



PHOTO BY KIMBERLY TURNBAUGH

CHESAPEAKE BAY BRUSHSTROKES

There's a secret to David Turnbaugh's hauntingly beautiful paintings—talent and hard work.

by PATRICIA RYBAK

Nothing so stirs the imagination as the sight of a Chesapeake Bay skipjack, under full sail, carving its way through the foam-tipped waves of a turbulent Bay. Add the sunlit image of Thomas Point Light, or the distant tree-lined horizon of Howell Point, and you have the stuff of which David Turnbaugh's oil paintings are made.

"What intrigues me about the skipjacks is that the wind is blowing them along as they're dragging their dredge baskets, and the baskets get so heavy that the boat almost comes to a complete stop. Then, as soon as the baskets are lifted off the bottom, the boat shoots ahead into the waves. It's really neat," says the artist who is currently working on a series of skipjack paintings that are being reproduced into prints.

David Turnbaugh is a tall, slender man with a warm smile and a gracious manner. A native of Maryland, he graduated from the Maryland Institute of Art in 1959, and taught art in the Baltimore County schools for 12 years. "I really enjoyed teaching school," he says, "but as long as my main income was from teaching, I didn't feel like I was a real artist."

The turning point—when the art teacher became the full-time artist—

Tucked away in his studio, artist David Turnbaugh renders a romantic Chesapeake scene.



occurred in 1971. Bendann Art Galleries in Baltimore sold one of his paintings for \$1,000 and owner Lance Bendann had confidence that they could sell more of his work. "When I started I had a wife, three kids, a house, two cars, and 667 bucks—that's all the money I had. But, I was at a point where I thought I could make a living in art. At least I wanted to try," recalls Turnbaugh.

Turnbaugh's life as an artist in the late seventies and early eighties revolved around a comfortable routine of painting Chesapeake subjects, part-

"The Howard," one in Turnbaugh's series of portraits documenting the last remaining skipjacks.

time teaching, and family. Then, he entered and won the 1985 Maryland Duck Stamp Contest with his painting of a pair of Canada geese. This event added a whole new dimension to Turnbaugh's career.

"Handling the duck stamp is a big job," says Turnbaugh. "All the

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Despite Turnbaugh's success, he has remained a humble man driven solely by his own high standards and love of painting.

state wants is the stamp. The reproduction rights belong to the creator. That's how the artist makes his or her money." Many art aficionados watch the duck stamp contest closely and collect a print of each year's stamp. Thus Turnbaugh was catapulted into the confusing and exciting worlds of printmaking and marketing. Turnbaugh and his wife, Maureen, visited the previous year's duck stamp winner, Carla Huber, in her home in Columbia, Md., where she "talked to us for four hours about what was

are the most time-consuming part of the duck stamp print business, says the artist, who figures he has rendered about 400 of the miniature drawings. And Maureen, who David Turnbaugh says has a "great head for figures," is kept busy handling the financial end of the business. The Turnbaughs also spend a good deal of time marketing the prints at galleries up and down the northeast coast.

But while Turnbaugh's success may be attributed in part to the



involved in producing and selling duck stamp prints. We took notes, but we still walked out of there with our heads spinning."

The frank talk with Huber made it clear that Turnbaugh's basement studio wouldn't be large enough to accommodate his fledgling print business. He found an office just a few miles from home and located several printmakers that could take on his work. Maryland Realist, Ltd. was born.

Between the print business and painting, Dave Turnbaugh is busier than he ever imagined. Remarques, the fine little drawings that appear in the bottom margin of some prints,

"I like snow. I also like birds in snow," says Turnbaugh about "January," the painting that inspired his winning duck stamp.

duck stamp and its prints, his paintings and prints are by no means limited to Canada geese. Turnbaugh's original works are rendered exclusively from photographs he has taken himself. Consequently he spends a lot of time on Maryland's Eastern Shore, especially Tilghman and Deal islands, photographing his favorite subjects—waterfowl, skipjacks, and workboats. Sometimes he finds his best shots while out for a sail. "One time, we were circling around some tongers

and I was taking pictures. The watermen—they're pretty nice guys with a good sense of humor—were talking back and forth, kidding with each other. Then, one of the men on the other boat got a bottle. He wrote something down on a piece of paper and put it in the bottle; he put the bottle in the water and kind of pushed it our way. The fella I was with, Don Cunningham, got out his net and retrieved the bottle. He took out the note and read it. It said something like this: 'Roses are red, violets are blue; I'm working hard, why aren't you?'"

Hundreds of artists have tried to capture the romance of Chesapeake Bay skipjacks, but Turnbaugh's finely drawn, moody renditions of these denizens of the Bay are especially riveting because of the artist's compulsive attention to detail. Working on a masonite panel that has been primed with up to 10 coats of gesso and then sanded to a fine finish, his painting surface is slick, but his paintings are not without texture. Be it the prickly blades of grass in a landscape, the downy feathers on the wings of a Canada goose, or the taut hard lines of a sail halyard, Turnbaugh applies texture stroke by meticulous stroke with a very fine sable brush. "You can't buy brushes to do the really fine work. They have to be worn down," says the artist, whose favorite brushes have only a few lonely hairs.

A vital component to Turnbaugh's beautiful finished products is the medium he and many area realists use faithfully: the Maroger Medium. This recipe of linseed oil, powdered lead, and mastic that Turnbaugh "cooks up" in his kitchen was developed by Jacques Maroger, Turnbaugh's teacher at the Maryland Institute. It is purported to be the medium of 17th-century old masters such as Rubens and Rembrandt. The medium is mixed in with the paint to make it spread easier and smoother. If applied in layers, the medium can also help a painting appear luminescent. Turnbaugh feels it helps his paintings achieve a clarity of color. "I just don't think my paintings would look like they do without it," he says.

Dave Turnbaugh is a man who is constantly striving for perfection. But his precise drawing, his painstaking adherence to accuracy, and his super-critical eye take their toll in his yearly production. "Most of my larger paintings take about three months. That's working 8, 10 hours



a day, seven days a week. There was one painting," the artist recalls with a grimace, "Mallard Pond, that I spent six months on. It took about two and a half months to finish the background landscape; then I added some mallards." He pauses and shakes his head.

"Funny things happen with birds when they are landing and taking off. Different patterns. You put a bird here and a bird there, and then you add one more bird—and suddenly they're lined up one way or another. Not good composition. That's what happened on this one. So, I sanded the birds off, repainted everything and tried a new approach. I didn't like that one either. I had to do the same thing. Sand. Repaint. The third attempt worked out. The painting had 30 or 40 birds in it, but I think for every bird that stayed, there were two that didn't make it. The thing is, I had this beautiful landscape and I hated to ruin it. Even though it took months and months, I had to save the painting."

Dave is a realist painter, but his easy-going hackles bristle when someone labels his work photorealistic. "I know some people see it that way," he says, "but I don't. My work just looks more real than some realists' work. My painting is the way I am. The way I see things."

Shunning labels, he simply refers to his work as "airy." Some of Turnbaugh's "airy" paintings sell for upwards of \$12,000.

Despite his success as an artist, David Turnbaugh's feet remain planted firmly on the ground. "I'm only as good as my last painting. If I flub on a painting, my confidence is rocked. I don't think about it much though; I try to keep my mind on simple things." He laughs. "My wife can tell you I'm rather simple-minded."

Dave Turnbaugh is a member of the Grand Central Art Galleries of New York, and the American Society of Marine Artists. In addition to winning the 1985 Maryland Duck Stamp contest, he is the recipient of the Maryland Institute Silver Medal Award, and numerous awards from exhibits and juried museum shows. His paintings may be seen at the Annapolis Marine Art Gallery, Ltd., and are in a number of collections, including USF&G and the Rodale Collection of Pennsylvania. And his paintings are still shown at Bendann Art Galleries. Bendann, a long-time associate of the artist, speaks highly of Turnbaugh. "Dave Turnbaugh is an exceptional artist. Despite his excellence and success as a painter,

Thompson Creek, the location of this winter scene, is one of the artist's favorite spots.

he has remained a humble man driven solely by his own high standards and love of painting."

Sitting in the living room of the Turnbaugh home surrounded by the works of this extraordinary artist, one can't help being stirred by the strength and clarity of vision that directed each brushstroke. But a sense of wistful solitude also pervades, a solitude that perhaps symbolizes the aloneness and isolation that are every artist's working companions.

"I'm a very happy person," says the artist. "I like what I do. I like my life. I have no great philosophy, no secrets. If you look at my paintings and ask me how I do it, I say it's all hard work. No short cuts. No secrets. Just hard work." □

Patricia Rybak is a freelance writer with an art background whose work has appeared in Baltimore-area papers. She and her husband spend leisure hours exploring the Bay in their O'Day 35, The Derring Do.