

# Steve Shelton:

A Glimpse Into The Past





By Jenn Hueting  
Photos By L.G. Patterson



**T**he outside of Steve Shelton's gray, one-story house is a clean-lined, 1960s design. The inside is an enchanting medley of 18th- and 19th-century treasures.

With antique picture frames decorating the walls and sculptures on display throughout the living room, the atmosphere is richly sophisticated yet exudes a warm and inviting air. Shelton will encourage you to make yourself at home, but be careful plopping onto the furniture; the daybed by the window is a circa 1850 French cast-iron campaign bed, and the chair beside it is a charming piece crafted in 1810 and painted to look like bamboo stalks.

Not everything here is old, though. The room's seemingly 200-year-old paintings are Shelton's own creations. His paintbrushes are dipped in neoclassicism, and he's built a successful career painting antique-looking portraits and folk scenes.

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### It Began With Santa

Shelton started showing his creations at art shows when he was 14.

"I made Christmas images with old German Belschnickle Santas," says Shelton, who began his art career making different kinds of holiday images. "These looked mean. They were supposed to scare naughty children."

Today, his art subjects appear a bit more somber. Perched on his living room table are a husband and wife, portraits based directly on the work of George Caleb Bingham.

These paintings were commissioned, but although he is a fan of Bingham's work, Shelton most often creates artwork from his own ideas and observations. Pulling inspiration from "here and there," he keeps extensive files of reference images, such as children's illustrations from the early 19th century.

Shelton begins his portraits with a very fine outline of a face and body, then paints a faint skin-tone color. Next, he erases the pencil markings and creates tiny areas of shading using water. The next stage is the meticulous part — Shelton paints each individual hair and eyelash, miniscule lines on a sometimes 3-by-4- or 4-by-5-inch piece of paper.

"My mom is always amazed by the hair. I'll probably end up going blind," Shelton says with a laugh.



Shelton focuses attention on the clothing and styles of his paintings' time periods. One of his latest pieces features a woman from the 1830s wearing an empire-waisted dress. Men of the 1820s and 1830s are painted with the fashionable hairstyles of the time, often a similar shape to Elvis' hairdo in the 20th-century rock 'n' roll age.

Shelton's paintings typically have bare backgrounds, similar to paintings of a bygone era when painted backgrounds would have cost too much money, he says. Shelton likes

to add his own creative elements, such as spectacles or a pet dog, to make the paintings unique.

### A Quest For The Unusual

Shelton recalls when a shelf full of hand-blown bottles came smashing down to the floor in his bedroom when he was young. He had warned his friends not to roughhouse.

"I was probably the only 12-year-old with antiques in my bedroom," he says. "One of my friends has told me, 'You're the youngest old man I know.'"

Shelton's mother has been an antique dealer since he was young, and unlike most kids, he's always embraced items from the past. He started building his own antique collection in junior high school. He still has a few of his first-bought



pieces, including a 1780s creamware reticulated bowl decorated in hearts and diamonds that he spotted for \$4 when he was in high school. The bowl is covered with staples to mend its breaks.

"They didn't have glue back then," Shelton says. "They didn't throw things away like we do today."

Shelton has a handful of stapled pieces; he says that relics and fragments, not flashy antiques, have always been his main interest. One of his favorite finds is a mirror frame that "didn't know how to swim in the flood." The frame drifted from an antique shop in downtown Alton, Ill., in 1993 when the Mississippi River flooded. A workman cleaning the area later found the frame buried in mud when he stepped on it, breaking the glass. Shelton white-washed the frame, giving it what he calls a "Roman-ruin look."

Shelton has a genuine interest in collecting but he doesn't let the process become too complicated or serious. You won't find him sitting for hours at auctions or scouring garage sales on Saturday mornings. Antiquing is a source of enjoyment he says, and he arranges his collections for fun.

He just finished setting up his treasures in his living room but visit his home in a month and it won't look the same. For the artistic collector with a rearranging bent, that's entertainment. ■

*Check out Shelton's artwork and antique finds at White Horse Antiques in Rocheport.*

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