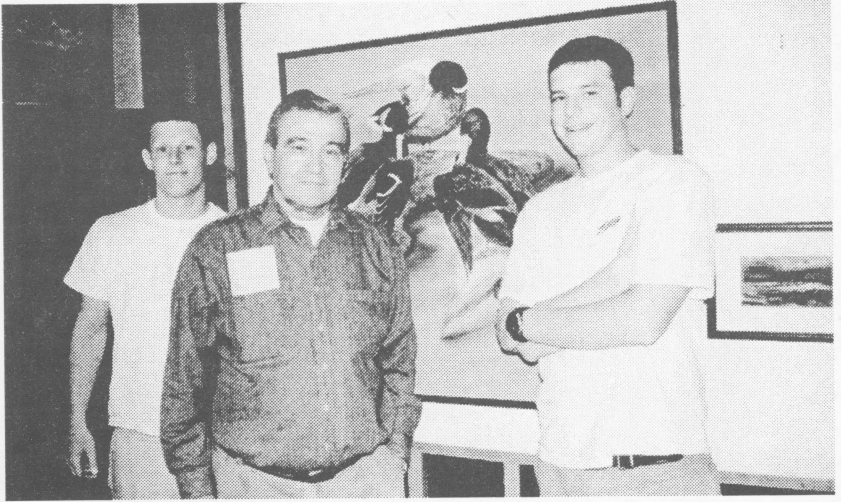


Life Imitates Art: The Frans van Baars Story



Students Chad Whitley (left) and Michael Lee stand with Mr. Frans Van Baars before one of his paintings.

By Chad Whitley and Michael Lee

Introduction

By Michael Lee

In late January, 1998, Chad Whitley and I visited artist Frans van Baars in his waterfront studio in downtown Washington. Mr. van

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Baars has earned wide recognition and success for his paintings and contributions to the world of art.

Although his career is now well established, van Baars never imagined he would become a professional artist. Once a Navy man, van Baars changed the course of his life due to a freak accident that broke his neck and back. It all began during his time of recuperation in 1965 when he lay paralyzed in bed, wondering what he would do with the rest of his life after such a close brush with death.

During his long recuperation, van Baars watched a root grow through the wall of his room that later developed into a beautiful flower. This incredible transformation awakened something inside him and became the deciding factor for his career. From that time on, van Baars knew he wanted to paint. Thus, his career began as he lay helpless in his hospital bed.

More than one flower would soon emerge from a root that had found its way into the cracks of a hospital recovery room. Van Baars began creating his own transformations as paint and canvas drew breath from his brush and life for him began anew.

Our conversation with van Baars revealed that he has learned much about art and life and how the two imitate each other. In the interview that follows, van Baars passes along his history, his wisdom, and his passions. Through it all, he asserts that he has been blessed because he is able to make a living doing something he loves.

Van Baars gave us a glimpse of how life can imitate art. We all start like the root seeking a path towards the light and towards

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understanding. We wind our way down many paths and often falter and take wrong turns. But somehow, miraculously, we find ourselves in the light, ready to paint our pictures, dream our dreams, and find meaning in our lives. Frans van Baars is a truly gifted artist who has overcome incredible obstacles. His work is now a part of the rich history of Coastal North Carolina and each painting is a beautiful chapter.

Life: Could you tell us a little about your early life?

Mr. van Baars: I was born in the Netherlands in the mid 1930's. I came to the United States in 1956 after World War II. I went to school until the end of high school, which in Holland at that time was sixteen. At the age of sixteen, I joined the Merchant Marines and sailed around the globe. My father also was a captain in the Merchant Marines, so prior to that we sailed with him. He would take us to a lot of museums, galleries, plays, and shows and expose us to all of the arts, wherever we were at the time. One of our neighbors was an artist, a painter. I would look in his studio and sort of look at the things that he was doing. I doodled all of my life and I carried a doodle pad with me, just for fun. Once I came to the United States, I ended up in the Navy and started to make a career out of the Navy. I ended up in submarine service. While in the service one day, I just had a freak accident and broke my neck and back and ended up in the hospital. I was in traction for several months. While I was in traction, I watched this little plant, well it was actually a stick, grow out of the wall into a beautiful little flower. Watching that transition really made me decide what I wanted to do when I got out, and that was to paint. First of all, before I got to that decision, I had to get over the "poor me" attitude. Before that happened, I was lying there feeling sorry for myself. You cannot make much progress while you

are feeling sorry for yourself. You need to get over the blues first before you can get into the pink. See, life is rather colorful.

Life: So what exactly brought you over to the United States?

Mr. van Baars: The people in this country should realize how good they've got it and stop their complaining. Everyone is nagging that this is wrong and that is wrong. Instead of expressing all of those things, let's do something and change it. We are living in the greatest country on this earth, and we have so many things. We have it so good. That does not mean that it is perfect, and that we cannot change things around and improve upon them. This country has the longest waiting list in the world for people trying to get into here. That's not just by accident. That is because people realize what a great place this is. At the time that I started to immigrate while sailing in the merchant marines, there were three of us that graduated from high school together. At the same time, we started to sail around the world. One of them, in South America, fell back in the cargo hole and got killed. There were two of us left. Right after that, we took a trip behind the Iron Curtain on the merchant ship. And when we came back from that, we did a little smuggling and a little of this and a little of that. We were young and poised, and we had a pocketful of money. We went by every embassy that was taking applications for immigrants. At this time, the Cold War had started. It was the mid '50's; the Berlin Wall and the whole thing had started up. We had just lived through World War II, and now we didn't want to go back to another war. So we wanted to get away from Europe particularly. My friend went to Australia. I was very fortunate. At that time, the United States had passed a law which would allow 60,000 people from Northern Europe, who had had diffi-

culties during the war or had been involved in natural disasters to enter the United States. Adolf, "the mustache man," didn't like my family very much and we didn't care for him either. We were bombed, shot at, and kicked around a little bit by him. That qualified me. Also in '53 we were flooded out, and that qualified me. There were a number of things that really helped. Another thing that also helped me was that my dad used to take photographs behind the Iron Curtain, and he would pass them on to NATO. So I think that it was all of these things together that put me pretty much on top of the list. The last part, the photographs, often really helped me while I was in the service here to get my top-secret clearances. I got them faster than any born citizen because I was already so well checked out. It was no problem because they knew where I came from.

Life: Have you been painting your whole life?

Mr. van Baars: I was doodling. I always had a doodle pad with me, but until I broke my neck in the 60's, I never considered going into the arts. The closest association that I had with the arts was my first mother-in-law. At the time my first wife's mother, who has died since then, was an art teacher. I used to watch her. I went out for fun and did some drawings and things like that. That was strictly for fun.

Life: At some point in your life didn't you realize that you were a good artist?

Mr. van Baars: I always enjoyed doing it. I think once you start selecting a job in life, select something that you enjoy doing. There are too many miserable people saying, "I hate this job and can't wait to retire." Find something that you enjoy and do it.

Life: Did you plan on making a frame shop to complement your artwork?

Mr. van Baars: The frame shop really came by accident. Again, I guess you can say that I am accident prone. I had talked to several people about framing my works for me so I could sell them and make a living. I really didn't want to go into framing, but the owner would only give me 10% off or something like that. When you do twenty or thirty pieces a month, that's a lot of money. So I heard about this frame shop being auctioned off in Southern Pines, and I ended up down there buying most of the equipment. Right after that, some of the people I had been dealing with wondered why I had not been in for some time. I told them that I had bought some equipment, and then they offered to buy the equipment at a profit to me, plus give me a real good percentage off the materials. I basically told them that they should have done that when things were going along in the beginning. Don't wait until now to do that. Be fair with me across the board. Don't just do it when you need to have it done. And, again, in life these are some of the lessons that we learn. I try to be fair with others and try to basically do the same with them as you would want them to do with you. If you don't like something they do or have someone working for you, be honest, tell them up front, and don't get mad. Just say that this is what I expect and this is the way it should be done.

Life: How long have you been running this shop around here?

Mr. van Baars: I am not running this shop. Brenda and Sonya do. The more I can get back into the creative part, the happier I am. Since I had to be involved for some time with Brenda being sick over the last couple of years, the more I have become grouchy.

Life: How long do you usually spend on a painting?

Mr. van Baars: Anywhere from ten minutes to ten months, depending on the size, and depending on the subject. The one thing that I never do is count time when I am painting. If I wanted to do that, I would go back and work for the government.

Life: So basically you are painting for the fun of it?

Mr. van Baars: When you do this for a living, it is a different pressure than when you are doing it for fun. However, there are a lot of people doing it for fun. Then all at once, you turn around and now you've got to put your work in frames and then you've got to sell them. I really wish a lot of people just did it for enjoyment and for fun. I really respect those people a great deal. It is a totally different facet. If you have to pay to produce, and you have to depend on your production, it's one thing. If you can just go out there and have a good time and really don't care whether it comes out or not, it's a different thing. And what I'm trying to find is somewhere in between those two because I do enjoy my fun and would not want to do anything else in my life.

Life: Do you have requests for paintings or do you mostly paint the coast?

Mr. van Baars: I would say this year ten to fifteen percent of the pieces that I have sold were commissions where they would ask me to paint their house or something. I'd much rather be painting something that I like, but that is security and it is also very necessary. Right now I am painting a series of paintings of Washington, Beaufort County, and eventually coastal North Carolina that I will be framing. I am having a lot of fun with that. We have

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bought the equipment to do my own prints now, and I am capable of putting my own prints on the same paper that I am painting on. Technology is wonderful, not cheap but it's wonderful.

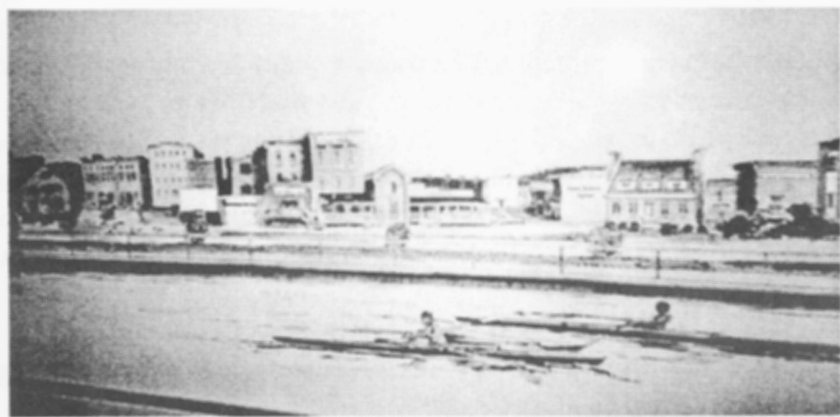
Life: What other advantages are available due to the printing process?

Mr. van Baars: Well, we can do a lot more graphing things with the computer, which I never thought I would see. Technology that is out there right now is so unbelievable. We look back at the old mimeograph machines, which some people might remember, where you had to type it on the sheet and then take the top off and put it on the thing and hand crank it. If you want to compare that to what is out there right now, you can now talk to people halfway across the globe on the Internet. Lettering used to take a whole day, and if you messed up the one thing, you had to do it all over again. Now you can put the lettering in a computer and do the graphics. One click of the button can create an ark for you and all this type of stuff. It's truly mind boggling, the technology that is out there.

Life: Has the location of your shop in downtown Washington been an advantage for your different paintings?

Mr. van Baars: Well, being in Washington, I'm far enough out of the way of what is going on with the arts in the big city, that I can do my own. But yet I can be far enough in the way to really create something that is exciting. Washington to me is very exciting. I like to see Washington as a very historical town. Washington can

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The Washington, NC, waterfront is one of Mr. Van Baars favorite subjects.

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be to the twentieth century what Williamsburg is to the colonial period. Those are my hopes. There is no city dealing with the twentieth century but in less than two years from now, the twentieth century will be gone. We really need to do something. I would like to go to the period of the '30's, early '40's maybe, pre-World War II years in Washington, when segregation was still prevalent. We need to look at those issues. If we don't look at them, we are going to repeat them. They're not all pretty, but they're not all that bad either.

Life: Is that why you like painting scenes of downtown Washington and along the East Coast?

Mr. van Baars: The main reason is that I live here and I like to paint what I can see. I could fly out to some exotic place and take a bunch of photographs and paint those, but I'm a painter, not a photographer. For example, a lot of the shows that artists enter, you need slides to send in. I really don't have a camera that takes slides, not a good camera. I just recently bought a little camera for the family, but I don't have the capability of taking slides. All of this logical stuff that is going on with the big cities and the art scene—I don't like to mess with it. I just like to do what I enjoy doing.

Life: Did you teach yourself how to frame pictures?

Mr. van Baars: If you are trying to make a living out of the arts, you basically have to learn every part of it. When you do your presentation, you must know how to work it and how to change things when they need to be changed. I was very fortunate that my art school taught us to do things from scratch; in other words,

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we had a class there where we were required to make our own paint.

Life: What was the name of the school?

Mr. van Baars: It was the Ivey School of Art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The school is no longer in existence. I also took some other courses at Carnegie in Pittsburgh, which is still very strong.

Life: What are some mottoes of your shop that help to keep it going?

Mr. van Baars: The people that work here, I would like them to treat the shop like it is their own shop. I prefer them to give me their best shot, and I will do the same. Don't worry about being angry about anything; just talk to one another and communicate.

Life: How did the public become aware of your paintings?

Mr. van Baars: You do shows. You do anything possible. Work continuously and become as visible as you can. By sitting outside painting, you become very visible. People see you painting there and begin to ask questions.

Life: Is it possible to make a decent living out of painting?

Mr. van Baars: Well, looking at my build right now, you know that I am not a starving artist, and I have no intention to. Can I buy everything that I fancy? No, but I think there are as many unhappy rich people as there are unhappy poor people. Richness and poverty, I think, are states of mind rather than how much

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money you've got in the bank. Yes, I do worry about money sometimes, and not everything comes easy at all times. Do I want to change anything? No. I've got the life that I want, and with it comes some baggage that I don't particularly care for. The goal is to be able to eventually throw that baggage out.

While growing up, I learned a very valuable lesson. Once while sailing with my dad, we were somewhere in the Indian Ocean, we went to watch some woodcarvers. They would make these large wooden screens. It was explained to us that they would always make a mistake in honor of Allah, because Allah was perfect and man was not perfect. At the time, it went in one ear and out the other, but later I also started to grow older and think about these things. It all came back to me. You know, that was a really neat idea. To them, Allah is the same as God is to us. To make a mistake in honor of God—that's neat! So I laid out a piece of paper and started to paint. I decided where I was going to make my mistake. Before I even got to that spot, I had already made so many mistakes that both God and I knew that I wasn't perfect. I had to come up with something more than that. From there, I decided that the final solution would be to make each painting better than the last painting. If I succeed, I am going to celebrate. If I fail, I am going to take myself out for supper and make myself feel good. That way you have a win-win situation. It's okay to fail and make mistakes as long as you are willing to look at it, learn from it, and continue on. I have learned more from my mistakes than my successes. I have always looked at things as a painter, and I'm always looking to do the perfect painting. You also have to realize, once you do that perfect painting, what do you have to do to maintain that?

Life: Do you often catch yourself painting the same scene twice?

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Mr. van Baars: Yes, there are many similarities in a lot of the things you do around here, and that's okay. I always try to look for a little difference. No, I don't want to do 500 sand dunes, one right after the other, but there is so much history here. Think of recent history over the last hundred years. I think those years are very fascinating.

Life: Have you painted somewhere and then gone back at a later time and realized just how much it has changed?

Mr. van Baars: Definitely, several times. Buildings change, and it doesn't take a long period of time to change. Since I do a lot of waterfront, it's not unusual for me to be sitting down painting and the ship pulls out while I am painting it. That has happened.

Life: Do you just add the ship into your painting?

Mr. van Baars: That all depends. Each circumstance is a little different. Sometimes you've got to paint it.

Life: So you've been halfway through a painting and your ship leaves?

Mr. van Baars: Yes, that has happened more than once.

Life: Do you think that a good rapport with the public is essential?

Mr. van Baars: Oh, definitely so!

Life: Is there an advantage to having your home and the frame shop both within the same building?

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Mr. van Baars: Well, I am having an affair with this building, I have to admit it. I am totally in love with this building. It's fantastic! We have got 24,000 square feet. It's like that young boy that built a tree fort or castle of his own. That is what he really wants! The roughness of it I enjoy. The apartments and the sections I enjoy. In the garage area, we are doing some remodeling. We are putting the computer room in there and just making some changes. To me, this building is Washington. I am having this wonderful affair with this building and my wife is letting me. It doesn't bother her; she thinks that this building is a "he," and I believe that she is doing the same thing with it that I am doing. It's really great!

Life: Pretty convenient. Walk downstairs and you're at work.

Mr. van Baars: What do you mean, walk downstairs? We can take the elevator downstairs! None of this walking stuff. We are having fun, and it's not always easy. By the time that our dreams have been fulfilled in this building, a lot of money will have been spent. That is basically what we are doing. I believe in investing in people, and we are investing in ourselves and this building. Stock markets might be good for some other folks. This saddens me because people lose human quality and things become more important than people.

Life: Is there any one person you look up to?

Mr. van Baars: No, I don't think there is one, but there are many. I am very grateful for my parents. My father passed away and my mother is still alive, but she doesn't know it. I have seen those folks do some extremely heroic things, particularly during World War II, that I admire and respect greatly. They did not quit; they

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continued on. My mother does not even recognize us. She just lies there. In many ways, she is still paying the price for those years. She went through the hunger and the starvation during the two wars, World War I and II. Even though Holland was not invaded during World War I, they did go pretty hungry. Malnutrition was common. Then during World War II, we actually watched people drop from starvation.

Life: What is your favorite painting?

Mr. van Baars: The one painting I did of the little plant from which I decided the path of my life. That is always important. I would not want to sell that one.

Life: Do you still have that one?

Mr. van Baars: I still have that one.

Life: Where is it?

Mr. van Baars: It's upstairs. The other favorite painting I have is "the next one."

Life: The next one. Which one is that?

Mr. van Baars: The next one. I look at paintings sort of like taking a trip. If you ever take a train trip, you take a blank piece of paper and the conductor stamps on it and makes marks on it. So I think of myself as a conductor, putting marks on that piece of paper. When that trip is over, the ticket can be put away. I can then start a new ticket, on a new journey, on a new trip. It's a

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rotating thing that just continues. You are always striving for the best and really hoping never to reach perfection.

Conclusion

By Chad Whitley

Frans van Baars' career evolved from a child who loved to "doodle" into a mature and respected artist of the 1990's who creates magnificent paintings of Eastern North Carolina. Each painting is like "a new journey" for van Baars, and he is always anticipating the beginning of "the next one."

He added that many people today miss what is important in life because "things have become more important than people." Art, as Mr. van Baars showed us, helps people snap out of those materialistic traps, whether it is a flower that blooms from a wall crack in a dank hospital recovery room or a seascape that draws us towards a sailboat waiting to ride the wind's wings.

Likewise, Mr. van Baars also shared a lesson from his youth with us that involved a group of woodcarvers on an island in the Indian Ocean. The men always made a mistake in God's honor. They believed that "God is perfect while man is not." The deliberate mistake was a testament that they recognized their faults and inadequacies. This was their tribute to a perfect God. Van Baars shared that he soon started to do the same thing with his paintings, but quickly found that he would make an unplanned mistake long before there was a need to make a deliberate one. Therefore, he came up with something more. He decided to "make each painting better than the last painting." Based on our time

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with him and the observations we made of his creations, he seems to be doing just that.



The Van Baars Ltd. studio faces the Pamlico River.