

Jef Sturm
2017 Georgetown Wooden Boat Show Artist

A love for and mastery of landscapes and light shine through in the 2017 Georgetown Wooden Boat Show painting by this year's artist, Jef Sturm.

Anyone who has seen the shrimp boats in the Tom Hanks movie "Forrest Gump" will recognize the historic era from which this year's featured boat was launched. The Prodigal Son, a familiar sight in Georgetown Harbor and Winyah Bay with Captain Ronnie Campbell at the helm, is typical of wooden shrimp boats from about 50 years ago except for one major deviation: Its rigging was removed.

"The Prodigal Son was built in '48, and it was a small shrimper," Sturm said. "It did what it did. Ronnie's gotten ahold of it and he's taken all the rigging and stuff off of it, and he's more or less refurbished it. It's a beautiful boat."

Sturm depicted the white wooden boat on a sunny and placid part of Winyah Bay where dashes of color in the paint and wood are reflected from a fair weather sky. The artist used setting and light to evoke a sensible and humbly elegant personality for the vessel.

And the Prodigal Son is used sensibly and elegantly. Ronnie Campbell stays alert to boaters who radio that they have sailed astray in the Georgetown area, and he has guided and towed many of them to safe harbor.

Jef Sturm's artistic journey began with encouragement back in Akron, Ohio, from his grandmother, Margaritte Orman, who was handy with crafts and played the piano. He attended a vocational high school where he took art for four periods every day, and Sturm was further encouraged by his commercial art instructor, Abby Nelson. She helped him build a portfolio, and the young artist was accepted at the Cleveland Institute of Art.

In Cleveland Sturm struck up a friendship and mentorship with his sophomore design instructor, the late John Paul Miller.

"He was a very good teacher," Sturm says. "Every year he took a student with him out West, and I traveled with him for about 6-8 weeks during the summer after my sophomore year. We did a lot of backpacking in the mountains in Wyoming and Montana. This was 1962, and we even got as far as Seattle for the World's Fair which was that year, when they put up the Space Needle."

After college Sturm and a friend opened their own graphic design and advertising business, but "We weren't really mature enough to be doing it." That business closed, and the artist went home to Akron and got a job with a design firm he dreamed of working with when he was in high school: Smith, Scherr & McDermott. He learned a lot there.

After four years at that job, he spent a few more years as the graphics coordinator for the City of Akron. Then came another stint with a graphic design business, followed by two years teaching graphic design at the same vocational high school he attended in the 1950s. In 1976 he again opened his own business, Jef Sturm Graphic Design, which he operated for two decades and experienced many technological advances that made his work much easier.

Before computers became common design tools, Sturm had to sit at the board and draw all his designs on pads with markers and send them to the typesetter, who put together proofs and sent them back to the designer. Then the proofs were placed on a board, and the board was put in front of a camera, and the camera took a negative.

“It was an unbelievable process,” Sturm says, shaking his head at the memory. “Then I got on the computer...and it was completely like going to heaven. I’d type my own copy, create a layout, then create a digital file for the printer, and he makes plates, and they print it. Everything in-between is gone with the computer.”

Although Sturm worked in graphic design, he always continued painting on canvas. He also went on annual golf trips to the Myrtle Beach area with his buddies, and when he and his wife decided to retire in 1996, they moved to Pawleys Island. A new retirement career in painting and teaching was launched.

Jef enjoys having more time to concentrate on painting. He likes impressionism since those artists paint “reflectively,” he says, meaning that the light and colors are picked up in a way to “get you that wonderful impressionistic look.” He also likes the Baroque period, and artists including Rembrandt and Fantin-LaTour.

Sturm has countless spots in the Lowcountry he visits for landscape inspiration, and he’s always looking for light. He likes it when the light and sky are a little moody with intermittent sun, or when the sun is low and long shadows are cast.

The artist teaches his methods on Mondays in Litchfield for the Coastal Carolina Lifelong Learning program. On Tuesdays he’s at The Market Common’s Seacoast Artists Gallery in Myrtle Beach, and on Fridays he drives up to Calabash in North Carolina to teach life drawing. Most of his students are retired, and Sturm has advice for them as well as for young artists wondering what steps to take to make art a career.

“Get as much education as you can while you’re young and in high school. Then get a portfolio together and try to get into a good design school. For people who are older and who are just starting to understand that they care about art and painting, find as many teachers as you can and go through as many venues as you can - drawing, design painting. Do all three of those, and you’ll get better. You’ll be happy.”

"I think that art is probably one of the more lovely things to do in life, to hang your hat on. It's a great way to make a living and a great way to live."

Jef's painting of The Prodigal Son will be auctioned off on Friday, October 20, 2017 at the annual Goat Island Yacht Club Regatta. His work will also be featured on posters and T-shirts, which will be available for purchase at the Wooden Boat Show scheduled for Oct. 21-22 at the Georgetown waterfront.