

off the  
easel



*"Cayuga Lake Storm, Keeping the Boat off the Rocks." Self-portrait: Mary Michael Shelley is an avid sailor.*

## Folk Artist Mary Shelley

# Her Life in **Pictures**

by Nancy E. McCarthy

**M**ary Michael Shelley is a self-taught folk artist. Her painted wood carvings form vibrant pictures, telling stories depicting emotions, places, people and creatures meaningful to her. Shelley, 73, has lived in Ithaca since graduating from Cornell University in 1972. Her art-making now spans 50 years.

Shelley's impressive body of work will be featured in her upcoming solo exhibit, "Art of the Everyday," at the Roberson Museum and Science Center in Binghamton (July 15

through October 15). "She has shown in a lot of group shows over the years, but was overdue for a wide representation of her work," said Peter Klosky, Roberson's exhibitions director.

Klosky knows Shelley's work from these previous group exhibits at the museum. However, he felt a special connection when viewing her "Sullivan's Diner IV, Waiter Holding Fried Eggs" in one of the permanent collections at the Fenimore Museum in Cooperstown. Sullivan's Diner was an actual restaurant in his hometown of Horseheads.

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A young admirer watches Shelley carve a new picture at the Ithaca Farmers Market.

"Nostalgia! I was hooked," he said.

The next Sullivan Diner picture in this series, "Sullivan's Diner Five, Waitress and Waiter at End of Day," resides in the permanent collections of the National Museum of Women and the Arts in Washington, D.C.

Klosky is not the only Shelley admirer drawn to her subject matter. Héctor "Tito" Abruña, an art lover and Cornell professor, owns over a dozen of Shelley's pieces. "Her work is simply stunning," Abruña said. "She captures scenes, many of them from Ithaca and surrounding areas, with beauty and grace." His favorite is a picture he purchased because it resembled the interior of La Bombonera, a diner in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico where he is originally from. Turns out it actually was a picture of the iconic eatery that Shelley was enchanted with during a Puerto Rico visit.

Diners are a favorite subject because restaurants are places "where people, isolated during the rest of their

day, could come together just to 'be' and feel a sense of instant belonging," Shelley said.

Folk art, in its many forms, tells visual stories about daily life or the culture of a community. Since folk artists are generally self-taught, it rides the fine line of the arts versus crafts debate. Asked if her wood carvings are craft or art, Shelley said, "Well, it's a craft until I paint it; but once painted, it becomes art."

Her followers may be surprised to learn that Shelley never aspired to be an artist. She didn't pursue any formal art education because she didn't feel she had artistic talent in that way. "A course of events in my life took me toward becoming a visual artist," Shelley said.

**On the Farm**

Shelley and her three brothers grew up on a Pennsylvania farm. Farms, barns, farmers and cows later became among her favorite scenes to carve.

Their parents, Duke and Ginger, met while attending Cornell University. Ginger, from a farming family, studied animal husbandry. Duke was an English major and a talented artist.

When Shelley was five, her parents stopped farming and her father worked as a commercial artist. Shelley, an avid reader, aspired to be a writer from a young age. Like her parents, she went to Cornell. Shelley first considered a psychology degree but decided to study English literature and creative writing. (Twenty years later she went back to school, attained a master's degree in social work and opened a counseling practice.)

Shelley's first job after college was with a local historical society working on a team to restore the Clinton House, an 1830 hotel in downtown Ithaca. Shelley wanted to learn carpentry because it seemed more interesting and paid more than the grunt work she was assigned.

During one of her father's visits, he scavenged a shelf

*"Winter Solstice Rooster, Calling Back the Light"*



board thrown away in the renovation debris. He later carved a picture of Shelley as a little girl riding her horse on their farm, painted the carving and sent it to her. "This gift from my father inspired me to begin to make my own carved and painted pictures," Shelley explained.

When she started to carve, her father advised her to use white pine, a good cutting wood which the shelf was made of, and use X-ACTO blades which don't require sharpening. An artist friend recommended acrylic paint which she has used exclusively ever since.

Her first painted carving was very simple and small. As she was teaching herself the skill, she began to get commissions to make carved signs. To get better at signs she read sign-making magazines – particularly how-to articles about carving gold leafed, incised letters on wooden signs. She had also started doing carpentry work. "The skills I was building with carpentry and sign-making advanced my ability to make more complex wooden pictures," said Shelley.

## The Artist's Process

Each piece starts with the excitement of an idea. Farm pieces are inspired by real barns – often in danger of collapse. "I feel the desire to show them before they, like their original builders, are gone," Shelley said.

Shelley discovers these barns while driving and pulls over to take reference photos from several angles. Later, she sketches the barn and adds imagined details: cows, farmers carrying buckets, a glorious sky, a tractor. Her process recaptures feelings she had growing up on a farm.

It takes numerous sketches before Shelley feels confident that the drawing will result in a good picture. "I like to work out my ideas with a pencil rather than a carving knife," she said. "I do reduction carving, starting with solid boards and chip away background material to reveal various shapes. Once I have carved the background wood away there is no way to put wood back on and make changes."

Shelley traces the sketch onto a white pine board using carbon paper and



*"Davenport, NY Barn - Winter Scene" - un-painted*

starts carving with traditional mallet and chisels. When completed, she paints the piece with acrylics. "I like them because they have little odor and dry quickly," she said. She then embellishes



*"Davenport, NY Barn - Winter Scene"*

the inner frame with gold leaf, a material she discovered during her sign-making years.

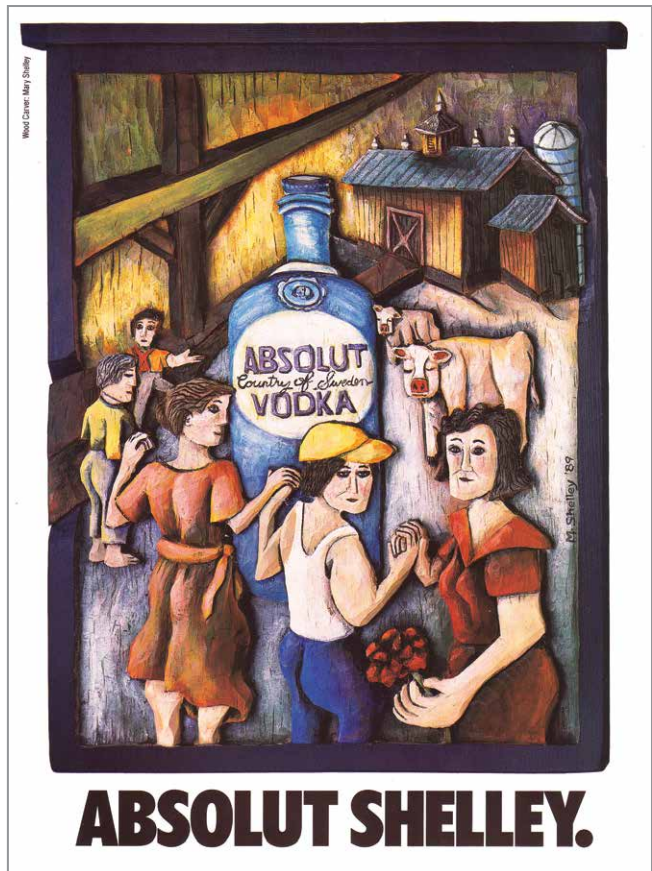
Until 1991 when she became a social worker, Shelley supplemented her art income with sign making and carpentry jobs. In 1976, Shelley connected with American folk art scholar Jay Johnson who owned America's Folk Heritage Gallery in Manhattan. Johnson became both a mentor and friend and represented her work until his death in 1990.

"My artists are mostly self-trained and can be called naive artists because they have a certain innocence but at the same time have more sophistication and finish than primitive artists," said Johnson in a 1985 interview. "They are attractive to the public because people want to get to the basics, to buy representational art that communicates. Folk art communicates easily and has an integrity that gets across to people. It is spiritually uplifting."

Shelley still misses him.

**Present Day**

Shelley has a longtime supportive life partner, grown children and interests outside of art-making (she's an avid sailor). Yet, as an artist she experiences a sense of isolation from working alone for many hours of the day. Shelley finds community and camaraderie at the bustling Ithaca Farmers Market where her "gallery" is Booth #3 on summer Saturdays



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ever since Johnson passed away. Shelley often carves pictures at her booth which attracts and fascinates visitors and fellow vendors. It's how Abruña discovered her work.

"Mary is an Ithaca treasure," said Freeville artist Jacques Schickel who came to know and admire her work since becoming a farmers market vendor in 2021. "A beautiful example of her mastery can be seen in 'Winter Solstice Rooster, Calling Back the Light.' It is stunning how Mary carves the sun into a fluid light."

Shelley's upcoming Roberson Museum is a retrospective of her amazing 50-year art career. "Art of the Everyday" is a traveling exhibit that also had a three-month run at the Fenimore Museum last year and is scheduled at the Arkell Museum in Canajorie, New York in 2024.

She estimates that she has made more than 2,000 painted carvings, maybe even closer to 3,000. Through the years, carving and painting one picture at a time, Shelley has chiseled out an extraordinary national reputation as an accomplished folk artist.

Visit [maryshelleyfolkart.com](http://maryshelleyfolkart.com) for more information. Follow "Folk Art Mary" on Instagram and Facebook. 



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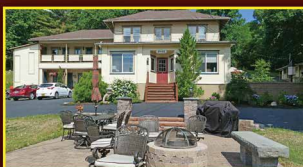
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