

Robert Douglas Hunter and His Students

by Mickey Myers

Many of us will always remember those teachers who made a difference in our lives. This summer, Bryan Memorial Gallery pays tribute to the late painter and teacher Robert Douglas Hunter (1928-2014) with an exhibit of twenty-four of his paintings and forty works by twenty artists who studied and painted with him between the 1950s until shortly before his death.

Hunter was fortunate to have had exceptional teachers, and to have been an exceptional student, himself. Born and raised in Boston, he studied at the Vesper George School of Art in Boston (from 1946), and then spent an additional five years studying with muralist and portrait painter R. H.

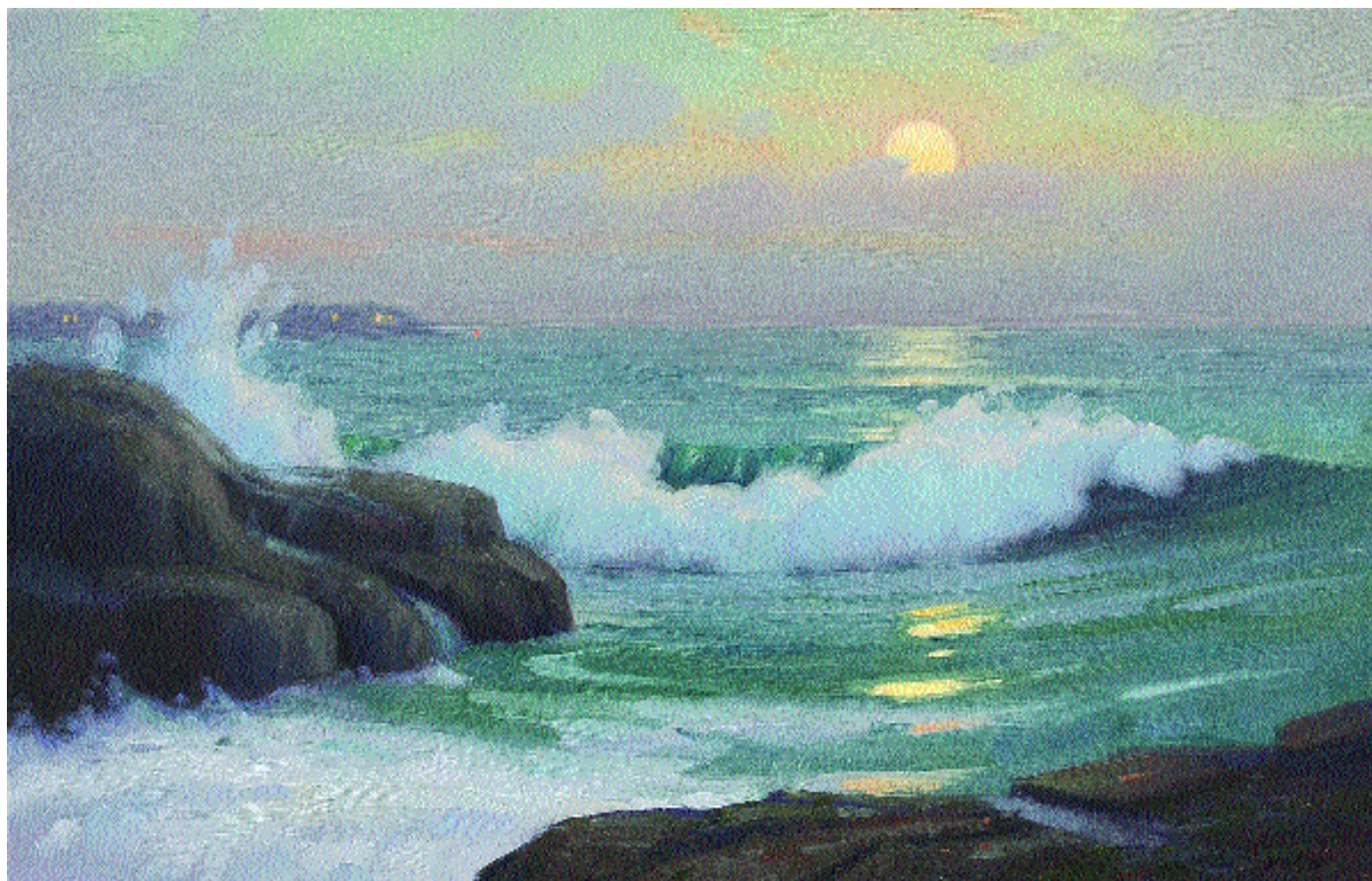
Ives Gammell (1893-1981), while beginning his own teaching career. When he returned to teach at his alma mater in 1950, he was already firmly ensconced in a lineage that could be traced back through The Impressionists to French academic painting. Soon, he would be shepherding that lineage forward, with students who are today the heirs of the Boston School and highly regarded artists and instructors themselves. The Boston School was not an educational institution, but rather a style of painting, combining features of Impressionism with traditions of Western art.

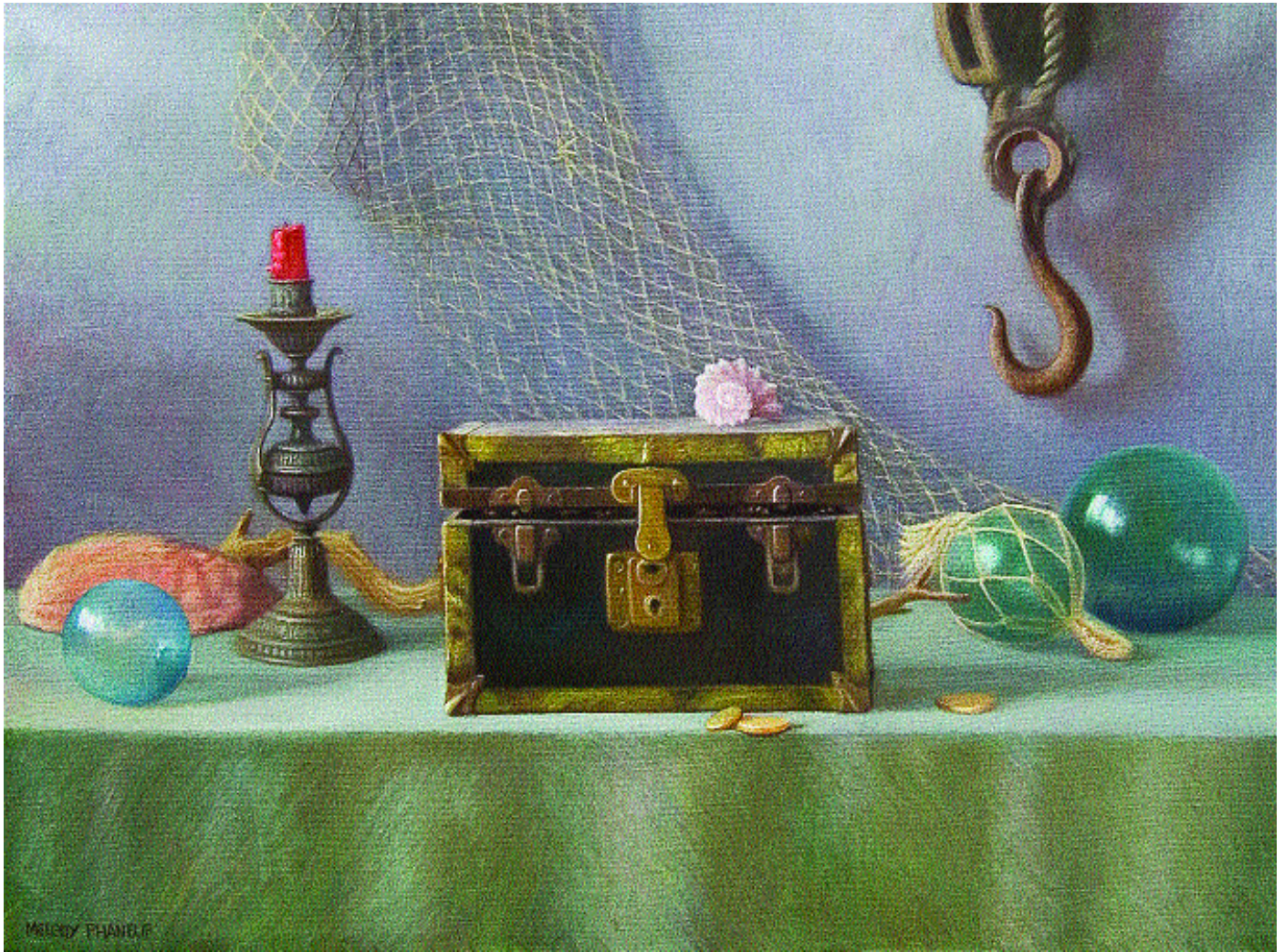
If Vesper George School of Art was modest in its environs at 41-44 St. Botolph Street, it was huge in its capacity to fuel the imaginations of its students. Reasonably priced, accessible by public transportation,

Robert Douglas Hunter and His Students is on view from June 30 through September 5, 2016, at the Bryan Memorial Gallery, 180 Main Street, Jeffersonville, Vermont, 05464, 802-644-5100, www.bryan-gallery.org. A simultaneous exhibition, *Robert Douglas Hunter: A Life in Art*, is on view June 18 through August 13, 2016, at the Cape Cod Museum of Art, 60 Hope Lane, Dennis, Massachusetts, 02638, 508-385-4477, www.ccmoa.org.

and accredited by the National Association of Trade and Technical Schools, its classes were small and unusually accommodating for some students who could join their peers in January if they missed the September semester.

With its arched entry among rows of





All illustrated images are from the collection of the artist.

ABOVE: Melody Phaneuf, *Relics of the Sea*, oil, 32 x 24.

RIGHT: Sergio Roffo, *Sunset on the Pond, Boston*, oil, 30 x 40.

LEFT: Sam Vokey, *Moonrise*, oil, 13 x 20.

identical brownstones on the edge of Boston's Back Bay, the school was a model of a self-contained campus, including an art supply store, a student lounge, a library, an assembly hall, an art gallery and large studio classrooms. Nearby were such iconic institutions as the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Public Library, and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

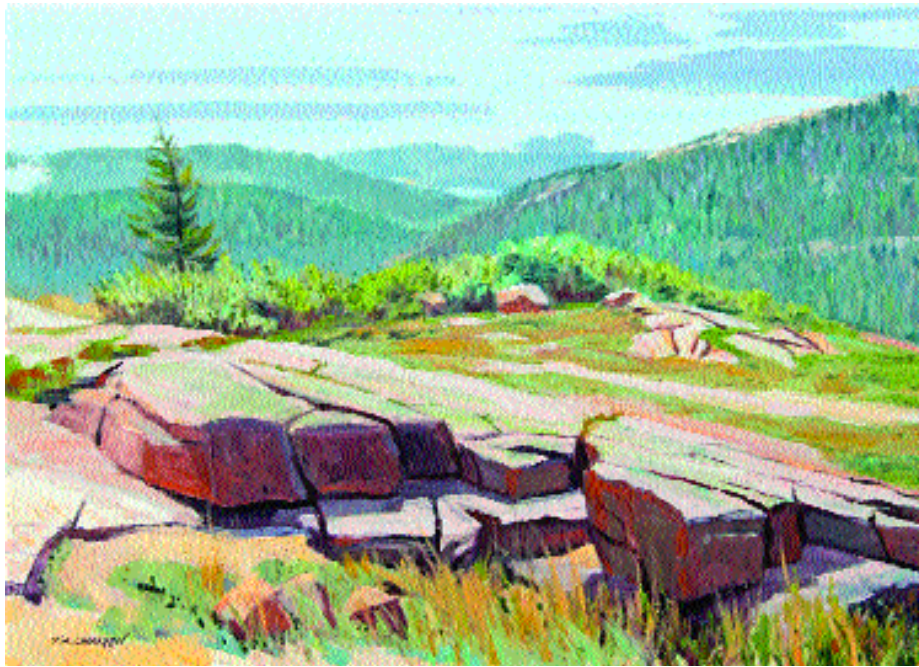
From his earliest years, Hunter had known "The only thing I ever wanted to do was paint." So into this intense, crowded and encouraging environment, first as a student and then as a teacher, he was at home as soon as he arrived. Social and personable,



he was liked by his colleagues and listened to by his students. As many noted, when he walked into the classroom, they knew

something special was about to happen.

Whether meeting in a classroom at Vesper George School of Art, or in a sum-

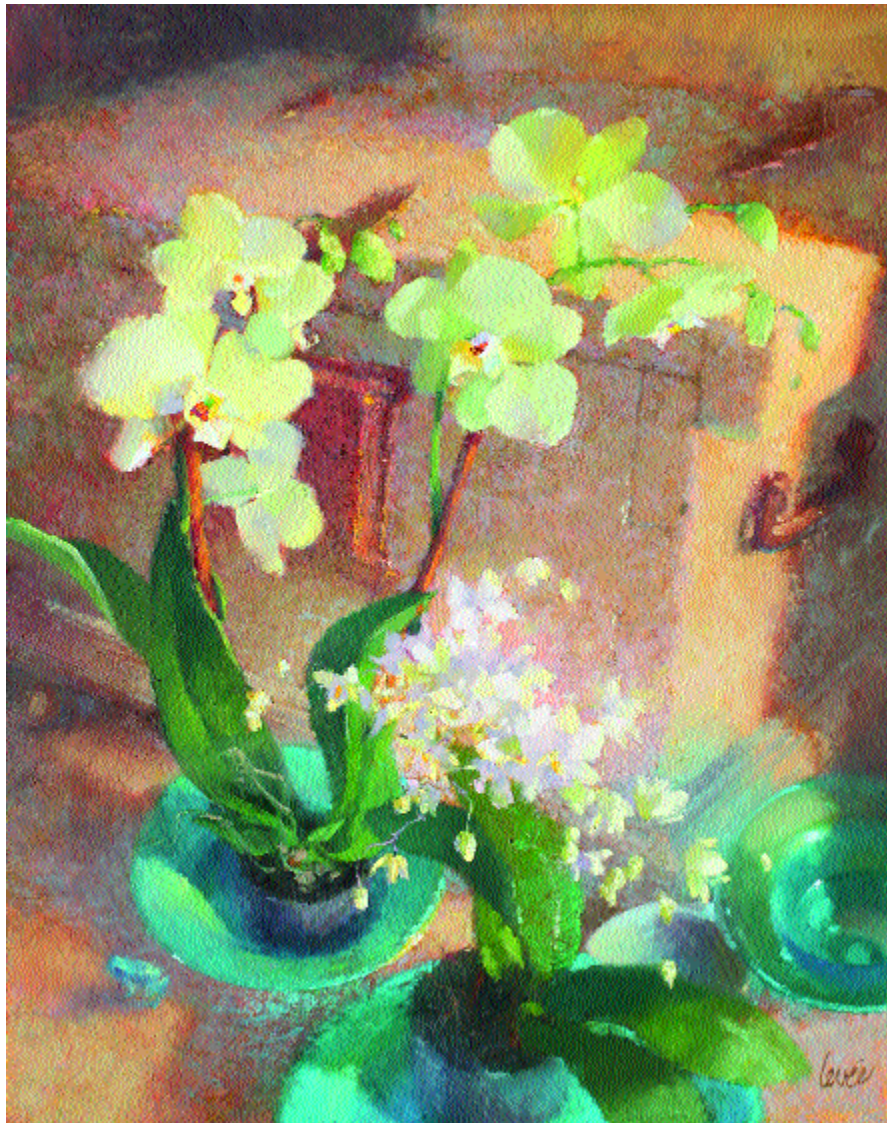


LEFT: T. A. Charron, *Westward Way*, oil, 16 x 18.

BELOW LEFT: Gayle Levée, *Gulf Stream*, oil/panel, 20 x 16.

RIGHT: Richard Copello, *Majesty: Ghost of the Arctic*, oil, 15 x 30.

BELOW RIGHT: Sam Vokey, *Summer Storm Passing*, oil, 22 x 23.



mer workshop in Provincetown, or less formally through a friend, or at the Guild of Boston Artists, where Hunter was president from 1973 until 1979, his students collectively describe the same response.

Geoffrey Chalmers met Hunter in 1956 in Provincetown when Hunter was studying with Gammell. Chalmers describes the affection Hunter would engender for the painting process, fostering yet channeling such enthusiasm that eventually one “could teach themselves,” or so it seemed.

Meeting Hunter twenty years later, as a student at the school, and in subsequent workshops, Melody Phaneuf offers an observation about the joy of a Hunter critique. “He was always generous with his time,” and would arrange transportation to take a whole class down Huntington Avenue to the Museum of Fine Arts. By that time Hunter was a renowned artist. Phaneuf reports, “Things would just resonate with him, almost like a spiritual mentorship. To this day I hear his voice come up when I am solving a painting.”

For three years, Phaneuf’s studio was in the Guild of Boston Artists building on Newbury Street, and she recalls that Hunter would drop in when visiting the Guild, offering to critique her work. “He changed my vision. He gave me the courage to put things down the way I see them, rather than follow a formula.”

Neil Drevitson studied at Vesper George School of Art in the 1960s. When his aspirations to be a fine artist were not met quickly enough in the course of study, he recalls requesting a meeting with Hunter. “I promised Hunter, ‘I’ll be your most dedicated student,’ if you take me on for extra study.” Hunter responded with an invitation to spend the summer in Provincetown, where Drevitson and his German shepherd were given lodging in the loft over Hunter’s studio. The two artists set up their easels side by side, and observed an agenda of painting from early in the morning until three in the afternoon, when Hunter left to go for a run, and then



prepare for the evening's socializing.

Generous with his time and knowledge, Hunter recommended Drevitson for a job with the Oliver Brothers, the leading art restoration firm in the Northeast. Though Drevitson describes it as a humbling environment, Hunter told him he had “no right to paint so well without more training.” Drevitson credits Hunter with showing him “how to see things,” and they solved many technical problems together that gave the younger artist the knowledge to be “his own painter.” Drevitson went on to realize his own career as an artist with a gallery in Woodstock, Vermont, and to this day cherishes congratulatory notes received from Hunter over the years.

Hunter's method of instruction encouraged the flow of tutelage from one generation to the next. Believing that one never knows something quite as well as when you can teach it, many of his students became teachers themselves. Whether it was the infectious environment that prevailed in his classroom or the value in the depth of his teaching, many of his students still teach today.

Robert Scott Jackson refers to his days





ABOVE: Geoffrey Chalmers, *Fighting Constitution*, o/c, 28 x 22.

LEFT: Gayle Levée, *Splash*, o/linen, 24 x 18.

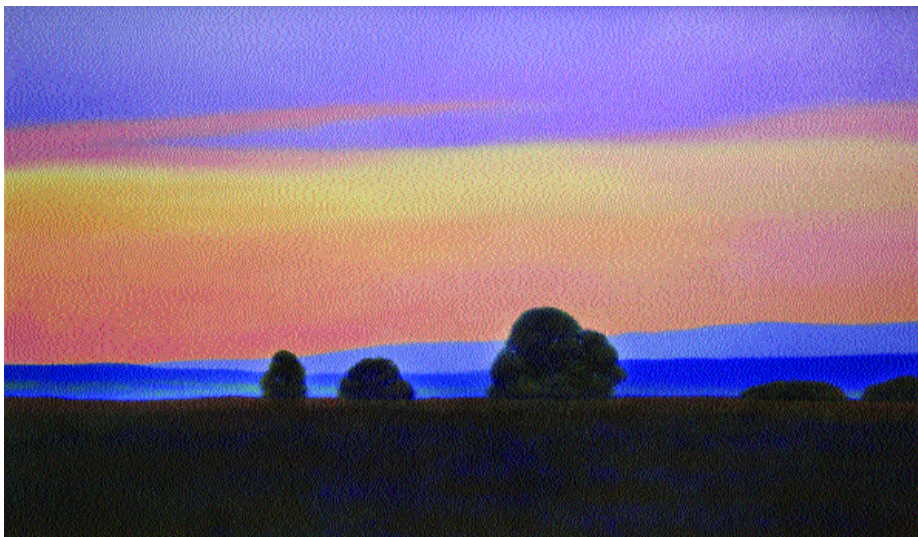
BELOW LEFT: Robert Scott Jackson, *Over the Hills*, 36 x 60.

RIGHT: Neil Drevitson, *Vermont Landscape*, oil, 10 x 14.

BELOW RIGHT: Cate Hunter Kashem, *Low River*, 9 x 12.

as Hunter's student as "The Glory Days." Studying at Vesper George School of Art starting in 1968, he found Hunter to be friendly and his classes intense. Jackson refers to a triumvirate of teachers: Hunter and Sidney Willis at the school and Gammell in his atelier in Williamstown, Massachusetts, whose instruction influenced the way he paints today: refined technique grounded in traditional values, with brilliant light and color effects, producing a modernity that is uniquely his own. In 1975 he opened his own studio and atelier in Newburyport, Massachusetts, which continues to this day.

Gayle Levée signed up for some workshops with Hunter at the Concord Art Center in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1995 when her recent move to Boston proved challenging for the Montana artist. Though she was accustomed to working in plein air, she found the long dark Boston winter uncomfortable and "working from photographs was killing my art." Though Hunter could not change the weather, he could influence what she saw and how she worked with it. Hunter suggested that the painting didn't have to be finished all at





once, and that working wet into wet, painting in layers, could keep her work fresh. Hunter advised her “Don’t pick at it. Just paint over it or wipe it off.”

Levéé felt encouraged by the light-hearted attitude that abounded in Hunter’s workshops including some at his home, where basic light and shadow were studied in his back yard. Levée confirms that Hunter didn’t talk a lot, but pointed out where the painting was working and what needed to be done next. “He was constantly finding beauty in everything, suggesting a way of seeing. The person who gives you that inspires loyalty.” Levée has developed a curriculum on The Boston School in workshops which she teaches in Nashville. Paintings such as *Splash* and *Gulf Stream* in the current exhibit demonstrate the transition of theory and understanding of color from Boston to a warmer climate.

Dianne Panarelli Miller went to Vesper George School of Art from 1979 until 1982, the year before the school closed. Subsequently Hunter was among those who began the R.H. Ives Gammell Atelier



on the third floor above the Guild of Boston Artists. Panarelli Miller was one of the first students chosen for a five-year, full-time scholarship program, learning the

traditional Boston School academic curriculum. She notes that Hunter donated his time during her five years there. Today Panarelli Miller teaches at numerous local



ABOVE: Sidney Willis, *There are Smiles*, oil, 24 x 18.

ABOVE LEFT: Vail Pagliarani, *The Seacoast Canning Company, Eastport, Maine*, oil, 18 x 24.

LEFT: Dianne Panarelli Miller, *Harvard Yard*, oil, 20 x 24.

RIGHT: Melody Phaneuf, *Fragrant Delight*, oil, 44 x 46.

art associations in New England. Recently she viewed a video of Hunter teaching, and realized that she is teaching her students with his exact words twenty-five years later.

Sam Vokey attended the Gammell Atelier in Boston for four years, starting in 1987 after graduating from college with a major in English Literature. He had been painting by himself on Cape Cod when

Hunter, a family friend, encouraged him to attend the Gammell Atelier, saying “You’ve got what it takes.” Vokey’s work explores balance within a composition such as its light and dark. His painting *Moonrise* in the current show is stormy and peaceful at the same time. *Summer Storm Passing*, from a color oil sketch originally, gets its serenity from the repetition of horizontal lines in

the sky and in the landscape, inviting the viewer to participate in the passage.

T. A. (Ted) Charron was on his way to a Classical Realism Conference in Virginia in 1991 when he struck up a conversation with an artist across the aisle on the plane, who was heading for the same conference. The gentleman with the proper Boston accent was Hunter, and their conversation lasted throughout the flight. Charron gasped when he realized that his travel companion was the keynote speaker at the conference, though it didn’t take long for the two to exchange numbers. Charron was further surprised that Hunter would want to see his work and apparently Hunter was surprised that Charron would want to study with him. “Why, you are already an accomplished artist.”



When they both got over their respective surprises, there was déjà vu about Charron's first visit to the Hunter studio and household in Needham, Massachusetts. Filled with Boston School paintings exquisitely installed, the house had a familiar ring to it. Charron realized he had seen it in *Smithsonian Magazine* as the previous home and studio of N. C. Wyeth. They continued these meetings, painting together, and critiquing each other's work for the rest of Hunter's life.

On one of their trips, Hunter's daughter Cate Hunter Kashem joined them. Charron recounts the magical moment when Hunter had critiqued Charron's work and Charron had critiqued Hunter's work

and both of them had critiqued Kashem's work, and then Hunter turned to Kashem, and said, "Your turn."

The value of painting together and sharing critiques was intrinsic to Hunter's method of passing on vision and technique while sharing the joy of discovery. In 1999 Richard Copello received the gift of a Robert Douglas Hunter still life and decided to look him up. Their subsequent friendship and Hunter's encouragement gave Copello the opportunity to develop the refinement in his painting for which he is so well known.

When Vail Pagliarani met Hunter in 2004, he encouraged Pagliarani to bring samples of his work to be critiqued.

Hunter told him that he was not going to be too concerned about hurting his feelings when critiquing his work. What came out of periodic critiques and field trips was, for Pagliarani, a fascination with the character of the subject he was painting.

Repeatedly, Hunter's students tell of notes they received from him years after their formal education concluded. Usually brief, Hunter's notes would tell of seeing their painting in an exhibit and complimenting an achievement, an award, or an idea. To this day, many have kept those notes in their studios, cherishing Hunter's support, and re-reading them whenever the occasion warrants, or as Hunter said to Melody Phaneuf, "That one's a real honey."