

Bradley Stevens paints at his home studio in Gainesville, Va., about an hour outside Washington. His wife, artist Patricia Skinner, sits in the background.

The **PORTRAIT MAKER**

*Behind the brushes
of “incurable
people-watcher”
Bradley Stevens,
BA ’76, MFA ’79*

By Bill Glovin, BA ’77

When Bradley Stevens was introduced to Hillary Clinton in 2007, he offered to paint her presidential portrait someday. He watched as she

howled with laughter.

“She reacted like it was the funniest thing she ever heard,” says Mr. Stevens. “Trouble is, I was serious.”

And it wouldn't be a stretch. After all, the encounter with Ms. Clinton occurred at the unveiling of one of Mr. Stevens' paintings—a portrait of political power broker Vernon Jordan—at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. His work hangs in the Capitol (the House and Senate) and the State Department. It's in George Washington's Mount Vernon estate and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.

Mr. Stevens, BA '76, MFA '79, has painted politicians and banking tycoons, educators and judges, among them a former U.S. Supreme Court justice. He gave Georgetown hoops phenomenon Allen Iverson the shape-up-or-ship-out warning during a drawing class he taught in the 1990s; he hand-delivered Felix Rohatyn's portrait to the legendary financier at the Lazard Frères headquarters on the top floor of 30 Rock in Manhattan; and he's had to ask Virginia Sen. Mark Warner, BA '77, an old GW buddy, to sit still while painting his official gubernatorial portrait, which will hang in perpetuity in the Virginia State Capitol building in Richmond.

His portrait of Albert H. Small, whose Washingtoniana Collection will serve as an anchor of a new GW museum complex, will hang in the new building.

“Painting a U.S. president would be the pinnacle of my career,” he says. The clout of the person sitting for a portrait, naturally, has a tendency to rub off on the painting. “How much higher can you get than painting the leader of the free world?”

It's a pinnacle, though, that would be one more peak in a career crowded with high points: Mr. Stevens, considered among the nation's leading realist painters, has won praise not just for his original portraiture and sanctioned copies of great works, but also for his landscapes and cityscapes. From the warmth of the sun to a face in the crowd and the visage of a president, he seems to find inspiration equally.

“I'm an incurable people-watcher. I find people endlessly fascinating,” Mr. Stevens says. “Everybody is so unique. It's the job of the portrait painter to seize



LEFT The portrait of Vernon Jordan that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery
MIDDLE *Seeking Sargent*, from the series *Museum Studies*, is part homage, part self portrait and includes Mr. Stevens' wife, Patricia, on the left
BOTTOM The Paris-inspired *Morning Along the Quai*, from his latest exhibit



upon what makes someone special and different.”

RAISED IN WESTPORT, CONN., an affluent suburb that is about an hour by train to midtown Manhattan, Mr. Stevens’ father was a Madison Avenue adman and his mother an elementary school teacher. At Staples High School, he played guitar in rock bands and was a starter on the basketball team.

“I’m sure my hometown had an influence on my path towards the arts,” he says. “It’s a culturally progressive place with many New York-based artists, illustrators, writers, actors, musicians and the like.”

Drawn to GW by the world-class art museums and cultural opportunities surrounding Foggy Bottom, Mr. Stevens thought as a freshman that he might major in economics. But he found the abstract theories of macroeconomics far less inspiring than his studio art classes.

“My professors—William Woodward, Frank Wright and Arthur Hall Smith—were superb and generous about sharing their lives as artists,” he recalls.

Mr. Woodward, now a professor emeritus of fine art, remembers Mr. Stevens as “patient, methodical and modest ... a very bright guy.” And Mr. Stevens’ time at GW would be foundational to the painter he would become.

At Mr. Woodward’s encouragement, he enrolled in a summer painting program in Brittany, France. There, “a whole other world opened up to me and gave me my love of France that continues to this day,” Mr. Stevens says.

His most recent exhibit—in October and November at the Warm Springs Gallery in Charlottesville, Va.—consisted of paintings of Paris and Provence created with a mind toward avoiding “postcard images” of France in favor of scenes from everyday life. “As travelers, we often see places through the eyes of a tourist without actually experiencing the place,” he says.

At GW, where the lanky, 6-foot-5 Mr. Stevens played lead guitar in the comedy band, the Dogmatics, he also got his first professional art commission: The athletics department hired him to paint a caricature of George Washington running and dribbling a basketball on the court of the newly built Smith Center. “I had to paint with the same liquid rubber that the court was made out of at the time, before they switched to wood,” he recalls.

And, while completing an MFA at the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences, Mr. Stevens was accepted into the National Gallery of Art’s copyist program, affording



him an easel in the museum on which he copied hundreds of paintings by Old Masters.

“This was something that artists had done for centuries as part of their education but that had fallen out of favor in the contemporary art world,” he says. “I loved it, and it’s where I learned so much about painting.”

He became so good at re-creating the techniques of Degas, Monet, Manet, Gilbert Stuart and others that, in the decades since, the National Gallery and other institutions, enterprises and individuals have commissioned him to replicate works. Among them: His reproduction of Gilbert Stuart’s famous, full-length Lansdowne portrait of George Washington, commissioned by the Smithsonian Institution, now hangs at Mount Vernon. He’s also re-created paintings of Thomas Jefferson for Monticello, James Monroe for the State Department, James Madison for the U.S. House of Representatives and Benjamin Franklin for the U.S. Embassy in Paris.

After graduate school, Mr. Stevens also went on to teach evening art and anatomy classes at GW and Georgetown for nearly two decades, before deciding to devote all his time to painting in 2000.

But in 1980, the year after he finished at GW, there was one more seminal moment for the young painter. The National Gallery of Art mounted a major exhibition of 19th-century landscapes, called *American Light*. Mr. Stevens, who had a studio within walking distance, visited practically every day.

“It changed my life; for the first time I felt where I really fit in as an artist because these artists were motivated by the same things I was seeing in the landscape,” he says. “Invariably, what inspires me the most in my landscape painting is a certain quality of light that imparts a mood to the subject. Everything else develops from there.”

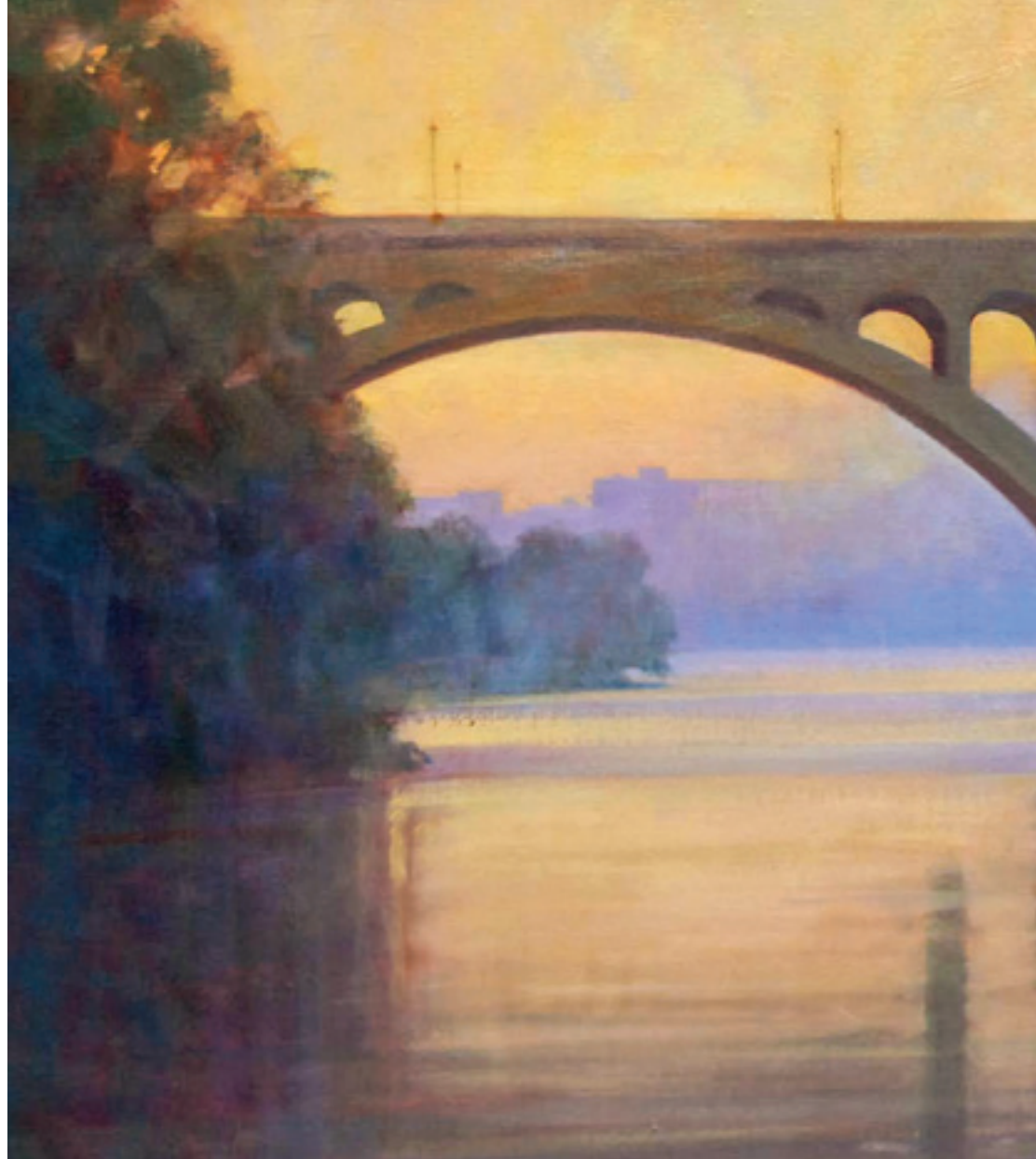
Mr. Stevens’ mural in the U.S. Capitol commemorating the Connecticut Compromise of 1787, which ironed out the issue of how states would be represented in Congress. The painter’s dentist and art agent modeled in costume for the piece.

COMMISSIONS HAVE A WAY of leading the Gainesville, Va.-based artist through doors without knowing what to expect on the other side. One reproduction project required that he spend several days working as the sole occupant in the White House’s Map Room, complete with a U.S. Marine guarding the door; another took him to headquarters of real estate and banking magnate B.F. Saul, during which Mr. Stevens mentioned that 35 years earlier, as a GW student, he had lived in one of Mr. Saul’s apartment buildings and wrote rent checks to him; yet another commission took him to the Fifth Avenue duplex of Helene and Michel David-Weill, where more than a dozen original paintings of French masters peered down while Mr. David-Weill posed in an antique French brocaded chair given to his father by Coco Chanel.

The opportunity to interact with and learn from “luminaries ... people that you might not normally have the opportunity to associate with,” he regards as an enormous benefit of the job. From one day to the next, he may be talking about news in the Middle East with U.S. Rep. Howard P. “Buck” McKeon, chair of the House Armed Services Committee; California versus French cabernets with David Trone, founder of

“You go to any museum, and a good percentage of the works are portraits of one kind or another. I revere those examples passed down to us. They are my teachers.”

RIGHT *Potomac Morning Fog*, a 2-foot-wide, 4-foot-long oil painting **BELOW** Mr. Stevens paints a copy of a James Madison portrait by Gilbert Stuart at the National Gallery of Art. It was commissioned by the family that donated the original to the museum.



Total Wine; or heart stents with biomedical engineer Robert Fischell.

For each client, Mr. Stevens provides a seven-step document that outlines “working procedures” such as a photo/sketching session, the client’s approval of the final compositional and scheduling several “life sessions,” or actual sittings.

“It’s important for me to get my subjects to relax and feel comfortable,” he says. “The best portraits don’t look posed. I spend time with the person, getting a sense of their personality and spirit, which I try to capture in the portrait.”

“I once had a commission to paint a doctor in Richmond,” he recalls. “Before the doctor started posing, we sat around his office and casually talked—all the while, I was secretly studying his mannerisms and gestures. Suddenly I said, ‘Freeze!’ I instinctively knew the pose he was in would be perfect for the portrait because it was utterly natural and reflected who he was.”

Portrait painters, he says, “should have

a certain lack of ego, which may sound odd because we think of artists as being all about ego. But the painting should be about your subject and not about you. Sure, all artists have their own vision and style, but those qualities need to be subservient to capturing the person being painted.”

Portraiture links the present to the future, Mr. Stevens says, and so he feels responsible for creating a work of art that will be an heirloom over many generations.

A portrait he painted of his wife’s mother, who died in 2007, “proudly hangs in the family home,” he says. “In a strange way it’s like her presence is still there, which speaks to the power of portraiture.”

“A testament to portraiture’s grand tradition,” he says, “is how humans have been compelled to capture their own image since the beginning of civilization. Go to any museum, and a good percentage of the works are portraits of one kind or another. I revere those examples passed down to us. They are my teachers. I like to think that we are all



part of one long continuum. Too many artists ignore art history, I believe.”

This appreciation for the great masters was a subject Mr. Stevens explored in his 2013 exhibition *Museum Studies*, a series of 13 paintings portraying people admiring famous works inside renowned museums around the country. It was, he says, a natural evolution of his time spent in museums copying paintings and one of his most ambitious projects to date, taking him a year to complete.

The series, which was exhibited at the Warms Springs Gallery and given front-page treatment in *The Washington Post's* Style section, was Mr. Stevens' way of paying tribute to John Singer Sargent, Gilbert Stuart and other inspiring artists and works.

While the paintings also very much focus on architecture and geometry of the museum spaces, he calls the series his “most intimate and psychological work to date,” reinforcing his belief that “all art is autobiographical in some way or another. These paintings are

born out of personal experience, things I've seen or felt,” he says.

Portraits may mostly drive his commissions, but Mr. Stevens' love for painting landscapes has never waned. An avid hiker and camper since boyhood, he says that he feels most spiritual in the presence of an awe-inspiring landscape.

He has painted scenes from his rafting and hiking trips through the Grand Canyon, as well as trips through almost every national park west of the Rockies and parts of Hawaii, British Columbia and much of California. He and his wife, artist Patricia Skinner, spend part of every year in Seattle, where she grew up, and for 20 years they have annually returned to their honeymoon spot, Orcas Island, Wash. Mr. Stevens calls the island, in Puget Sound bordering Canada, “incredibly beautiful, wild and unspoiled, a place we go to unwind and recharge.”

Since the epiphany at the *American Light* exhibition in 1980, he has mixed genres and has sometimes found confluence.

“Each genre or subject matter in which I work serves to assist the others,” says Mr. Stevens. “The portrait work helps when I put figures in my landscapes or cityscapes. My portraits will occasionally have a landscape in the background and so forth. The natural overlap between areas of concentration hopefully makes me a better artist.”

The overlap has trained an eye for subjects that is as enamored of “endless fascinating characters” as it is a snowy, sun-dappled field or the wake of a kayaker plying the Potomac.

“I used to have students come up to me and say they don't know what to paint. I could never understand that,” Mr. Stevens says. “You paint your life. If you are a living, breathing, thinking, feeling person, subjects are everywhere.”

GW **Where's the best place to hang a painting at home? A professor offers tips in Institutional Knowledge, Pg. 76.**