

# Artist Expresses Soul Through Watercolors

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BERLIN (Somerset Co.) — From fragile flowers to animals, her soul seems to be expressing itself when Shirley Tataleba puts her paintbrush to work on the watercolors she loves so well to do.

Rich hues and mysterious shadows of the hibiscus blossom, for instance, may leave one caught in its cares for untold moments, as if it were the reality.

Of the magnolia, iris and others, the same is true.

And her brush lovingly captures the corralled horses the native farm girl imagines grazing in a fenced field.

"I was born and raised on a farm," says Shirley, indicating in the panoramic landscape visible through the picture window, Whitehorse Mountain where she grew up.

"I love animals, especially my little Mitzi," she says, alluding to a nearby Siamese house cat. She adopted it from the assorted feline orphans housed at the humane society's local animal shelter.

A devoted wife of 45 years to husband, John Tataleba and mother of their three children — Gail, Gary and Gwen — Shirley was a busy homemaker who hand-made most of their clothes when the kids were younger.

Later she held part-time jobs, but in the housewife's deepest heart, an artist was waiting to be born.

The opportunity came in the summer of 1980 when Gwen was college bound. Shirley enrolled in a class that Laurel Arts in Somerset was offering.

"I started with oils first because I thought it would be easier," she recalls.

Then in 1987 she painted her first watercolor.

I wasn't pleased with my first watercolor," Shirley says, retrospectively. I just had no control. It was very amateurish," the late bloomer, who in essence resembles the beauties pollinating on her studio work table, reports.

A still life oil painting of old crocks, however, was her first sale, after a friend who worked at a local bank had urged Shirley to display it there. The reminiscent piece soon attracted a buyer.

"I was happy, but at the same time," she remembers, "I felt a sense of loss."

Whether or not she felt like working, Shirley developed a paint-everyday habit that takes a recess only on Sundays.

"I have to be almost psyched up to paint," she says. "Once I get started the creativity begins to flow."

As her confidence grew, the home florist, and — to her daughters — an exemplar of home-making arts, Shirley began entering competitions, encouraged to the place where her works, alongside those of other artists, could be judged.

By 1989 the Pennsylvania Federation of Women's Club Photography Competition had awarded her a state second place.

Then came the Harley Hotel Award at the Penn Hills (Allegheny County) Arts Council Show in 1992, and on, until the awards — 13 in all — last year found her named 1997 Somerset County Woman in the Arts by the General Federation of Woman's Clubs.

While watercolor is her preferred media because she so likes its softness and its transparency — "Its luminosity seems to be a natural for capturing the iridescent color of flowers," she said; the artistic explorer also delves into other mediums to discover new possibilities.

These include pen and ink, charcoal, mixed media, and oriental painting.

"I don't limit myself to flower painting," the artist who "paints in her mind's eye," she states.

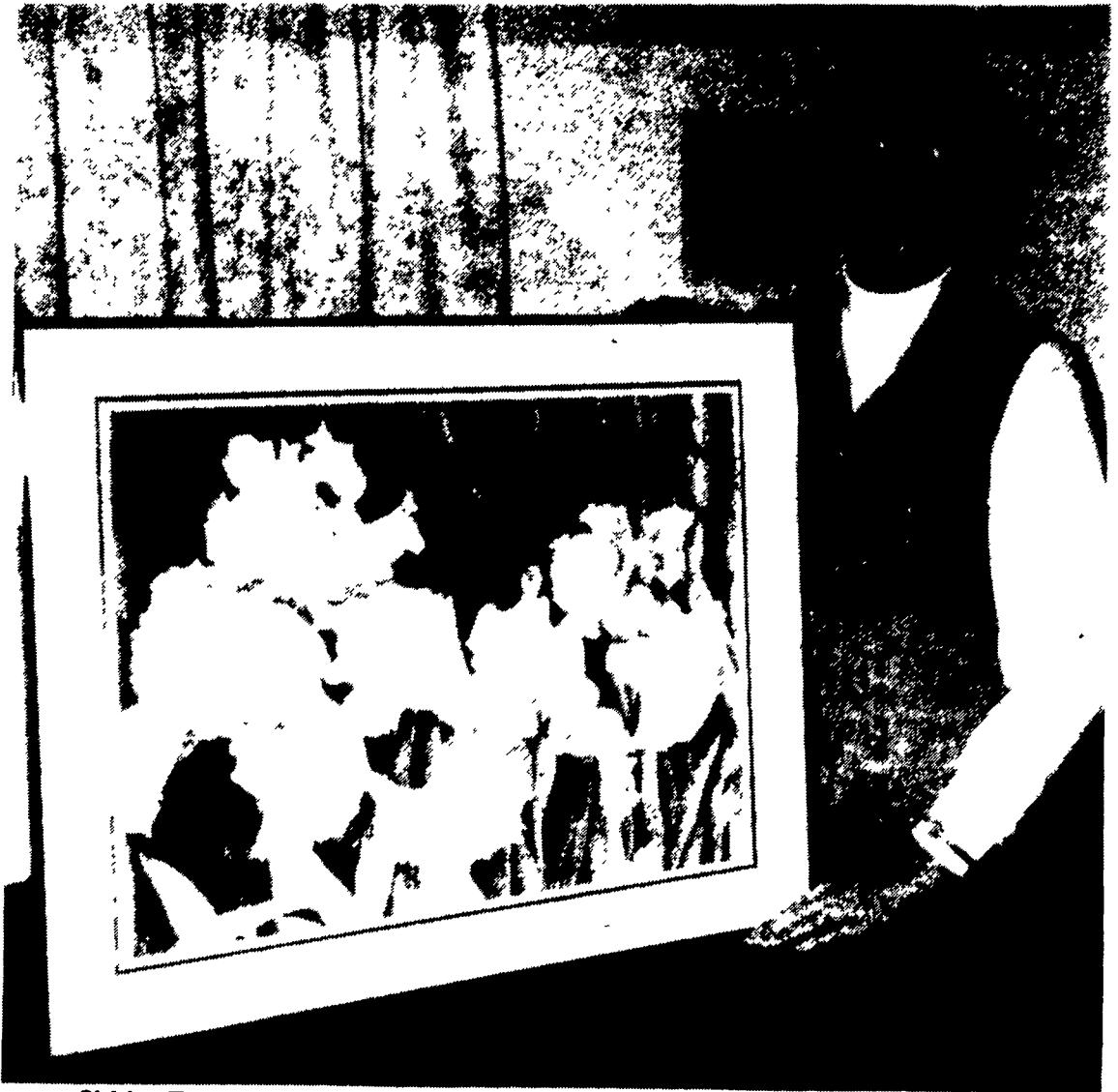
"I see something that catches my eye and a painting begins."

When a critique of her work is needed, her retired, reliable spouse give Shirley an honest opinion about it.

On the thickly-covered framing table, the skills she learned in framing class are put to use as she and John, together, encase the finished paintings behind glass.

"Did you say I was retired?" interjected John upon overhearing his better-half saying so. "I didn't know that," he added, teasing her.

The Tatalebas sacrificed their personal comfort by turning the master suite into an art studio because its norther exposure allowed



Shirley Tataleba did this watercolor of irises on rice paper. Her one-woman show in the Holmes Gallery, Latrobe, Westmoreland County runs from Feb. 13 to March 27.

natural light to flood in. The smaller bedroom, with determination, was comfortably furnished.

"It's very important to have good lighting. I prefer to paint with natural light," she says. Fluorescent lamps give supplemental lighting directly over the painting table.

"Working in a flower bed is relaxation," Shirley, a grandmother who rides horseback with her four grandkids, said, adding merrily, "but John won't let me plant anymore flower beds."

The two and a half-acre site on a small knoll that skirts the borough should support any number of decorative plots without crowding John too much. They moved into the ranch-style house in 1960, Shirley said.

Inside, none of the wall hangings have the "Shirley Tataleba" signature on them.

"I never hang my own paintings in my house," she says. "I would be forever critiquing them."

Neither does she give her paintings as personal gifts because another person's taste in art cannot be predicted, she said.

From Feb. 13 through March 27, Shirley's work will be featured in a one-woman show at the Holmes Gallery in Latrobe (Westmoreland County) Hospital.

The Holmes show, her fourth at the venue, will exhibit all mediums, including watercolor on rice paper, pen and ink, that Shir-

ley has done.

She and John, with heavy cardboard and blankets will carefully pack each of the 25 fragile, varying sized pieces into the family car for the drive to Latrobe. Their road time to the gallery will exceed one hour.

"We have our system," the organizer who is affiliated with three area galleries, said. They are From the Heart in Somerset, Tub Mill Art Gallery, Salisbury and the Dogwood Gallery at Seven Springs Mountain Resort, Champion. All are located in Somerset County.

Life's vagaries no doubt account for the musicianship that bypassed Shirley and John but made a strong showing in their kids.

Like his two granddads, Gary is a violinist. Gwen, an alumna of Penn State, played clarinet in its Blue Band.

Gary is unmarried and Gwen's husband is John Hartman.

Shirley's father-in-law, who in 1912 migrated from Europe to the United States, later handcrafted a cello for her and violin for his son, John.

Although "Pap," is no longer living, his survivors, especially, granddaughter Gail, Dwight Smith's wife, is highly interested in the family's European roots.

That's why, the information that Shirley saw in a publication of the Pennsylvania Watercolor So-

ciety about an artist in the Ukraine, was so exciting for the mother-daughter duo who, currently, are working on a genealogy.

To make a long story short, the artist was recently contacted. He shortly astonished the Tatalebas by locating John's first cousin now living in the Ukraine, and helped them make the connection.

In hand they have a letter, but are waiting for an opportune time in the schedule of their interpreter who will reveal the contents of the neatly-written communication.

Besides the Pennsylvania Watercolor Society, Shirley belongs to the Bedford County Arts Council, Somerset County Artists Association, Laurel Arts, Tub Mill Arts, and the Allied Artists of Johnstown.

Her paintings have appeared in shows throughout western Pennsylvania and Maryland including the Japanese-American International Watercolor Exhibition tour and the Cumberland Valley Artists Exhibition in Hagerstown, Md.

Many are also in privately-owned and business-owned collections.

Shirley credits God with the limitless inspiration that nature itself provides.

"I feel God has given us so much beauty to enjoy," she says in summary of all the Creator has given to his children everywhere.



"Bigger than life, almost like you can get into them," says Shirley Tataleba about her watercolor of pink hibiscus.



## OMESTEAD OTES

