BARCLAY SHEAKS

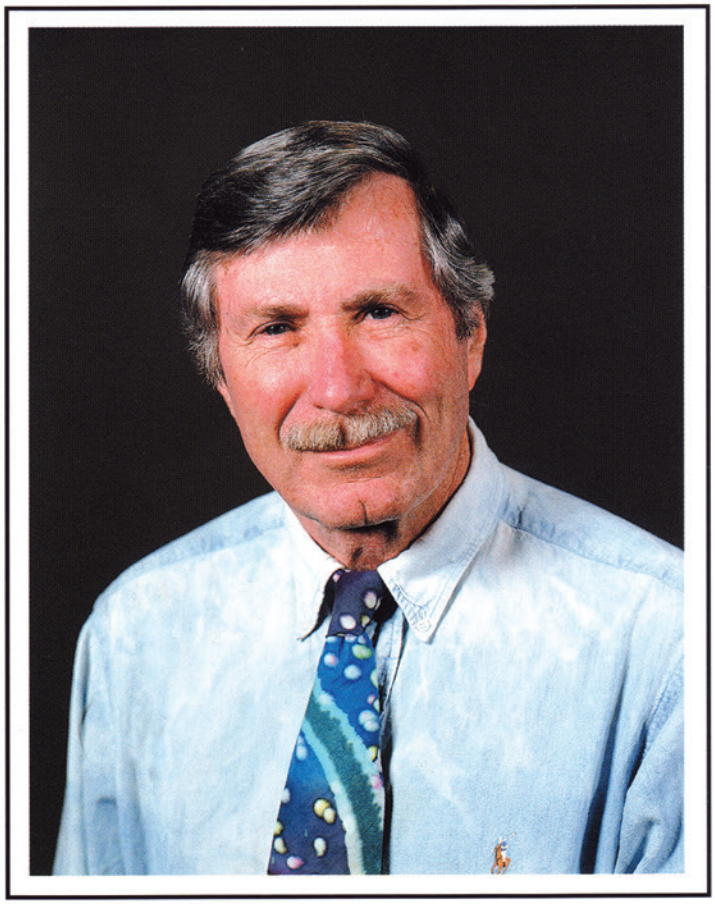
A RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION 1935-2000

Celebrating the Opening of the Barclay Sheaks Gallery

VIRGINIA WESLEYAN COLLEGE

June 23, 2000

Exhibit runs through July 25, 2000



Cover

WAVE
Acrylic, 1987
collection of Virginia Wesleyan College

In this composition, Sheaks pares the subject down to a single field of tall grass, like those commonly seen in the fallow fields of cattle-feed farms on Virginia's Eastern Shore. The austere clarity of the pictorial shapes and restrained palette contrasts with the delicate and capricious play of the wind.

Commentary on Exhibition by Joyce Bernstein Howell
Professor of Art and Curator of Exhibitions, Virginia Wesleyan College

The College gratefully appreciates the generosity of
the following individuals and corporations who loaned works for this exhibition:
Mr. and Mrs. Mark Neighbors, Edna Sheaks, Dr. and Mrs. Glen H. Shepard, Mr. James N. Hubbard III,
Joyce Bernstein Howell, Sue B. Myers and Dr. O. J. Sheaks

Catalogue courtesy of Arthur Carter and Sue B. Myers

THE BARCLAY SHEAKS GALLERY

Barclay Sheaks, Distinguished Artist-in-residence, founder of the art department, and Associate Professor at Virginia Wesleyan College, is a nationally-known painter whose work is owned by numerous museums, as well as by many distinguished university, corporate, and private art collections. Sheaks' reputation dates from the early 1960s with his acrylic paintings of waterfront scenes, and ever since, the wetlands, farmlands and people of the Chesapeake Bay have been a central theme in his art, and probably the kind of subjects for which he is best known.

Sheaks conveys his passion and sensibility not only as a painter, but also as a poet, and in his many activities as an outdoors man. Sheaks' art reflects an intimate relationship with the environment in which the artist spends his time, and the people he finds there. Other important themes in his art are his ongoing interest in abstract composition, and, especially in his more recent work, the quiet, and very human world of the studio. No matter what theme is undertaken, his painting style is characterized by the interplay of formal elements – the structural strength and clarity of composition and spatial division, united with the most fleeting effects of light, atmosphere, and a rich array of visual textures.

With the establishment of the Barclay Sheaks Gallery, Virginia Wesleyan College has taken advantage of a unique opportunity to collect and display a body of work which is not only stunning visually, but which also expresses so compellingly the values of liberal and lifelong learning. The paintings are a tangible manifestation of what comes from taking knowledge, and nurturing it with work, continuous application, experience and vision. The work is eloquent testimony to how perseverance and diligence combine with creativity and inspiration to create lasting objects.

Sheaks was here at the foundation of the college, provides continuity, and sets a standard of excellence for the future. The Barclay Sheaks Gallery allows everyone to enjoy these works, and provides a place where our students can experience the visual arts at first hand whenever they like. The elegance and prominence of the gallery demonstrates the college's regard for this artist, what he has produced, and what he has contributed to his students, his colleagues, and to the growth of the institution. It also demonstrates the college's understanding and appreciation of the unspoken intangibles which separate great education from mediocre education.

Joyce Bernstein Howell

ABOUT BARCLAY SHEAKS

The landscape that fans associate with Barclay Sheaks can be tracked to a narrow finger on earth jutting into the Poquoson River.

At the eastern tip of Griffins Beach, along a stretch that's not really walkable, the Virginia painter has built his summer house and studio. He keeps a workshop at his Hilton Village home, too, but this place has the view he favors.

Any follower of the artist would recognize that this is Sheaks Country.

Rumble slowly down the long, gravel driveway to the brown shingle house with the red shutters – a wake-up splash of color to break up the dark mass. The effect seems familiar: We've seen it in his paintings.

Stroll past the house and onto the long triangle of grassy turf pointing to the river. The spring-green patch – on a lot shaped like Florida – is rimmed in shrubs and dense tufts of marsh grasses bound on both sides by untamed marsh. At the tip, step up to the gazebo. From up here, you escape the mosquitoes and horse flies, and it's cooler. Everywhere else, the air's nearly still, but here there's a breeze.

Up here, you can sit on a bench and scan Sheaks' horizon.

To the west, there's a spindly cluster of top-heavy pines – Sheaks calls them umbrella-topped. Behind the pines is a mass of deep green-blue forest that turns paler and bluer as it crawls toward the water.

Marsh grasses finagling toward the river look as soft as duck's down. The eye wants to drink in the subtle color changes, from hunter green to golden wheat. Parcels of grass, like cowlicks, move in one direction, then another.

The shore has not made way for a gridded civilization; it has a pleasing, meandering line. The grasses reach all the way to the beach, breaking up the textured, oatmeal-and-cream of the sand.

Pleasure boats bob on a glassy river on this hot and hazy midsummer's afternoon. The boats are still and quiet. The dominant sound is the lapping of teal-green water just below the octagonal gazebo, with its hammock hooks awaiting a lazy napper.

Two gulls stand motionless on a small shallow patch. In the distance, along a narrow stretch of shore, a solo walker. Her features are vague yet evocative, like so many beachcombers who appear in his work.

To the northwest, a hazy sky gives a thalo blue tinge to the treeline.

Northeast, Cow Island looks like a slim peninsula. You can imagine Sheaks staring at the vista, one eye sweeping back and forth, between the scene and the canvas. Adding a little yellow to warm the grasses, a few umbrella-topped trees midway the expanse, a clump of low bushes.

Further east, a tiny thumbprint of an island rises green and grassy in a little cove. Just beyond it, a power boat is tied to a pier. Its white hull is cool and gleaming against an expanse of burnt sienna grasses.

All of these things have found their way into Sheaks' landscapes. But reconfigured, rearranged, reduced to essence, the features pulled and tugged at.

Composed.

Sheaks paints what he know. His "intimate interaction...with a home location," as author Alan Gussow defines the modus operandi of the new regionalist artists, informs and shapes his images.

He makes visible that which he experiences and values. What isn't seen, but which may be inferred, is his concern about the environmental destruction taking place in the marshlands and bays around Tidewater.

But Sheaks isn't a message painter, preferring to present the radiance of his surroundings. His familiar panorama also would include those who are close to him – particularly, his beloved wife of five decades, Edna.

While his landscapes and water scenes are so closely associated with the artist, it is Sheaks' figural work that top museums such as the Butler Institute of American Art have chosen to collect. His "Watchers" series has been especially admired. It was a breakthrough body of work, born of a vision he had while riding the Cape May Ferry. He witnessed a cluster of people gazing out at the water, mesmerized. It struck him just how much time people spend in the act of watching – a state that is both disassociated and connected.

Paintings from this series feature hard-edged objects within flat fields of color, and figures with arrested expressions. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond owns his first canvas from that series – "Watcher by the Rail," depicting Edna leaning over the ferry railing.

He also has applied a more painterly approach to such keenly-observed characters as oyster shuckers, watermen, migrant workers and outdoorsmen on horseback. Animals have a special place in his oeuvre, too. Some of his most memorable paintings depict cows standing in dark, glistening waters or a great blue heron in marsh grass acting as sentinel.

Watching is the perennial state of the artist.

And yet, as an art professor for 30 years at Virginia Wesleyan, Sheaks has excelled at interaction. In an art world that can be narcissistic and self-referential, Sheaks has maintained a broader and more balanced view.

For Sheaks, art has a function within the society at large. It should speak to all people, not just the art-educated.

He believes in teaching the fundamentals of composition and design, from color theory to brush techniques. Individuality of expression is respected in his classes, along with evidence of hard work. He believes that all of his students, thus armed, have a fair shot at an art career. Many of his students have gone on to create and to teach art, even to write about it.

Of course, an art career is a calling as much as a vocation.

Sheaks felt the urge early on, as a kid growing up in mountainous New Market, Va. He's told the story countless times, of making his first brushes from hair trimmed off a cat's tail.

On mountain lakes, he'd sail toy boats, too. So his inclination toward water also arose in his youth.

On the occasion of the opening of the new Barclay Sheaks Gallery in Virginia Wesleyan's handsome, new Katherine B. and Mills E. Godwin Jr. Administration Building, a survey show of his work is being presented. The college's commitment to permanently display his work is a fitting tribute. In addition to being a longtime, devoted professor, he is one of Virginia's most revered painters.

The retrospective will begin with a 1935 drawing he made at age 7, on lined notebook paper, of his house in New Market.

The chronology likely will culminate with recent paintings inspired by a cracked, concrete retaining wall on his Poquoson property. The dilapidated wall interested the artist as a subject, because the site speaks to how nature always and inevitably takes over. The wall appears so formidable, yet it has been overrun by grass and bush, which seem so ephemeral.

And in between that childhood sketch and his latest work, a lifetime of watching. Figures and landscapes with a powerful sense of place. The netting of essence.

Teresa Annas, VWC '76
Arts writer, *The Virginian-Pilot*

Catalogue of Selected Works From the Exhibition

DESERTED FARM (above)

Acrylic on masonite, 36" x 48", 1965
collection of the artist

Sheaks spent his childhood in the rural Shenandoah Valley of Virginia where there were an abundance of abandoned farms. The decomposition of the structures, coupled with the encroaching growth of untended plants and vines, gave the appearance that the farms were slowly melting into the natural environment. This picture is a composite, not from one farm, but from parts of every one. This painting tracks an interesting history through the local and national art world of the 1960s. In that decade, art organizations in Hampton Roads, such as the Virginia Beach Arts Center (now the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia) were providing exhibition alternatives to commercial galleries. *Deserted Farm* received numerous awards in such local and regional exhibitions and in November 1965 was accepted for display in a national juried show at the National Academy of Design in New York. Founded in 1802, this is the oldest fine arts school, and non-commercial exhibiting institution, in America.

WILD PONIES (opposite page)

Acrylic on upson board, each 7¼" x 6¾", 1990
collection of the artist

While Sheaks' better-known subject matter relates to harbor scenes, landscapes, low-land marshes and the like, no representative collection would be complete without the inclusion of animal studies, of which there are numerous examples. Among these are the two recent studies in this exhibition, *Wild Ponies*. The ponies live on Assateague Island of Virginia's Eastern Shore, an environment pictured in the panoramic landscape, *Still and Cold*.

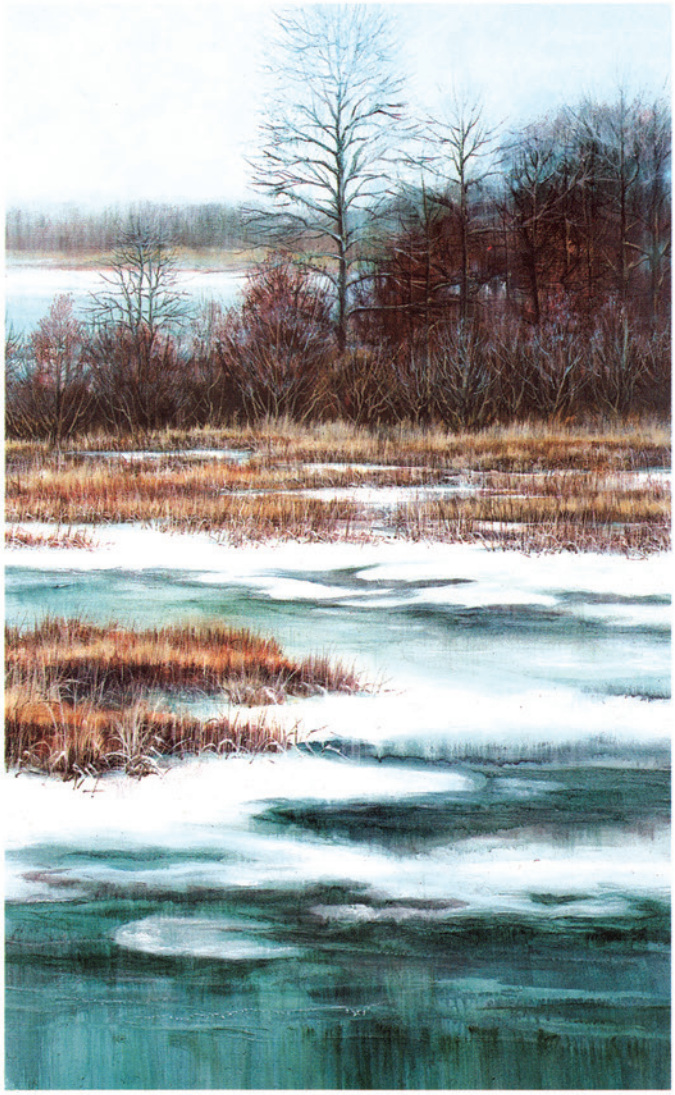
DUNE AND GULLS (above)
Acrylic on upson board, 18" x 24", 1974
collection of the artist

THE FRENCH MARKET I (opposite page)
Acrylic on masonite, 30" x 24", 1966
collection of Edna Sheaks

A mere two-hundred years ago, artists were expected to paint only noble deeds and great heros: to paint the ordinary and familiar was considered insignificant and unworthy of "art". It was the Impressionists who first showed that everyday life had its own poetic quality that could be conveyed by making paintings which looked like they were records of candid observation of the contemporary world. The French have the word *flanêur* for the person who walks in cities and other public places, part detective, part philosopher, observing with endless fascination the spectacle of modern life. Sheaks produces many works in this modernist tradition, drawing on the exotic places encountered on his travels as well as on his everyday "beat". When the subject appears "neutral", and no story or message obtrudes, the qualities of technique and surface texture can forcefully engage the viewer's attention.

The French Market I, for instance, features a view of a street in New Orleans, a city where the artist taught a seminar in the summer of 1966. This painting was one of a series exploring a technique of using transparent acrylic glazes to capture a particular feeling of luminosity, in this instance, the hot, humid shimmer that typifies the optical experience of a summer afternoon in that low-land southern city.

Sheaks travels regularly to the beaches and wetlands of Virginia's Eastern Shore, where sand dunes and seabirds are common sights of a leisurely walk. Though the sight might be ordinary, the composition of a painting must be extraordinary to hold visual interest, and great skill is required to render and arrange the complex interplay of form, space, color, and light in a way that interest and delights. Seldom does it come easy. *Dune and Gulls*, however, is one of those rare occurrences when all elements: inspiration, structure, media and technique came together successfully in one seamless working session, with no future touch-ups needed.



STILL AND COLD

Acrylic on stretched canvas each panel, 48" x 36", 1979
collection of Dr. and Mrs. Glen H. Shepard

The American Landscape is a central theme in American Art, beginning in the nineteenth century when ideologies of land, ranging from the politics of Manifest Destiny to the poetics of *Walden* were forces helping to shape national identity. Though there is little true "wilderness" now, the wetlands of the Chesapeake Bay and the vast tracts of undeveloped property on the Eastern Shore preserve the pristine appearance of this continent.

Still and Cold shows us Virginia wetlands as a "panoramic landscape" in a compositional type which conveys the imposing elements of landscape, and the supra-human strength of natural forces – in this case, the primal power of winter. The work was conceived in January 1973 – the winter of the big freeze when the Coast Guard had to send ice breakers to open the channels and harbors in the Chesapeake Bay. The artist spent a frigid week on the Eastern Shore of Virginia sketching, painting, taking photographs and writing poetry. This triptych is based on sketches and photographs made on the Assateague Island, a National Park on the Shore's Atlantic coast. Panoramic landscapes like this one are unusual for Sheaks, and in this painting there is the added challenge of composing the view as a three-part picture. In *Still and Cold*, the artist has designed each unit to be complete in itself. Any two adjacent panels, or all three parts together, can come together as a unified whole.

TIME EXPIRED

Acrylic on masonite, 18" x 24", 1964
collection of the artist

Time Expired is probably the only intentional "message" painting, prompted by the chance unity between two unrelated objects. The words "time expired" in the parking meter can also be read as a sign describing the run-down row house doorway behind it. This painting, accepted into the National Juried Midyear Exhibition of American Painting at the Butler Institute of American Art, was an important landmark in the artist's gaining national recognition.

WATCHER ON THE STERN

Acrylic on masonite, 36" x 48", 1968
collection of the artist

WATCHER (not illustrated)

Acrylic on masonite, 36" x 48", 1971
collection of Virginia Wesleyan College

Begun in the 1960s, the Watcher Series is a group of figure paintings united in style and theme. The focus of each painting is a figure who is watching, still and quiet to observe the world in action. These paintings become a meditation on the power of visual experience and art. For the immobile watchers, all sense of time and reality is taken over by whatever it is they are watching, which is unseen to us. For us as viewers of paintings, the same occurs. The style of this series combines realistic precision with a visual austerity that enhances the images. Sheaks achieves this effect through paring down the image, eliminating transitory effects of light, suggestions of movement, and inessential detail. The two paintings from the series in the current exhibition show some of the variations on the "watcher" theme. In *Watcher on the Stern* (1968), we are at a distance from the solitary figure. In contrast to the vast, uncluttered space she occupies, the red tone of her coat instills visual weight in the figure.

In *Watcher* (1971), it is as if we are sitting at the table with the figure, who dominates the picture space. In this painting, the visual theme of complex refractions of the visible world is represented in the reflective surfaces of sunglasses, water glass, and water.

The impetus for the series was an actual experience, and the first picture in the series, *Watcher by The Rail*, May 1968, is now in the American Art Collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The artist writes, "The inspiration for the "watcher" series was the result of a singular experience which occurred in the mid-1960's on a ferry boat trip from Cape May, New Jersey to Lewes, Delaware. Mrs. Sheaks had gone for a cup of coffee. With my camera I headed for the cabin. Arriving I found everyone in a state of suspended animation – frozen in time. Passengers were unmoving sitting, standing, waiting quietly, watching. Outside on the deck my wife was standing transfixed by the rail, watching. When the camera clicked the spell was broken and the first "watcher" was conceived. That first painting is now in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond."

AFTER THE STORM

Acrylic on stretched canvas, 30" x 40", 1998
collection of the artist

After the Storm is a recent example from a continuing series of studies of one particular old retaining wall. The artist returns to it as a subject because of a continuing fascination with the way unprotected man-made forms age, weather and decay under nature's ever abrading pressure.

POND

Acrylic on stretched canvas, 45" x 72", 1988
collection of the artist

Sheaks is familiar with this landscape, both as a painter and as an outdoorsman, and a characteristic of his pictures of the "wild" landscape is the way they simultaneously demonstrate a grasp of aesthetics and ecology. Unlike *Still and Cold*, which is all encompassing, *Pond* represents the limited area of a small wet-weather pond. Though this pond was barely twenty-five feet across, it is a microcosm of a low-land marsh. The aesthetic focus is the light, whose dynamic presence echoes the biological life of the pond – a phosphorescent glow of dormant life waiting for spring. In this large painting, the close-up focus invites the viewer to experience the beauty of the surface sparkle and texture, and also to see below the surface, so to speak, and comprehend its splendid vitality as a biological organism.

HAIR BRUSH

Acrylic on construction paper, 7½" x 6½", 1980
collection of the artist

Hair Brush demonstrates the artist's predilection for painting the casually-observed human figure. The small-scale format and limited palette in studies like this one allows for working rapidly and is conducive to a "painterly" brush technique. This technique allows the viewer to sense the artist's touch by making the fluid quality of the paint visible. Sheaks chooses the incidental gesture, rather than a formal pose, to create an intimate effect that shows the rich, pictorial qualities to be found in the most unassuming corner of the everyday world.

MOONRISE

Acrylic on stretched canvas, 30" x 48", 1985
collection of Mr. and Mrs. Mark Neighbors

This painting captures how the most solid forms of the landscape can yield to the forces of light. With its striking iridescence and feeling for spatial depth, this painting demonstrates the artist's sustaining passion for capturing the most fleeting effects of all types of outdoor light.

OYSTER BOATS

Acrylic on masonite, 12" x 36", 1965
collection of Dr. and Mrs. Glen H. Shepard

As the artist is also a boater, it is not surprising that Sheaks' familiarity with the coastal areas of the Chesapeake Bay extends to an interest in docks, watermen, and boats. In *Oyster Boats*, he shows us vessels designed and used to harvest what used to be the "cash crop" of the bay watermen, oysters. This painting, like *French Market I*, is from the 1960s, a decade in the artist's career which brought a proliferation of experimental discoveries. One of these was the incorporation of linear incisions carved directly into the surface of the painting. The lines created were used to direct the eye and unify the composition. Masonite hard board was ideally suited as both a support and ground for using this technique.

EXHIBITS, AWARDS AND HONORS

SELECTED JURIED EXHIBITIONS, AWARDS AND COMMISSIONS:

Butler Institute of Art, Youngstown, Ohio. Mid-year show of American Painting. Purchase Award for permanent collection.

Peninsula Artist Show, Newport News, Virginia. Mariner's Museum Award for best marine painting.

American Watercolor Society, National Academy of Design. Painting selected from this exhibition for special traveling show to tour United States.

National Drawing Biennial, Norfolk, Virginia. Drawing selected for Smithsonian Institute national traveling show.

Dixie Annual 13-State Art Competition, Montgomery Museum, Montgomery, Alabama, and Louisiana State Art Commission. Juror's special mention in watercolor.

Allied Artists of America Annual Exhibition, National Academy of Design, New York, New York.

National Society for Painters in Casein Annual Exhibition, National Arts Club, New York, New York.

Central South Exhibition, Parthenon, Nashville, Tennessee.

Contemporary Virginia and North Carolina Artists, Irene Leache Exhibition, Norfolk Museum, Norfolk Virginia.

Virginia Artists Show, Virginia Museum. Certificate of Distinction and Purchase Award for permanent collection.

Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Paintings selected for exhibition.

James River Juried Art Show, Mariner's Museum. Five State and Washington, D.C. area competition. Top award winner.

Gallery of Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Ten top realists of the Southeast invitational exhibition.

Land of Pleasant Living, professional artist invitational, Baltimore, Maryland. Prize winner and purchase award.

Drawings and watercolors selected by Louisiana Art Commission to tour state.

Commissioned to paint portrait of supercarrier "America" in action. Painting hangs in ward room, and will eventually to into U.S. Naval Archives.
Commissioned to paint supercarrier "Enterprise" in action.
Commissioned for a series of paintings depicting exploration of outer space including the Viking Project for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and Langley Research Center.
Commissioned for 120-foot painting depicting the surface of Mars for the U.S. Bicentennial Exposition on Science and Technology at Kennedy Space Center.

MUSEUM AND CORPORATE COLLECTIONS:

The Butler Institute of Art, Youngstown, Ohio; The Columbia Museum, Columbia, South Carolina; The Courtland Museum, Courtland, Virginia; The Junior League Museum Collection, Newport News, Virginia; The Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia; The Mobile Museum, Mobile, Alabama; The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia; The Virginia Museum, Richmond, Virginia; The American Tobacco Company; Blue Cross-Blue Shield; Virginia Commonwealth University; Longwood College; The Norfolk Public Schools; The National Brewing Company; Rothchilds of Pall Mall, New Zealand; The Swedish Tobacco Company; Tenneco Corporation; The Thalhimer Collection; United Virginia Bank; The University of Delaware; Universal Leaf Tobacco Company; The Virginia National Bank; American National Bank; Noland Company, Inc.; National Aeronautics and Space Administration; Randolph Macon College; Philip Morris; Westminster Canterbury; Riverside Hospital; McDonald's Restaurant; Bocour Paints; Medical College of Virginia; Alabama Power Co.; Christopher Newport University; E.M. Sandler and Sons, Inc.; Donnley Financial; The Muscarelle Museum of Art; Virginia Wesleyan College and others.

PUBLICATIONS:

Author:

Painting with Acrylics from Start to Finish, Davis Publications, Inc., 1972
Drawing and Painting the Natural Environment, Davis Publications, Inc., 1974
Painting in Oils, Davis Publications, Inc., 1977
Stretching the Eyes' Distance – Reflections on the Chesapeake Bay, Bleecker Street Publishing Corp., 1980
Drawing Figures and Faces, Davis Publications, Inc., 1987
Pamphlet on techniques and methods of using acrylic polymer emulsion paints, Hunt Manufacturing Company
Acrylic Painting with Barclay Sheaks published in conjunction with PBS Television Series, 1985
The Acrylics Book, Watson-Guptill Publications, 1996

Other Publications:

Painting reproduced in publication *Prize Winning Art*
Reproductions of paintings and descriptions of methods and techniques used, *Painting in Synthetic Media* and *The Complete Guide to Polymer Painting* (Russell O. Woody, Jr., Reinhold.)
Painting with description of how it was executed included in *Collins Artists' Manual,* Harper Collins Publishers, London, England, 1995.
Series of articles for *Palette Talk* published by M. Grumbacher, Inc., 1991, 1992
Who's Who in American Art
Who's Who in the South and Southeast

OTHER RELATED ACTIVITIES AND HONORS:

Over 100 one-man exhibitions in various galleries, institutions and art centers.
Numerous awards in various media in local, regional and national shows, festivals, etc.
Artist-in-residence for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia and traveling lecturer.
Artist-in-residence for the Richmond Humanities Center.
Presented program, NAEA (National Art Education Association) Conference New England, 1982.
Prepared, executed and hosted a nationally syndicated television series for PBS *Acrylic Painting with Barclay Sheaks,* 1985.
Honorary Doctorate, Christopher Newport University, 1997.
Currently Associate Professor of Art and Distinguished Resident Artist, Virginia Wesleyan College.

Back Cover

YOUNG MAN WITH A ROSE

Acrylic on masonite, 36" x 48", 1972
collection of Sue B. Myers

Painted with a technique similar to that of the *Watcher* series, this is a picture inspired by a college student from Virginia Wesleyan's early days, the 1970s. The student was a campus fixture because everywhere he went he wore the rose-bedecked hat. In the painting, a portrait-like individuality is combined with formal, frontal symmetry, thereby creating a character which the viewer experiences as both a distinct personality and an icon of an era.