

Whose painting is it?

**Quincy artist, 98, finds works sold under signature of more famous colleague
By Carolyn Y. Johnson, Boston Globe Staff | April 10, 2005**

QUINCY -- When watercolorist Henry McDaniel saw his brushstrokes on the cover of the spring issue of the Atlantic Salmon Journal, to which he subscribes, he was elated. The steep gray banks of the Matane River in Quebec, the fly fisherman casting his line over foaming rapids, the dappled pool -- it was exactly as McDaniel remembered painting the scene.

Except that, at least according to the magazine McDaniel received in the mail last month, it wasn't his painting.

Instead of McDaniel's usual red signature, the name of John Whorf, a well-known American impressionist from the Boston area who died in 1959, floated like a white ghost in the bottom right-hand corner.

"That burned me up . . . I'm in my 99th year," McDaniel exclaimed over tea in his Quincy home. "You just hope you can sit back and not worry about these things."

McDaniel, a former art director whose two lifelong passions are fishing and painting, was flabbergasted, and his son, Joe, who was the model for the fisherman in the painting, immediately launched an investigation.

Drawing on the elder McDaniel's keen memory and the younger's persistent detective work, the duo has unraveled a case of what some say is a common malpractice in the art business: using the name of a reputable artist on a work by someone less regarded to boost its value. The McDaniels say that sometime before summer 2003, Henry McDaniel's water-soluble signature was rubbed off two paintings and replaced with John Whorf's name, and they were sold for thousands more than McDaniel ever received for his work.

The art dealer for those paintings, Barridoff Galleries in Portland, Maine, is now investigating the consignor, who had said the Whorfs were acquired from a private estate. In the meantime, the McDaniels have initiated a campaign to have the forged paintings re-signed by Henry McDaniel before he dies.

They have more than their memories to back them up: The Atlantic Salmon Journal cover painting, identified as Whorf's "Fishing in the Rapids," had appeared with the caption "One of the beautiful unnamed pools" in a spread of Henry McDaniel watercolors in the July 1957 issue of the Ford Times, a magazine published by the Ford Motor Co.

Joe McDaniel "is totally right -- it is his father" who was the artist, said Rob Elowitch, owner of Barridoff Galleries, which sold the two paintings with a Whorf signature at an August 2003 auction in Maine.

"Fishing in the Rapids" sold for \$18,720 to Avery Galleries in Haverford, Pa.; the second painting, "Fishing in the Rapids, White River, Vermont," sold for \$9,945 to another gallery.

Larry Taylor, the art consultant for the Atlantic Salmon Journal who chose the painting as its cover art, quoted Richard Rosello, owner of Avery Galleries, as saying the work has been sold since then for about \$40,000. (The gallery would not confirm the figure, for privacy reasons.) Taylor got permission to use it as the magazine's cover art free of charge.

McDaniel's paintings usually fall within the \$4,000 to \$6,000 range, according to Stephen O'Brien, a Newbury Street gallery owner who has sold the Quincy man's work.

Art specialists say watercolor fraud is relatively common, and even art dealers who take every precaution in scrutinizing a painting -- checking signatures, using an ultraviolet light to search for alterations -- can be duped. Since watercolor takes a century to set and is soluble by water, a forger can easily erase a signature, according to Cory Barbis, an art conservator in Vermont who often works with Boston-area galleries.

The story of McDaniel's work being recast under Whorf's name has grabbed the attention of art critics and dealers, and sheds light on a marketplace where much of a work's value is in its name. In its November 2003 issue, the Maine Antique Digest described the two paintings sold at auction that summer as "truly superior works by this excellent artist, painted with rich tones, reflections, and exquisite detail. Each depicted fishing scenes with glowing water and a play on the rapid movement of water that was truly a stroke of genius."

Elowitch said when he first saw the paintings, he said to himself, "These are gorgeous. If these are real, then these are worth a lot of money."

"And I accepted them totally as real because they were as good as [Whorf] had ever done, or better," he said. In his online catalog, Elowitch described the paintings as the "largest and certainly the finest Whorfs we've ever seen."

Nicole Amoroso, director of Avery Galleries, said that she was moved by the painting bought and sold by her gallery, but that in retrospect there were clear differences between Whorf's work and McDaniel's.

"They were both working in watercolor, they were both interested in fishing scenes, marine scenes. The way they deal with dappled light is similar in many ways. But McDaniel's palate is brighter, his brush strokes are tighter. Everything's been revealed, in retrospect," she said, adding that McDaniel's work is more "commercial" than Whorf's.

Taylor, the consultant for the Atlantic Salmon Journal, which has a circulation of about 11,500, said he too was taken in, even though he knew McDaniel well:

They were fellow fishermen, and Taylor had even used McDaniel's work in magazines in the past.

"I'm kicking myself, because I should have known it wasn't a John Whorf. The style is so distinctly -- to me, distinctly -- Henry McDaniel and not a bit like John Whorf," he said. "These galleries got snookered, just like I did."

Taylor said he even recognizes the pool in the painting, an area of the Matane that local fishermen call "the smoker," and where he fished in 1967.

Perhaps most curious is that McDaniel and Whorf were acquaintances, as fellow Boston-area artists of roughly the same age. When McDaniel, still energetic and still painting as he approaches the century mark, walked up the stairs to his home studio recently, he spent more time admiring tiny thumbnails of Whorf's paintings on the Internet than showing off his own work.

McDaniel said he can envision Whorf responding to the forgery in a thick cloud of expletives.

"I wouldn't dare say it in his language," he said.

"I know he'd blow his top. He wouldn't want his name to go on anything he didn't do."

According to Whorf's son, John, 77, fake Whorfs became common after his father's death in 1959. "Shortly after he died, there was sort of a splurge of these very bad watercolors that were floating around and were signed with a crude imitation of his signature," said the Hingham resident.

"These were very amateurish paintings. It's a different story with Mr. McDaniel."

This story appears headed for a happy ending. While the McDaniels remain outraged, the forged Whorfs have also catapulted Henry McDaniel to the attention of art dealers, and both paintings will be returned to have the true artist's signature restored, according to the Avery and Barridoff galleries.

"We'd like to do a little folio of Mr. McDaniel's work, and use the one that was forged as a centerpiece," said Amoroso, who plans to visit Quincy to look at McDaniel's work, and to have the painter erase John Whorf's name from her client's painting and sign his own.

"We think [McDaniel] is a wonderful artist. We wanted to give him the credit he deserves."

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