

Barclay Sheaks | 1928 – 2010

# Painter captured the bewitching art of watching

By Teresa Annas  
*The Virginian-Pilot*

Barclay Sheaks sought inspiration in everything he saw.

He painted Queen Anne's lace and barn doors, fields glistening in dew.

His "Watchers" series began when he was riding the ferry in the late 1960s with his former wife, Edna. He spied her on deck and became transfixed by the atmosphere, he recalled in 2005. She was in deep contemplation, staring out at the water.

For Sheaks, it was a visionary moment.

"I started seeing watchers everywhere," he said.

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The biggest watcher of all was Sheaks himself, of course.

One of the region's most popular and accomplished painters since the 1960s, the Newport News artist died Tuesday at Riverside Regional Medical Center of pneumonia at age 81. He had Parkinson's disease for nearly five years, his wife of eight years, Deborah Sheaks, said Thursday.

The artist went through various phases but became especially known for his realistic paintings of marshes, barns and Queen Anne's lace.

From the 1960s until the 1990s, he was an active exhibitor, admired by area artists and collectors.

"He was my idol, and a big inspiration to me," said Bob Burnell, a popular Portsmouth painter of marine subjects.

Sheaks' painting skills were such that "some of the stuff, I couldn't figure out how he did it. I still can't

figure out how he did it."

James Warwick Jones, gallery manager at the Charles Taylor Arts Center in Hampton and a realist painter, said Sheaks' works depict the regional landscape but in a nonstandard way.

"He had an original way of seeing things," said Jones, who had known Sheaks since the 1960s.

"One of the many paintings I remember was after a storm, and there were rocking chairs on the beach and the tide and wind had almost covered them with sand.

"It suggested the forces of nature," and was poetic, Jones said.

In addition to his talent, Sheaks built his reputation as a pioneer with acrylic paint, about which he wrote several how-to books. He hosted a 1985 how-to-paint-with-acrylics series that aired on public TV nationwide.

The books and 13-part series were an extension of Sheaks' devotion to teaching. He headed the fine arts department at Virginia Wesleyan College from the late 1960s until his retirement in 2005. A gallery at the school contains his work and bears his name.

Though he didn't teach there, a permanent gallery of his work also is at Christopher Newport University in Newport News. Sheaks also taught art at Warwick High School from 1948 until 1967.

Deborah Sheaks was among his Warwick students in 1967.

"He continued to paint until the end," she said. "The last picture he painted will be at the memorial service."

He was working on the large canvas the week before he went into the hospital, she said. The painting presents a characteristic

Sheaks scene, with Queen Anne's lace and a barn with its door open.

On the couple's rides into the countryside, Sheaks would be on a constant lookout for inspiration.

"If it was early morning and the dew was on the grass, he just loved the way it glittered on the grass blades. He would say, 'Pull over! In five minutes, it will be too late!'"

And from those photos, he would build his paintings.

"He saw beauty in everything and everybody," Deborah Sheaks said. "He would point things out to me that I never saw until he pointed them out. He just lived art."

Even though he had Parkinson's, the shaking in his right hand would stop when he painted.

"The neurologist said when he painted, it sparked a different part of his brain," where he didn't have tremors, Deborah Sheaks said.

With a brush in his hand, she recalled, "it goes to the zone, where his talent is. And that was a rest for him, and an enjoyment."

Sheaks' credits include shows at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington. He was honored in 2005 with a survey show of his work at the Peninsula Fine Arts Center in Newport News.

A memorial service is set for 2 p.m. Sunday at the Ferguson Center for the Arts, Christopher Newport University, with a reception to follow.

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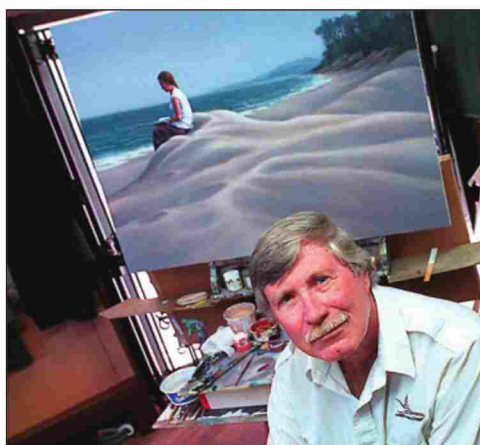
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*Deborah Sheaks of her late husband, Barclay*



COURTESY OF PENINSULA FINE ARTS CENTER

**“Coffee Cup” is a 1969 acrylic by Sheaks. The artist was a pioneer in the use of acrylics, and he even hosted a how-to series for public TV that aired nationwide.**



BILL TIERNAN | VIRGINIAN-PILOT FILE PHOTO

**Barclay Sheaks began his “Watchers” series in the late 1960s. Despite illness, he worked right up until his death this week.**