

Renowned Artist, William Ward Beecher, on his life and work

By Brenda Underwood

On one of the first cooler mornings August 2005 had seen, Bill Beecher sat in a sunny corner of his porch, classical music playing at his side, and almost completely surrounded by the white blossoms of an eight-foot tall fragrant hydrangea buzzing with hundreds of bees. For a moment time stood still; a hummingbird flew into the hummingbird feeder and out again, filtered sunlight settled across the porch and Bill, Hemingwayesque in a white shirt and white hat, sat reading *Art in America*.



“It’s covered only with bumblebees,” Bill pointed out, referring to the fragrant hydrangea behind him. “Honeybees don’t go near it ...

only bumblebees, and they don’t sting. They are harmless. When you leave I’m going to snap off a batch of branches for you. They keep very well. I like dried flowers that have shape and meaning to them, that don’t look dead. Toward the end of the summer, I will snap off half a dozen branches and stick them into the shelf of a table. They last all winter long and end up a pinkish tan and look kind of nice.”

William Ward Beecher was born in Manhattan during the depression. Like many people at that time, his family had to move out of Manhattan. "My father found a nice apartment in Brooklyn which is where I really grew up. I was there until I was about 17. My father was a minor vice-president with the Underwood Corporation that made typewriters. As time goes on I learn more and more that he was the member of the family who took care of all those useless people that were part of our family. I had an uncle who was a failed playwright, I had an uncle who couldn’t stand the family and became a diplomat in Venezuela. My maternal grandmother grew up with servants and never learned how to do anything except make an apple pie.”

“In many ways, my parents were really quite remarkable,” said Bill. “My mother spoke perfect Spanish, not the mainland Spanish but what I consider to be real Spanish without the lipping. It’s not my fault that Phillip II couldn’t speak,” Bill added, with a gleam of humor in his eyes. “She also spoke French and Italian fluently. My mother was a fervent liberal democrat and the speaker most in demand for the Women’s Clubs of America. Her real name was Jeannette but she didn’t like it so when she was 16 she changed it to Beatrice, a classical name, and [after she married] was known as Beatrice Beecher.”

In 1942, when America entered World War II, Bill, along with eight of his friends, volunteered for the air force. "Each of our serial numbers begins with a zero," he said, "which means you weren't drafted, you volunteered." Bill started flying heavy bombers (B-17s) out of England and then became a side-door gunner in a B-17. "In 1945 there was only one survivor [of the eight] and here I am. Everybody else got shot down. One of them was my best friend."

Bill and his wife Lorie came to Cornwall in 1960 and put down roots. "One of the nice things about Cornwall," said Bill, "is that people don't care whether you have roots or not as long as you fit in and behave yourself."

"When we were first married, Lorie and I talked about having six kids; we thought it would be such fun. By the time number four showed up we were ready to call it a day because, a) they are terribly expensive and, b) we were not sure we liked the idea anymore."

Bill and Lorie had three boys and a girl. Their daughter, Karen, was killed in a car accident. "We don't talk about it," said Bill. "She was a beautiful girl, only 17. I still think of her all the time – not obsessively, but little things will remind me."

"Lorie made a dancer out of me," continued Bill. "When we first met, we would go out to the St. Regis Roof and all I knew was the box step. On the other hand, Lorie was a superb professional dancer. She taught dancing among other things. She taught me to do all kinds of dances except for one thing which I never learned and that was how to do the reverse when waltzing. I never was able to do a reverse without falling on my face. I still can't, but I can tango."

When Bill was in the air force he had no idea that he would eventually become a painter; he had always painted but had never thought of art as a career. In 1943, while stationed in England, the army put on a show of art done by the army. "I just happen to have won it," said Bill. After that, he thought about it quite a lot and by 1945 had started a portfolio of drawings of his fellow soldiers. "I took it to a gallery on 57th Street (which shall be nameless here) and they accepted me right away. I've been off and running since then and also making a living at it. That is 60 years."

Bill, a self-taught painter, is considered one of the foremost experts in the art of *trompe l'oeil*, one of the most difficult in the field of art. *Trompe l'oeil* ("that which deceives the eye") is a three-dimensional painting that leads the viewer to believe he is looking at something that is not there; for example, out of an open window, when, in fact, he is looking at a painting of an open window on a wall.

Bill attributes the current interest in the genre to a remark a dealer's wife made after he had finished a painting. "It was a seascape," said Bill, "and she said, 'Oh, look at this wonderful wood up front. Wouldn't it be fantastic if that was real? Maybe you could paste a piece of wood on the painting.'" Being a painstaking artist with an immense amount of pride in his work, Bill said, "No, I don't have to paste anything on the painting. I'll paint it instead—in three dimensions." And, he did, leading to the renewed interest in *trompe l'oeil*.

“*Trompe l’oeil* has been going on for a thousand years,” Bill explained. “It is found in the floors of Pompeii done in tile and it is really quite amusing. It shows that the Pompeian’s, in addition to a rather stylish lifestyle, had a sense of humor too. There is a floor from the dining area of a buried villa after the volcano [erupted] and in it are things like a little mouse done in miniature tiles, a discarded banana skin, and a piece of half-eaten fruit—all of it done in *trompe l’oeil*. It has always been around, Bill explained, “I didn’t invent it, I’m just the best at it.”

Henry Ward Beecher (Bill’s grandfather) once said: “Every artist dips his brush in his own soul and paints his own nature into his pictures.” In contemplating how that applies to his work, Bill said, “... my prime depictions are all basically classical subjects. I suppose it is respect as much as anything. Respect for what has gone before. Sometimes [my work] has a little twist. For example, somebody who had bought one of my paintings called me a couple of years ago—it was Farmhouse Window—I give them names I can remember) and said they couldn’t find the signature. I said, ‘Well did you really examine it? Did you look on the title page of the book that’s leaning against the wall on the left side?’ That’s where my signature was. A lot of painters do that, they hide it.”

Speaking of artists, both ancient and contemporary, Bill admires the work of Vermeer the Dutch painter recognized for his use of light. “I try to catch the light and I guess I’ve done it because enough people have come back to me and said: ‘The thing I like best about your work is the way you capture light. If you think it’s easy, it isn’t. You really have to work hard... to make the light come out ... so when you have got it hanging on the wall the light just pours out of the painting.”

Bill also admires the work of Andrew Wyeth and Winslow Homer and other realists “whose subject matter has a certain story value to it. Their paintings are more than just an urn of flowers. I can do those in my sleep.”

Bill is putting together a *catalog raisonné* of his work, which, in the art world “is a summation of all the work of an artist that can be found and described,” like an autobiography for a writer.

“I’m doing it the way I think it should be done. I’m putting in everything including at least three paintings that just make me cringe they are so commercial. But, they are mine, [and although] they are well done, they are so *Saturday Evening Post*. I put them in because when I’m gone that’s going to be part of the story of my life. Usually, when you read about an artist in an art magazine, Cruikshank, for example, they will say in the last paragraph ‘and a *catalog raisonné* is being prepared. We expect publishing to be in 2010.’ The guy has been dead for 250 years! Hello... whoa... excuse me.... You know, I’m not dead. I don’t know anybody who has done their own *catalog raisonné* but I am alive and I can say truthfully my opinion of what I’m putting in the book.”

At 84 years of age, Bill has experienced some recent health problems. “Some of them are puzzling,” he said. “For example, I have gout, but people, myself included, had always thought of it as being a rich man’s disease. There was that famous drawing by Cruikshank (1792-1878) of the rich old man in his heavily padded armchair with one foot completely wrapped up resting on a footstool. That was

universally accepted as gout. Wrong! You can get it when you are 23 years old.” Bill has gout in both feet and a hernia as a result of a recent operation. A visiting nurse calls in to check on him each day.

“Medically, I am just fine, and medically they tell me that I am going to live forever and I keep telling them I don’t want to. There’s nothing wrong with my mind. I have a few limited friends. I won’t put up with bores; I’m not rude to them, I just don’t seek them out. You’d be surprised at the things we talk about sometimes on this porch. I love people with active minds.”

Bill lost Lorie 11 years ago. They had been married 42 years. Recalling her last year when he was her caregiver, Bill remembers many mornings in the kitchen while preparing her poached egg, he would hear a noise at the back door and, going out, find a large pan of freshly baked warm biscuits. “That’s what happens in Cornwall, we take care of each other.”

Bill still paints “*más o menos*” but he doesn’t drive any more. “It’s my decision not to drive because I would be a menace,” he said. “It does become difficult when you need something. You have to rely on other people to drive you.” Speaking of others in town who live alone, Bill said, “You know what the problem is—I know because I’m doing it—they’re lonely.”

Although reluctant to speak about his ancestors, Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Bill remembers a story about his great aunt. “When Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been a best seller for several years. When she was introduced to the President in Washington, he shook her hand and said: ‘So you’re the little lady who started this war.’ I thought that was interesting.”

Lamenting the current state of the healthcare system, and imagining what it will be like in another 20 years, Bill said, “I won’t be here, thank you. Do you think I want to turn into George Burns? No! I don’t want somebody who says: ‘Who’s George Burns?’ There’s an old line about the navy man who retired and among other things he was bored out of his mind. When he was leaving the ship for the last time he slung an anchor over his shoulder, descended the gangway and one of his fellow sailors said, ‘What are you going to do with the anchor?’” The guy says, ‘I’m going to keep walking until somebody says what’s that thing on your shoulder and then I’ll know I’m in the right place.’”

You will find examples of Bill’s work at www.williamwardbeecher.com. His work is in many public and private collections and he has shown his paintings in numerous fine art museums and galleries including the Metropolitan museum of Art, the Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art in Hartford, The Munson Williams-Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, and the San Francisco Palace of the Legion of Honor, among others. In addition to his many paintings and drawings, he has designed advertisements for Tanglewood and TWA, covers for magazines, and posters, fabric and wallpaper.

(Interviewed August 17, 2005)

