

# 15 MINUTES

## An artful life

BY EVAN WILLIAMS  
ewilliams@florida-weekly.com

A painting of a man and his dog called "Old Friends," by Ellen Sheppard, hangs behind the front door in her living room. It was modeled on a newspaper picture she cut out years ago, but it looks like she knew the man in it as a brother or friend. The attention to detail is personal, verging on fussy: the light in his white hair, the dog that's trying to twist into his lap, the stitches on his overalls. It's a painting she's reproduced four times over, with slightly different angles or lighting.

Mrs. Sheppard's house is filled with her art: a Florida landscape hangs in the hall; an elegant girl in a white dress stands over the couch, an airy, impressionistic work marked by a few simple splashes of color: a bouquet of roses, a purple belt.

But of all the paintings her husband John has seen her finish over the years - they've been married for 54 - "Old Friends" touched him the most.

"I like the man, because he's just a kind man, he's a simple man," Mr. Sheppard explained. "I see him as not living a complicated life. And I just like his face. And I like his dog. Of course, I've always liked dogs."

And Mrs. Sheppard has always liked to paint, she said; but for most of her life dabbled in it only on occasion.

"I was really too busy with family," she said. "And family is still the first thing in my life. Art is really second, and a lot of artists won't tell you that. Family has just been my whole life and that's what's

important in my life: my husband Johnny, the children and grandchildren."

She was born in Massapequa, N.Y. and raised on Long Island and was, practically she said, an only child. She had one brother 10 years older who went to war. After moving to Florida, she met her husband and was hired by his father's law firm, as a legal secretary.

Their first child was born in 1957, then two more followed in the next two-and-a-half years, "And that was it," Mrs. Sheppard said. They still live in the same house they raised their children in, near the Edison Home in Fort Myers.

"They'll have to carry me out feet first," Mr. Sheppard said.

Two of the three children live in Fort Myers. One passed away 27 years ago. They have six grandchildren, all in Southwest Florida.

It wasn't until the house was empty that Mrs. Sheppard created a studio in the garage and started painting seriously. That was ten years ago. During that time her experience and knowledge grew, and Mrs. Sheppard developed an "Impressionistic" style ("that means the strokes are loose and the colors are bright," she said) while taking painting lessons from Gale Bennett and Lucie Macherowski at



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO BY EVAN WILLIAMS

Ellen Sheppard in her studio with a picture of the old man and his dog she painted.

Alliance for the Arts.

"The reason I went to (Bennett) in the beginning is because everything I drew or painted was very realistic," Mrs. Sheppard said. "I wanted to loosen up."

She learned about some of the things that worked best for her in creating art.

"When I start a painting, I like to make a black and white picture first, because then it's so much easier to see the values," she said. "Sometimes the color distracts from that. You've gotta think of colors as warm and cool, dark and light, where you place them — there's so many things."

Mrs. Sheppard donates many of her paintings, or uses proceeds from their

sales, to benefit local organizations like the American Heart Association, Arts for Acts, the Historical Museum, the Children's Hospital and the Covenant Presbyterian Church. It's an opportunity she wouldn't do without, she said; that, and family traditions, like the gingerbread cookies she makes every year. The whole family gets involved in the process.

"They keep asking me around Thanksgiving, 'Grandma, you're still going to make gingerbread cookies, aren't you?'" Mrs. Sheppard said.

Although it's gotten messy in the kitchen on occasion, she said, so far they've never failed. ■

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