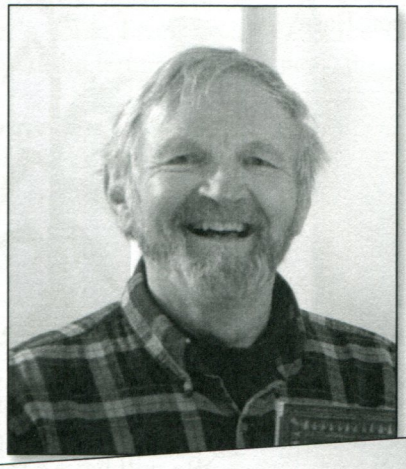
Ken Zilisch: Portrait of the Artist



Ken Zilisch has been a visual story teller all his life. "Always, deep inside was this wanting to draw, wanting to paint," he says. In Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, where he grew up, he recalls the day his kindergarten teacher summoned his mother. Ken, certain he was in trouble, hid outside the classroom door to listen. His teacher showed his mother some of his drawings and told her that her son had a gift and that it should be supported.

But it was not easy. Drawing "was something I could do. People would say, 'You did a really good job on that.' For the other stuff, it was, 'Hey, you flunked that again.'" He found out much later that his challenges were due to dyslexia and ADD.

He drew his way through grade school and high school, doing projects for extra credit. In his senior year, he received a Silver Palette Award in the *Milwaukee Journal* art calendar contest, but when he decided to go to art or architecture school, his teachers discouraged him, saying he couldn't spell *architect* or *structure*. "They said, if you can't spell it, you can't be it."

Instead he joined the military. Scoring in the top two percent during recruitment, he was assigned to intelligence gathering and spent the next four years in the Far East. During that time he continued with his artwork: sculpture, thrown pots, pen-and-ink renderings, cartoons, pastel portraits, oil painting, and photography. People bought his work.

After his military service, he returned to Wisconsin. He was encouraged by a college art instructor to apply to Layton School of Art (now MIAD) and was accepted. The GI Bill paid for his schooling, and for his last two years he received scholarships. One of his instructors told him, "The only thing you are here to do . . . is know everything your instructors know and take it one step beyond." Ken has applied this advice ever since. For example, adding a tiny figure leaning over a railing to a pen-and-ink illustration of a historic mill tells a fuller story. In a large pastel portrait, "Uncle Tom" wears a Scout's neckerchief. The extra details reward the careful viewer.



Top: Artist Ken Zilisch.
Above: A page from Ken's sketchbook.



PHOTOS: REBECCA UPJOHN SNYDER

Above: "Uncle Tom," completed in three hours in a painting group Ken was a member of. This piece is 19½"x25". Left and opposite: Postcard-size examples of detailed pen-and-ink drawings of historic Ozark landscapes. Originals are 11"x14".



While at Layton, Ken met his first wife and the mother of his daughter, and they moved to Door County, Wisconsin. They started KD ad-ventures, an advertising agency, which they ran for 20 years. They had clients from banks to flower shops to makers of liquid manure handling systems. They created ads, brochures, catalogs, and visuals for TV commercials. Ken also freelanced for a label company and continued doing fine art on the side: pastels, pen and ink, wood blocks, drawing, painting, photography. His versatility in different media, his ability to solve problems within limited visual space,

and his skill at juggling different aspects of production on multiple projects was something he believes was actually facilitated by the dyslexia and ADD, because he thought differently.

He graduated from Layton with honors in graphic design, something he chose so he could support his family.

After his marriage ended amicably, he lived in Arkansas. Later, he moved to New Hampshire, where he became involved in the Mount Washington Valley Art Association and taught art. "I don't teach people how to draw," Ken says quoting author/art teacher Betty Edwards, "I teach them how to see." His students draw, sit back and look again, measure distances, look at angles, evaluate space. "We have a little bit of math in there and you start to put it together—and trust it. Drawing and painting to me almost become a meditation."



"Blink Bonnie" on Diamond Lake in Cassopolis, MI. The assignment was to re-create this scene from a 2½"x4" black & white photo from a historic book; artistic license allowed. Finished size 20"x24".

Dyslexia and ADD continued to challenge him and ended his second relationship. He didn't receive a diagnosis for the dyslexia until he was in his late forties, and the ADD until his late fifties or early sixties. But, he says, if it hadn't happened that way, he wouldn't have met Carol.

They met through church. Ken's minister told Carol: "He's a nice guy, he's handy with his hands, and he's very creative, but he's a little odd." Ken smiles and adds, "Our relationship is absolutely easy. We found we worked well together, and we had a lot of the same philosophies of life."

The most rewarding aspect of being an artist, he says, is the gratitude people express for his work. Sometimes there is silence, or even tears because he has captured the essence of a loved one. Sometimes a small business owner tells him they are able to stay in business because of the benefits of his ad work.

His early artistic influences were the Phantom, Roy Rogers, Tarzan, and Prince Valiant, all of them skillfully rendered. "I could read comics," he said. "When my dad and brother and I would haul trash for other people, you'd have *The Saturday Evening Post* and you'd start seeing Norman Rockwell and John Clymer. Just seeing the covers and seeing the cartoons and comic books: those became my mentors."

What advice would he give to an aspiring artist? Buy the best-quality materials you can, Ken says. Carry a sketchbook and take the time to really look. For learning to draw, he suggests *The Awakened Eye* and *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain.*

Ken hands me a page of Exhibitions, Commissions, Awards, and Teaching that fills two columns in a tiny font. At the top it says "partial list." As he speaks, creativity spills out of him and his excitement is palpable.

"I am not just the minister's spouse," he says with a grin. And then he begins to talk about his clown work as a mime . . . but that is another story. *Rebecca Upjohn Snyder*



ShakerStyle
Hand Crafted Furniture
1-603-827-3340
Visit Our Showroom
292 Chesham Road
Harrisville, NH 03450
Wed. - Fri. 10-5
Sat. 10-2
or by appointment
www.shakerstyle.com

LANDESIGN
Landscape Architecture and Construction
Douglas R. Miller, Landscape Architect
www.landesignllc.com
dmiller@landesignllc.com
(603) 827-3833
CALL TODAY TO CREATE THE OUTDOOR SPACE OF YOUR DREAMS