturbridge Village, of one of the potters dressed in period garb in front of the seventeen century kilns. The first attempt was made from the acrylic paints in the old cardboard box and painted on a raw pine board from the wood shop. It was remarkably

successful as my first real painting. I was amazed. “I think I taught myself to paint,” I thought. “Without realizing it.”

Thus began the second half of my life. Seeing the potter painting on an untreated pine board that sucked the pigment into the porous wood, a friend said the flatness of the work looked like an egg tempera painting. Untrained, a scientist teaching art and auto mechanics to society’s cast-aways—I’d never heard of it. At the Fitchburg Library, I found a book, *New Techniques in Egg Tempera*, by Robert Vickery. (Old copies are still available from Abe’sBooks.com.)

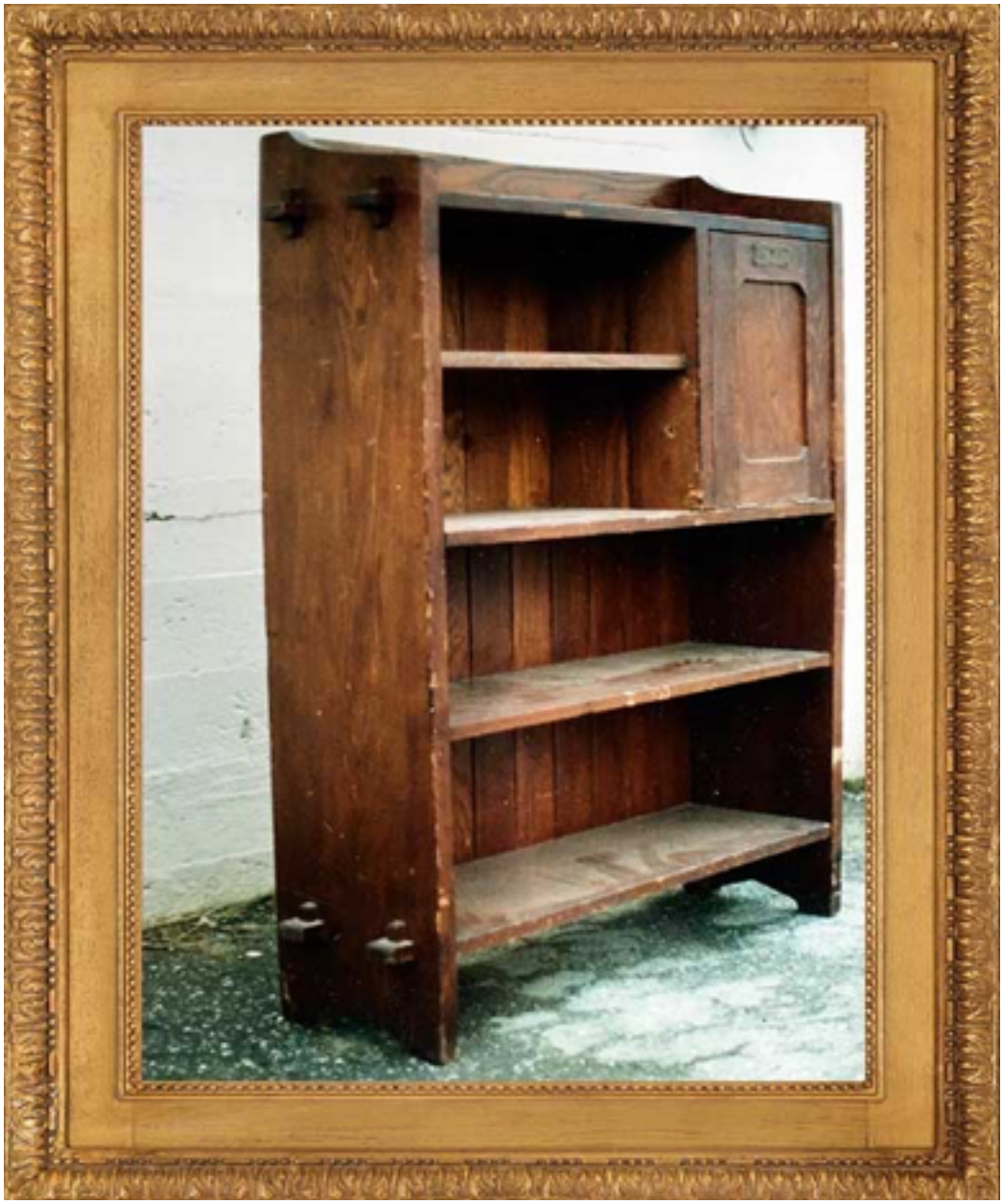
After reading it, I tried my first painting in the medium, from a photo I took at the state hospital’s boiler room—brick, metal, oil soaked wood. This was my test, seven textures.

Using the egg yolk, water, and dry pigments, I created an amazing painting. I was hooked by the flow of the silky material off my brush. The surface tension pulled the colored egg yolk mixture off the camel-hair bristles like the linseed and turpentine of an oil painting, yet the layer dried in ten minutes, ready for a re-coat. This medium gave me the flow of oils and the drying time of acrylics. Perfect. I started painting large, six or seven feet high, unusual for a beginning painter. I think my birth veil was talking.



I hung these first works in a local bank in the hamlet of Ashburnham where I lived. The wife of a cook I painted at the Gardner State Hospital contacted me to say how proud she was, her husband an ordinary cook and his face now hanging in the bank. It was the first time in my life that something I made changed another person's life, and I never forgot it.

American picker



Stuart Soloman, an antique dealer I'd never met, saw the paintings in the bank and contacted me. As he walked through my cabin inspecting my paintings, he asked if I would consider selling my dresser, a tall oak chest of drawers with a square door

for hats. “They call this a *Texas Highboy*,” he said and offered me fifty bucks. I didn’t value the piece, a hand-me-down from my parent’s basement. As we talked, I opened the drawers and piled a handful of shirts and tighty whities onto my bed. He didn’t plan to buy a painting, he told me; he wanted advice. “I’m running into a lot of Art Deco antiques,” he told me. “Geometric shapes from the nineteen thirties, jewelry, furniture, and lamps. Some of these objects are valuable, but most are junk. You’re an artist,” he continued, “with a great eye for color and form.” He proposed collaboration: I would help him to recognize great style, and he would introduce me into the world of antiques.

Stuart’s house, three miles down the road, was like a museum. A Tiffany Studios leaded shade hung over his claw-foot dining table. I admired a multi-drawer dental cabinet, tiger oak in an ornate Victorian over statement. It sported forty cubby holes and swing-out shelves that opened on fancy brass hinges. The living room was a sea of colorful lighting perched on massive dark tables he called *Mission*. I fell in love with all of it, including the lifestyle.

One morning on a visit, I found him still in bed. A gorgeous brunette lay beside him, the blanket barely covering ample boobies, while they sipped coffee. She told me she was a professional hypnotist and bragged about her ability to plant a suggestion into the mind of a subject that caused an orgasm by the act of stroking her palm. Stuart answered the phone beside him and agreed to purchase a rolltop desk

for $300. As I pondered a new career as a hypnotist, he dialed a number and sold the desk for $700. I marveled at his ability to make four hundred dollars, still naked, with an orgasm magician at his side. The hook was set, and I began to look for antiques to supplement my meager income.

I met him at two in the morning that next weekend. He wanted to show me Brimfield. The little hamlet near the Connecticut border near the historic town of Sturbridge Village was wide awake as we arrived before sunrise. Stuart pulled out a hundred dollar bill for a woman who directed his van stuffed full of vintage goodies to a parking spot behind her house.

“I have a slot in the front for another fifty,” she told him. He didn’t blink.

“There’s no parking on the street for set up,” Stuart explained. “Neighbors to the flea market field charged money for close access to the gate at dawn. The closer to the entrance, the higher the price.” My mind reeled.

Inside the gates, at dawn, I was introduced to a world I’d never imagined. One thousand dealers selling everything for cash, from antique muskets to slot machines. Money flew like sand in a dust storm. My first purchase was a wicker baby carriage with large wheels and an Art Deco bonnet for $60. Stuart bought it from me for a hundred and rolled it into his booth. I lost my cherry that morning on a woven straw pram.

Walking through endless paths through treasures, I ran into my cousin, Mark. Third son of my dad's brother, Roy, the professor who helped me get certified, we knew each other from yearly family trips to Worcester on the holidays. His booth was a pile of tarnished brass chandeliers and glass lamp shades. He was raking in money like a ticket taker at the carnival. There was huge interest in restoring historic Victorian brownstones to their original interiors, he told me. His specialty was gas lights. Tarnished in green, these fixtures ended up in attics and basements all over New England because of the value of brass. Mark sold the metal frames to lighting shops where they were polished, lacquered, and drilled for modern wiring. He took me to some shelves of glass light shades for a lesson. "These acid-etched gas shades have a four inch flange," he explained. "I'll buy all you can find for $16 each." For the equivalent smaller electric versions, he would pay eight.

Antiques dealers, at least in New England, never entered the field because they wanted to; they were usually recruited into the trade by another, invited in with secrets of the business shared. Stuart showed me the ropes. One day, he told me to accompany him on a pick. "I'm going to introduce you to some people who are totally under the radar," he told me. "Today, with me, you can buy anything you want, but you can never come back alone. Do you agree?"

What choice did I have?

The house we visited in the neighboring town of Winchendon was like all the others on the quiet street. Stuart knocked on the door and received a warm greeting. He bought fifteen objects; I bought an etched-gas shade for twelve for a four dollar profit down the line with Cousin Mark. “These guys are door knockers,” he explained later. “A lion’s share of the antique business is based on their ability to cold knock on a stranger’s door and come away with great treasures for pennies. You notice he didn’t have a sign in the yard?” I had. “He sells his inventory to a handful of people on the QT. Always cash. I don’t advertise either, so I am part of this tier also, but I’m a couple layers higher on the food chain.”

In Greenfield past the Connecticut River, we entered a neighborhood of 1950s tract houses. We stopped in the driveway of a one-story rambler with an attached garage. The middle-age couple who met us would have looked right at home stepping out of an RV wearing matching jackets. They ushered us into the garage to face a roomful of cheap yard sale finds. I watched Stuart work harder than expected in this pile of worthless junk, considering the high quality of his inventory. He finally chose a glass ashtray, an advertising promotion for a tire company, which he purchased for $15. They invited us into the connecting carport where he glommed onto a pair of bookends. They now invited us into the house. The kitchen held a nice collection of advertising tins that he bought to decorate his kitchen. That purchase bought access to the next room. Furniture began showing up in the living

room where he chose two fancy Victorian end tables. “I have a gal who’s looking for exactly this,” he whispered. The basement was a vintage oak showplace. He found five pieces that pleased him, and we settled up.

Driving home, he explained. “Judy and John and I have an understanding,” he said. “If I don’t buy something in the garage, I never get to the carport, and so on and so on. I bought a piece of Stickley today.”

My relationship with Stickley furniture had yet been formed. All I knew about antiques at this point was I could buy any acid-etched gas light globe priced under sixteen bucks and make money. That year I stumbled onto an unusual table lamp base, hand-hammered copper with an old brown patina and no shade. Stuart didn’t

recognize it, noting it would fit well with his dark heavy Mission furniture if complete.

At the trusty Fitchburg library, I found the only book on the subject, and another world opened. *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876-1912* by Robert Judson Clark, printed in 1972, was the companion piece of a Princeton University Museum exhibit. With images and text, Clark explored a period in the history of design celebrating simplicity in form and color that rejected the ornate excesses of the previous Victorian age. Spokesman for the revolution was a furniture maker named Gustav Stickley. In Stickley's interpretation of decorative arts, every object in a home interior was integrated into a philosophy celebrating nature and harmony. His dark, hand-joined furniture, hand-hammered metal work and lamps, fabrics, art, and rugs all combined to create a serene living experience.

Stickley's movement was popular in 1905, one hundred years before the internet. Thousands of bungalow cottages were built with this esthetic. Many were filled with objects of Gustav's manufacture. After World War One, a wave of the new modernism swept the country, and Stickley's influence waned. His tables, chairs, and lamps were relegated to fishing camps and vacation homes and landfills. A decorating magazine in the 1930s referred to the Arts and Crafts Movement as that unfortunate period when crude designs and the color brown ruled the home. By 1965, there wasn't a living soul on the planet earth who found the clunky chairs

and mica-shaded lamps worth keeping. Important masterpieces of the American Arts and Craft Movement were consigned to basements, attics, or vacation lodges on the lake. That view changed when Judson Clark opened his exhibition at Princeton.

Years later, I would have a conversation with a major Stickley collector. “My wife and I owned a summer cabin deep in the woods of Maine,” he told me. “We enjoyed antiques and filled it with nice furniture only to find them gone in the spring—stolen in the dead of winter by locals who raided our isolated, snow-bound camp.” After a few years of this looting, they decided to fill the cabin with the ugliest furniture they could find, heavy chairs and tables with such little value that auction houses wouldn’t offer them in their sales. “Next spring,” he related, “we found the house again had been broken into but nothing had been stolen, so we bought more of the clunky oak. It was ridiculously cheap. A reclining chair cost a dollar, an oak bookcase ten.” Time passed, and imperceptibly they found certain pieces they’d grown to like. The common thread through their favorites, they found, was a shop mark with *Gustav Stickley* on a red decal. Now they looked for more, the only humans in New England who wanted the pieces, and discovered that low-priced Stickley furniture filled Maine like low-hanging fruit. When he told me the story, their collection was worth millions.

When I asked Stuart about Stickley in 1977, he told me there were only three dealers in New England who cared: a bearded biker from Maine, a fey decorator in Boston, and a guy named Chris Kennedy in Amherst who was always buying the next big thing. When Stuart came across a piece, he told me, one of them received a call, and they wanted it cheap.

I set out to find a piece of Stickley, roaming the back roads of New Hampshire and Vermont, and had no luck for the entire year. It didn't turn up at antique shops because no one wanted to buy it.

The rehabilitation of Gustav Stickley took root when Dover Publications reprinted a complete 1910 catalog. The uncaring world now had access to line drawings of many of the forms, settees, tables, chairs, bookcases, bedroom furniture, table items, and lighting. A few movie stars with deep pockets, including Barbara Streisand, began furnishing their homes with the pieces, and the race was on.

I signed up for a post-graduate course in creativity at the University of Massachusetts that summer. The class was based on right brain/left brain communication with which problems were turned into animals and mathematical equations and back to animals and then to a solution. What fun. The last class was to take place at the professor's island house on Martha's Vineyard, a weekend retreat in a magical Victorian town called Oak Bluffs. For me, the weekend on an island off

Cape Cod was a godsend. After a week set up at the summer Brimfield show, a ferryboat to an offshore island seemed a perfect place to decelerate.

Oak Bluffs was a chautauqua town, a ring of petite Victorian bungalows surrounding a park. The professor's house was a 1910 Tudor with a wide covered porch and an ocean view. Exhausted as I was from six days in the sun, buying and selling in a sea of barracuda, I stepped onto the ferry on foot, longing for the solitude of an island with four grand cash in my pocket.

In this wonderful setting, the class would propose a problem, and the group would visualize it, morph it, and change it into a mathematical equation whose solution would be the answer. The process was a satisfying exercise for my growing relationship with creativity. On a break in the afternoon marathon, I walked into town, delighted to see no antiques stores after a week of sunbaked hustle. As I explored a side street, though, a small *Antiques* sign with an arrow pointing up hung from a corner. "I came here to be away from antiques," I told myself, but curiosity won. Up the stairs and inside, I saw a set of Mission furniture: eight blond oak side chairs, two additional chairs with arms, and a reclining chair with an arm bent like a banana. (All Morris chairs in the 1910 Dover Catalog, the only book available at the time, have flat arms.) I saw another massive oak chair the size of a tank. "These chairs are from the Oak Bluffs reading room," the owner told me. "It opened in 1903. These chairs have been cleaned and refinished every year for eighty years."

These forms bothered me because they were bolder and better than the 1910 designs in the Dover book, my new Bible. Furthermore, there was, after eighty years of refinishing, no signature stamp in sight. And, to top it all off, she wanted three hundred dollars each for the eight dining chairs, more than signed Stickley originals on the market at the time, and seven hundred each for the banana-arm Morris chair and the armchair built like a tank. I thanked her and headed back to class.

"I have a problem," I began the afternoon creativity session. "Here are the parameters."

1. "I saw a set of furniture today. It's driving me crazy."
2. "I now have enough money to pay the rent and get current with those I owe money."
3. "I'm sick of the antique business."
4. "They're so cool."

My class nursed my problem into a left brain-right brain conversation and ended quickly. "You have to buy them," they concluded. "Because you're going to buy them anyway." Problem solved. The class volunteered to carry a chair each onto the ferry with my Brimfield pick-up truck parked on the mainland. I carried the banana armchair. As I held it upside down like a helmet to walk onto the ferry, I spied

a red ink *Stickley* mark under the arm. The set turned out to be Thornden chairs from 1901 when early designs were bold and free—rare and too early to be in the Dover reprint, our only Bible at the time. The banana chair sells today for ten thousand and up.

Jack Gunter, artist

My early paintings were influenced by the art of Andrew Wyeth. As a chemist, then a science teacher, then a wood shop teacher turned artist, my knowledge of fine art was in its infancy. Through magazines, the occasional visit to the Fitchburg Library, and conversations with Gill, who was teaching art with me full time, I had learned a little about the New York art scene. Photorealism intrigued me. Large-scale canvases by Chuck Close, Malcolm Morley, Ralph Goings, and Charles Bell crossed the line between representational art and abstraction. The thought that a six-foot painting of a gumball machine or a ten-foot-tall portrait could hang in museums of contemporary art allowed me to take my art seriously.

Andrew Wyeth's egg tempera portraits and landscapes celebrated old world techniques in a world looking for the next new-ism, but his prodigious talent trumped the lack of modern theories in this work. In New England, if you knew nothing about art you still knew Wyeth's name. The site of a decaying state hospital was the perfect subject for a Wyeth wannabe. I painted broken windows in old barn interiors where angled afternoon light illuminated the peeling paint on a hundred-year-old wall.

Gill and I hit the outdoor art fair circuit and spent weekends camping out in Mystic Seaport, Connecticut and Bar Harbor, Maine displaying my New England egg temperas and her fine weaving on portable walls. Side by side in sleeping bags, our relationship was chaste but flirtatious. We met for happy hour at the bucolic Fitzwilliam Inn to work on the art curriculum, and we week-ended in Boston for museum openings and traipsed around New England hawking our craft, but we kept our hands to ourselves for years.

As antique flea markets and art junkets with Gill bumped squarely into my teaching career, I approached the Mini School staff with a proposal. Since our Friday was a carrot on a stick for the students who behaved all week, the school hosted mountain climbing or roller skating trips requiring less supervision. I suggested that if I gave up my free periods and was a no-show on Friday when we were babysitting, I could offer to teach one hundred percent of my current classes and

gain a five-day weekend for my other pursuits. For three-fifths of my salary and all the health care, my full-time teaching load could be shoehorned into three days at the school. When the staff suggested it would be an insurmountable task to rewrite the school schedule to meet my desire for a three-day week, I produced a revised class calendar that worked just fine. With thirty students and six teachers, it was a matter of math.

The administration relented, saving $3000 and keeping the status quo. My Mondays now began on Tuesday when I looked at the day after tomorrow as the end of my work week, an easy-to-shoulder burden. My new mantra was “TGIT” (Thank God it’s Thursday), and I began to consider a career as a painter, the rent paid with Stickley chairs and $16 gaslight shades.

Gale warning

The rural country of central Massachusetts was a land of mystery. I met a totally unusual woman who lived on a hilltop commune north of the town called Orange. Her name was Gale Kennedy. She was building a huge concrete boat she expected to sail to Iceland one day. Daughter of a boat-builder, Gale had spent most of her young life on the Mississippi River. And I mean *on* the Mississippi River—in a small boat. Her sign-maker father drifted the river painting for his living, family in tow, for years. It was in her blood. She told me of a local newspaper reporter who ventured up the hill to the sprawling property, once an end of the world cult head-

quarters, now abandoned except for the boatbuilders who'd moved in. Gale was pleased the folks down in town were interested in writing a piece about her obsession with huge, concrete hulls. As the interview progressed, the reporter gingerly asked her, living on a hilltop with a dubious past, surrounded by looming fifty-foot boat bottoms, when she expected the world to end. The question made no sense until Gale realized with the history of the property, the people in town had believed the builders were constructing arks to save animals, two by two, from the great flood.

Gale's son, Jimmy, was a playmate for John John that summer as we spent evenings looking skyward for UFOs and exploring maps of Iceland. That fall, I invited young Jim to drive to Florida with me and John. We canoed alligator-infested waterways and were present in a deep forest when a night-blooming cereus opened its one-evening blossom before curling up for an other year.

Garden of Eden

John John and I flew to the Pacific Northwest in the summer of 1979 to visit brother Steve and climb mountains in the North Cascades. He quickly grew bored with alpine meadows, preferring instead to place his name on every grocery store Pac Man and Nintendo console, his East Coast experience in video gaming granting him an edge over Pacific Northwest hicks. He did agree to go white water rafting, though. Our raft trip began high in the North Cascades, east of a mountain hole in the wall called Darrington. The raft guide had an athletic build and a Northwest bushy mustache. He had John squealing as we dropped into rapids called the *bone grinder* and *dead man falls*. After the excursion, he invited us to his log cabin home in the valley. His partner, a woman named Barbara, met us in the garden, a newborn around her neck in a third world country sling. She bloomed with the glow of a new mother, her breasts both straining and staining her shirt. Womanhood surrounded her with an estrogen enhanced aura.

As John was more interested in quarter video machines than mountain peaks, I decided to see what West Coast dealers sold as antiques and hit a few stores, expecting to see ox yokes and country primitives. Herk Hancock, the proprietor of Old 99 Antiques and Curios, directed me to a dark oak lunch table he'd had for sale all year. The maker was obvious: Limbert Company, Grand Rapids, a Stickley com-

petitor who had usurped the square reticulation of Scotland's Rennie Mackintosh to give its furniture a secessionist flavor. Highly desirable with nine square cutouts on each side, it floated on a Machine Age lattice and glowed in a rich brown original finish. The table, when it surfaces today, commands $10,000. Herk's price in 1979 in Burlington, Washington was $110. I knocked it apart at my brother's house, hauled it home in a large suitcase, and made plans to return.

Cousin Mark was looking for an adventure. Together we took out a hundred-dollar classified ad in the Seattle Times: *Two guys from Boston want Mission Oak furni-*

ture: Stickley, Limbert, Roycroft and Dirk van Erp lamps. Call Herk Hancock in Burlington.

Hancock called to report four callbacks. We flew out on the next plane. In short order, we bought a pair of rare Stickley side chairs, spindled in the manner of Frank Lloyd Wright; a Gus spindled office chair, tall with a tilting spring (never before known to exist); a Gus Stickley spindled magazine stand (never before seen); a Limbert double oval table, the holy grail; and a Dirk van Erp lamp. Total outlay, $2200. The price in New England, $30,000. I thought about moving, but I had a three day a week teaching job, a cool apartment that had previously been the courtroom of the old Gardner City Hall, a growing infatuation with Gill, a son with whom I faithfully spent every weekend, a warehouse under the town movie theater, and ten of my museum-exhibited egg tempera paintings on the walls with a growing reputation.

Biting the apple

Gill and I made the mistake of kissing for real in the fourth year of our friendship and collaboration. The door to my heart swung open, and she walked right in. I painted a portrait of her looking at me with love in her eyes. It took an entire year to light her face in the glow of total love. I was teaching egg tempera painting part time in the prestigious Shannon Art Center over the New Hampshire border. The curator was excited about an Andrew Wyeth and Family exhibit they were hosting

the next month. The show was culled from the collections of privileged New Hampshire families and showed artwork by N.C. Wyeth—Andrew's illustrator father, Andrew's works, and the paintings of his son, Jamie.

As I watched them hang a show worth millions, he asked me, as their part-time egg tempera teacher with a body of work in the medium, if I wanted to put one of my paintings on the wall next to Andrew Wyeth. Holy smokes! I chose the portrait of Gill, four feet square, egg tempera on panel, the closest thing to perfection I'd ever painted. Though the exhibit still looks great in my resume, the choice was a terrible mistake.

Five nights later, a pounding on my door woke me up at 2:00 in the morning. John John slept in the back room, and he hid behind the bed. Gill's boyfriend stood at the door, red-faced. They'd had a confession session that night, he sputtered. Confessions of infidelity flew out, and Gill's transgression was with me. I had no defense; I told him I was in love with his lady. There was no violence, but the damage was done. I'm sorry my son experienced it.

Two evenings later, Gill called. My heart leaped and then fell when she told me one of Tom's friends had seen the portrait hanging in the Wyeth show. Close enough to know the situation, he told him, "You should see the look in Gill's eyes." I told Gill I loved her. She told me I seduced her and ruined her life. I heard a click.

Tom was on the other line. “You had no written permission to use me as a model,” she told me, breaking my heart with the words I knew would follow. “I order you to destroy it, disfigure it, or modify the painting so it is not me.”

“We were lovers,” I stammered. “Why would my heart-mate need a model release for me to take her photograph?”

“It’s the law,” she said and hung up.

She called me each night for two weeks, a torture that would have been banned at Abu Ghraib. I cried sometimes as she repeated her cold words. I wanted the conversations to stop. The next day, when I knew she was at home alone, I drove the painting to her house. Her body language was guarded and close. I dragged the most successful painting of my life out of the Power Wagon and carried it to her. “This is an accurate image of you experiencing true love,” I told her. “It’s yours; you destroy it.” I drove away, empty-handed. It was the cruelest thing I’ve ever done to a human being in my life.