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*Sherry Steele's
Colorful
Wildlife
Drawings
Delight
Sporting
Collectors And
Artists Alike*

Lou Holtz, the great American football coach, is well known for dispensing inspirational nuggets about success. "Show me someone who has done something worthwhile," he says, "and I'll show you someone who has overcome adversity."

Sherry Steele is living proof of Holtz's maxim. She not only represents the rewards that come from persevering through hardship, she's evidence that the best years of an artist's career can actually begin in midlife.

Steele's colorful pen and ink drawings—one of which titled "Something to Strut About" graces the current cover of *SAFARI Magazine*—confirm that with memorable sporting art there's often far more to the experience of seeing than meets the eye.

Steele today is among an influential group of talented women leaving their mark in wildlife painting and sculpture. It's worth mentioning that, because she only produces a handful of new compositions each year, demand for her originals is fierce.

"As an artist, my work is different from most of the oil and acrylic painters who show at SCI," she said in a recent interview.

What makes Steele different? Those who appreciate fine art need only count the ways or, as



POWER BROKERS

BY TODD WILKINSON

Art OF THE HUNT

The Power of Steele

in Steele's case, try to connect the dots. Whether it's an exquisite leopard scene, a portrayal of other animals or human portraits, Steele achieves impact through extraordinary minute precision.

Look closer—not just nearer, but with the aid of a magnifying glass—and you realize how spellbinding her method actually is, and why she commands the growing admiration of artist peers.

"What she does is amazing," says British-American painter John Seerey-Lester, whom Steele considers a mentor. "Sherry accomplishes with her own hand and personal vision what other artists could only achieve through digital technology."

In viewing Steele's works, Seerey-Lester notes that her well-drawn depictions of African and North American wildlife are far more than what most people regard as "pen and ink."

They're actually the product of methodically laying down thousands upon thousands of tiny pinpricks of color in different layers and color shades. In some of Steele's larger works, the artist herself estimates that there are typically between 500,000 and a million individual specks covering a palette range.

"Back in England, we used to refer to her technique as 'pointilism,' which grew out of the 19th century movement of Impressionism," Seerey-Lester says. "In the modern age, pointillism has become a dying art form. But Sherry gives us a reason to have renewed appreciation."

Equally inspiring is Steele's ascent as an artist, a case study for how patience and determination allows a person to prevail over adversity.



WHISPER IN THE GRASS

Born in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1947, Steele speaks adoringly of her “mountain man” father who worked hard and brought the family into the Great Smokies at every opportunity to camp, fish, hunt and explore. “We didn’t have a lot of money. *National Geographic* was one of the two magazines we could afford,” she says. “I read every issue cover to cover and some of the first animals I drew were based on photographs that appeared on the pages.”

When Steele was in the second grade, her teacher recognized her talent and entered her drawings in a statewide art competition. The instructor also suggested that she receive formal lessons. “My mother refused,” Steele says. “She was afraid that someone would force their style on me and I would lose my sense of individualism.”

Later, her family settled in south Florida. Along the way, Sherry and her brothers were taught how to handle, use and care for firearms as a natural extension of their upbringing. Steele doesn’t hunt big game today, but she remains an avid wingshooter.

Meanwhile, in the Sunshine State, she spent countless days along the Gulf of Mexico kayaking bays and inland rivers like the Myakka, keeping a checklist of wildlife she saw and drawing them from life in her journals.

While attending Florida State, she got married young. The jobs of her husband, who was first in the military before becoming a lobbyist, kept them constantly on the move. Eventually, they made their home in Washington D.C. where Steele worked as a professional staff member on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee for the U.S. House of Representatives and, whenever possible, she traveled to wild parts of the



WHEN THERE WERE GIANTS AMONG US

world to observe wildlife.

Her spouse, however, “obstructed her from drawing,” she says, yet she continued quietly to make pen and ink portraits on the side. At social engagements in the nation’s capital, people heard about her art. Via word of mouth, Steele built a devoted base of collectors that included members of Congress and other influential people.

“Twenty five years of marriage to my former husband accomplished two things,” she says in light reflection. “It fueled my hunger to create,

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and it taught me that I don't need to rush my art."

It wasn't until Steele was divorced and met Chuck Messer during an evening of two-stepping at a honky-tonk in suburban DC during the early 1990s that her art career truly began to flourish. The couple fell in love, married and moved west to Austin, Texas.

"I used to cry because I was prevented from pursuing my art. Now I cry because of the sheer joy of being able to do it and having the support of my second husband," Steele says.

Messer says he, too, has derived tremendous satisfaction from watching Steele come into her own. The years of Steele's 40s ignited a pivotal time of reinvention. "When you love what you do, like Sherry does, it is reflected in every aspect of her life," Messer explains. "At least once each day she comes to me with her favorite affirmation, 'I am such a lucky lady.' Getting a late start in art, as she did, she is determined to make up for those lost years."

Over the past two decades, Steele and Messer have been to Africa 10 times and she's cultivated a loyal following among those who come to SCI.

Dick Stockmar and his wife, Jackie—both SCI lifetime members—met Steele 17 years ago in Reno. Today, they own two dozen of her original drawings divided between homes in Michigan and New Mexico. Some are personal commissions and others resulted from Steele's safaris.

"The amount of research she puts into each piece is impressive," Stockmar says. "They come across as more than drawings. The backgrounds and color and expressions on her subject's faces are so lifelike. She captures the mood of an animal. Her power of observation is special."

Steele shares the story behind a critically-acclaimed piece titled "Whispers In The Grass," in which a leopardess suddenly appeared, allowing the artist to quick-sketch her, and then vanished into cover as if she were a ghost.

"This was one of those remarkable encounters where the leopard approached our vehicle, answered my version of 'cat speak,' and lingered beside us," Steele says. "I had perhaps 25 minutes to sketch her as she lay down in the grass within 20

feet of our vehicle to groom herself. You may find a disproportionately large amount of cats in my repertoire as I have a strong connection to them and my collectors feel I get their faces 'right.'" In this piece, the grasses in front of her face and body had to be inked in first. There is no changing my mind once the ink has dried, which is within seconds."

Travel agent and adventure planner Barbara Wolbrink has known Steele since 1998 when she was just starting to emerge as an artist. "I have seven of Sherry's pieces in my bedroom and another seven hanging between the living room and family room," she says. "All but one are cats, and all of those are African. We also give away Sherry's drawings as gifts to clients and to friends as wedding presents. People regard them as treasures."

Steele's *SAFARI* cover image, "Something to Strut About," is based on a lifetime of studying the courtship dances of wild turkeys—Merriam's, Rio Grande and the Eastern which she observed around the Appalachians as a child. She gathered all the reference material she could, including the tail feathers spread across the table in front of her.

For those not lucky enough to own a Steele original, which, painstakingly, can take months to complete, hundreds of collectors have been able to purchase more affordable and limited edition paper giclées from her website. As an artist, Steele ardently believes in supporting conservation and has helped organize a number of events to increase public awareness about the crisis of poaching and aid the protection of elephants, rhinos and other species.

Back at her drawing table, the indefatigable Steele is now in her 60s but shows no signs of slowing down.

"I've told Sherry that she should alter her technique, maybe take up regular painting so that she can produce more art because her work is so much in demand and yet her process of creation is so slow and attentive to detail," Seerey-Lester says. "But she doesn't want to change because this is who she is. That makes Sherry and her artwork all the more genuine."

Art of the Hunt columnist Todd Wilkinson is a lifelong sportsman and has been writing about wildlife art for more than 25 years. He also is author of the recent, critically-acclaimed book, "Last Stand: Ted Turner's Quest to Save a Troubled Planet." 