

Frank Mason in Vermont: Artist and Teacher

by Mickey Myers

This summer the genius of Frank Mason (1921-2009) can be discerned in *Frank Mason in Vermont: Artist and Teacher* at the Bryan Memorial Gallery in Jeffersonville, Vermont. Exuberant, flamboyant, and inspirational, Mason is paired with some of the students he taught and encouraged over six decades. Twenty-two works painted in Vermont by Mason are installed alongside works by fifty former students. The exhibit references the month-long trips to Vermont to paint en plein air, which Mason led annually from 1968 until shortly before his death.

During a Mason Month in Vermont, it was not unusual to see painters at their easels, lined up artist after artist (sometimes

as many as fifty at a time) alongside dirt roads in the picturesque environs of northern Vermont. Mason had a penchant for Stowe and other nearby locations in Lamoille County, and for Peacham (population 732) in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, where he owned a home with his wife, Anne. Mason's relationship to Vermont could be considered the culmination of a rich and steady career as a painter and beloved instructor of classical realism at the Art Students League in New York City.

Frank Mason was born in Cleveland, Ohio, to a Shakespearean actor (his father) and a painter, pianist and violinist (his mother). An only child, Mason embraced his parents' outgoing natures even before he selected a field of study for himself. His family moved to New York City in 1932,

Frank Mason in Vermont: Artist and Teacher is on view through September 4, 2017, at the Bryan Memorial Gallery, 180 Main Street, Jeffersonville, Vermont, 05464, 802-644-5100, www.bryangallery.org.

where Mason was enrolled in the first class of the Music and Arts High School, while attending evening classes at the National Academy of Design. By age sixteen, he received a scholarship at the Art Students League, where he met the man who was to be his teacher, mentor and friend, Frank Vincent DuMond (1865-1951).

Mason recalled DuMond telling him, "You seem to have a good sense of humor. Good thing. You're going to need it!" Mason was eager for guidance, and DuMond felt he needed to be shepherded differently





All illustrated images by Frank Mason are from the estate of Frank Mason. All other illustrations are collection of the artist.

ABOVE: Frank Mason, *Old Silo, Cabot*, oil, 11 x 22.

RIGHT: Elizabeth Torak, *A Colorful Table*, oil, 36 x 40.

LEFT: Frank Mason, *Tide Coming in on Whale Rock, Bald Head*, oil, 24 x 36.

than most, as he was clearly gifted at such a young age. He invited Mason to his landscape workshops in Pownal, Vermont, in exchange for his tending the gardens of DuMond's home. It was hard work, all summer long, but from it Mason became synchronized to a cadence and an intimacy with nature that was to continue for the rest of his life.

As their relationship matured, DuMond asked Mason when he was going to start teaching. This prophetic story as reported by Tom Torak credits Mason with replying that "...he had never thought about teaching, he just wanted to paint. Dumond looked him squarely in the eye and said 'Frank, it's not yours to keep for yourself.'" When DuMond died at age eighty-five in 1951, Mason, age thirty,



took over his classes at the Art Students League, a position he held for fifty-one years, instructing in classical realism.

Mason wore the mantle of the Masters with dignity, humor and a strong sense of lineage. The pattern of winters in New



BELOW: Joel Coplin, *Oak Creek*, oil, 24 x 36.



ABOVE: Frank Mason, *Old Birches*, oil, 16 x 10.

LEFT: Kim Darling, *Composition in Orange and Blue*, oil, 20 x 16.

ABOVE RIGHT: Frank Mason, *Storm Over Jeffersonville*, oil, 12 x 16.

RIGHT: Tom Torak, *Sorrel's Knoll*, oil, 20 x 24.

York City and summers in Vermont, firmly instilled by DuMond's schedule, was at the core of Mason's beliefs as an artist. In his work and teaching, his personal aesthetic followed the Old Masters. He sought the effect of light on form as seen through atmosphere, and as he explained to his young wife, Anne, "It's hard to teach atmosphere in the classroom. Ah, but when you see it in the country...."

The first Mason Month in Vermont was organized in 1967 with the help of Mason's League classroom monitor Tom Ranges, who recalls Mason told him, "I'll do it if I have a place to go, and don't have to do the prep work." A dozen League students rented shared cabins in Warren, Vermont, and spent a month dedicated to painting. Twice a week, Mason met with the students in the field at locations agreed upon with Ranges, and an agenda for the month, with class critiques on Saturdays, was established that would last with little variation for forty years.

Eventually settling the workshop pro-



gram in Stowe, Vermont, Anne Mason offers, “Frank thought Stowe was perfect.... It had appropriate housing; the people were so welcoming, and as Frank said, ‘You can’t kill those mountains.’” Attendance was limited to fifty, first come, first served. While many may have been League students, others joined in; there were no grades or credits, and roll was not taken. Participants paid a one-time fee for the entire month.

Each week of instruction was divided into two days with Mason instructing and critiquing, and three days students painted on their own, with a monitor who managed the logistics of the perpetually changing locations. In the days before cell phones, with classes scheduled according to the vicissitudes of the weather, painting in early morning some days and late afternoon others, the monitor took on the role of conductor, keeping everyone together for the sake of the art.

Most Mason students mention one or





ABOVE: Frank Mason, *Mid-Summer, Cabot View*, oil, 16 x 22.

LEFT: John C. Traynor, *Pleasant Valley View, Jeffersonville, VT*, oil, 24 x 30.

ABOVE RIGHT: Frank Mason, *Lilacs*, oil, 15 x 18.

RIGHT: Fiona Cooper Fenwick, *The Farm Pond Field*, oil, 12 x 16.



painting landscapes en plein air in order to capture momentary passages of light. “The light effect,” which Walter Mosley summarizes as “the main concentration of light,” was the driving topic of discussion through all Mason critiques, as he inquired of its whereabouts and painted it into a student’s canvas, should it be missing. Finally, the story telling: Anne Mason reports when her husband saw even one student’s eyes glazing over, he knew it was time for a story, and punctuated his workshops with elaborate story telling that transferred the wisdom of the masters to the situation at hand. As Joel Coplin remembers, “Mason always had a better story,” no matter the topic.

Shari Dukes Kiener recalls, “We would

another of three central teaching approaches in their recollections of Mason’s workshops. The Prismatic Palette is most

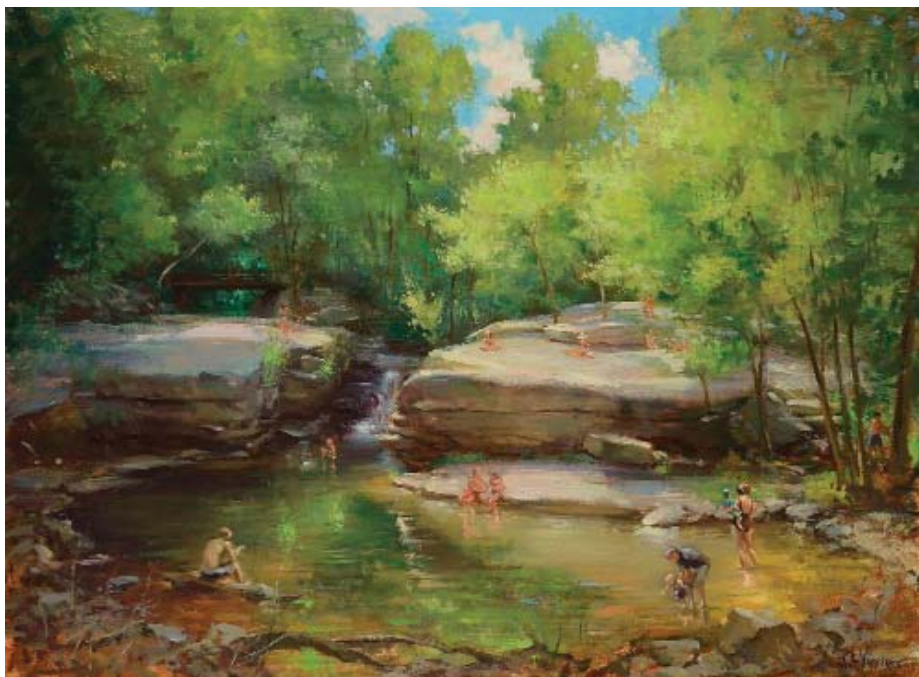
obvious and basic to all participants in snapshots that are shared of the workshops—a way of organizing paints that facilitates



meet with Frank every Tuesday and Thursday, either for sunrise, starting at 4:30 a.m., or for sunset, starting at 4:30 p.m. We arrived an hour before Frank, to get our paintings started and ready to capture the light effect. The sunrise sessions could be tough. There were cold, rainy mornings in early June, and it was still dark, and often drizzling rain. We were trained to show up rain or shine, and in the event of rain, to soldier on under our umbrellas, in our rain gear, and with plastic over our easels. Then, without fail, when Frank would arrive to join us, the rain would stop.”

Saturday afternoons were spent at Harry’s Barn (literally, a barn) with Mason critiquing the week’s work. The day was capped with a dinner prepared by Anne, to whom her husband explained that the participants had worked so ferociously all





LEFT: John Varriano, *Sunday at Split Rock*, oil, 30 x 40.

BELOW LEFT: Susan Goetz, *Sisters*, oil, 64 x 44.

RIGHT: Frank Mason, *White Mountains from Hay Field*, oil, 20 x 28.

BELOW RIGHT: Frank Mason, *Peacham Orchard*, oil, 24 x 36.



week they needed the encouragement of social time together.

Mason himself painted only occasionally during workshop weeks, and never with the class except to illustrate a point on a participant's canvas. "What stays with me, Corinne Russo remembers, "is the joy he got from putting the perfect stroke on the canvas, bringing a subject to life...with a big infectious smile on his face." Mason usually did one or two demos during the month, from peonies in a vase to a thundering waterfall.

The energy and concentration required by teaching outdoors took at least a day of recovery before he turned his attention to his own work—often accompanied by a student who painted nearby without commentary. In July, he began to paint his own work in earnest until returning to New York City for the school year.

To be acknowledged by him seemed to be a privilege, which Fiona Cooper Fenwick remembers often didn't come during one's first workshop. "To be critiqued by Frank was a privilege, and yet every critique was meant as a lesson for the whole class. Most often, a critiqued painting would be saved by the student, untouched after Frank had worked on it, as a visual lesson to be kept."

Mason's voice boomed as he erupted with laughter at the folly of life or art. He would breathe in the fresh morning air as he stepped into a tableau of students at their easels, proceeding toward whatever caught his eye on a student's canvas. Gradually, others would peel off from in front of their easels and before long, the first student and Mason would be surrounded by onlookers. He would demonstrate directly on a student's canvas because as he said he could show what he meant better than he could explain it. As they moved from easel to easel, Mason's intimacy with nature and painting prevailed over his familiarity with the student names. "Dear Love," he would call one or another, "Now we are getting somewhere."



At six foot three inches tall Mason could be “an intimidating figure especially for new students, but kind at the same time,” Coplin submits. Jan Brough suggests, “His commanding presence was thrilling to experience as he spent much time and energy passing on his skills.” Russo states that Mason was “larger than life in many ways: in his persona, his exuberance, his boundless energy, his extraordinary skill and his passion for painting.”

Many of his former students reference the life-altering effect of Mason’s instruction. Leslie Watkins says, “It was the beginning of what I consider my genuine life as an artist. Up until then, everything else had been in preparation.” Despite his exuberance, Mason would acknowledge, “It’s not me. It’s what I’m teaching. I’m teaching them a way to live their whole life.” Regardless of where the credit lies, to this day a group of Mason students returns to Stowe every June, though without their leader, with enough skills and ideas to fill the month, painting together.

Anne Mason explains her husband was



“...intent on passing onto his students the skills to progress indefinitely on their own: to teach themselves. His pleasure came when his students went beyond the classroom. How?..by learning the basic concepts and the way to approach every painting.”

Mason himself mused that “I’d like to be remembered for handing the torch onto the younger generation in the same way it was handed to me.” Or as Douglas David remembers, Mason said, “It is not about this painting; it is about the next 100.”