

## ***WITH THE EYE OF A DRAFTSMAN***

During the last two decades of his life, **Thomas C. Skinner, Jr.** created a prodigious number of paintings, murals and sketches that not only accurately depicted numerous creations of the craftsmen of Newport News Shipbuilding, but also captured typical mid-twentieth century shipyard work scenes. One of his many contemporary admirers said:

*“T. C. Skinner [as he signed his work] displays a quality that is seldom seen and extremely hard to achieve. Most of his ‘official’ work is of the nature of portraiture; i.e. portraits of ships, and what he called ‘likeness’ was of paramount importance to him.”*

That ‘likeness’ was equally important to the men and women who designed and built ships in Newport News. In the late 1940’s and early 1950’s, his art frequently graced the covers of the *Shipyards Bulletin*. Several of his more appreciated works, like this representation of the superliner *UNITED STATES* at high speed in rough seas, were reproduced and given out by the thousand to the shipbuilders that created his subjects.



Thomas C. Skinner, Jr. was born on Christmas Day, 1889 in Kuttawa, Kentucky. Early in his life, the family moved to Waynesville, North Carolina; the birthplace of long-time NNS President, Homer L. Ferguson. Young Tom spent a great deal of his childhood painting in watercolor the beautiful mountain scenery that surrounds Waynesville.

After attending Kingsley Military Academy in New Jersey, Skinner enrolled at the Art Students League of New York; a school 'run by artists for artists'. There, his early work attracted the attention of Instructor Robert Henri, one of the foremost artists of his day. With Henri acting as his mentor, Skinner continued his studies in Europe.

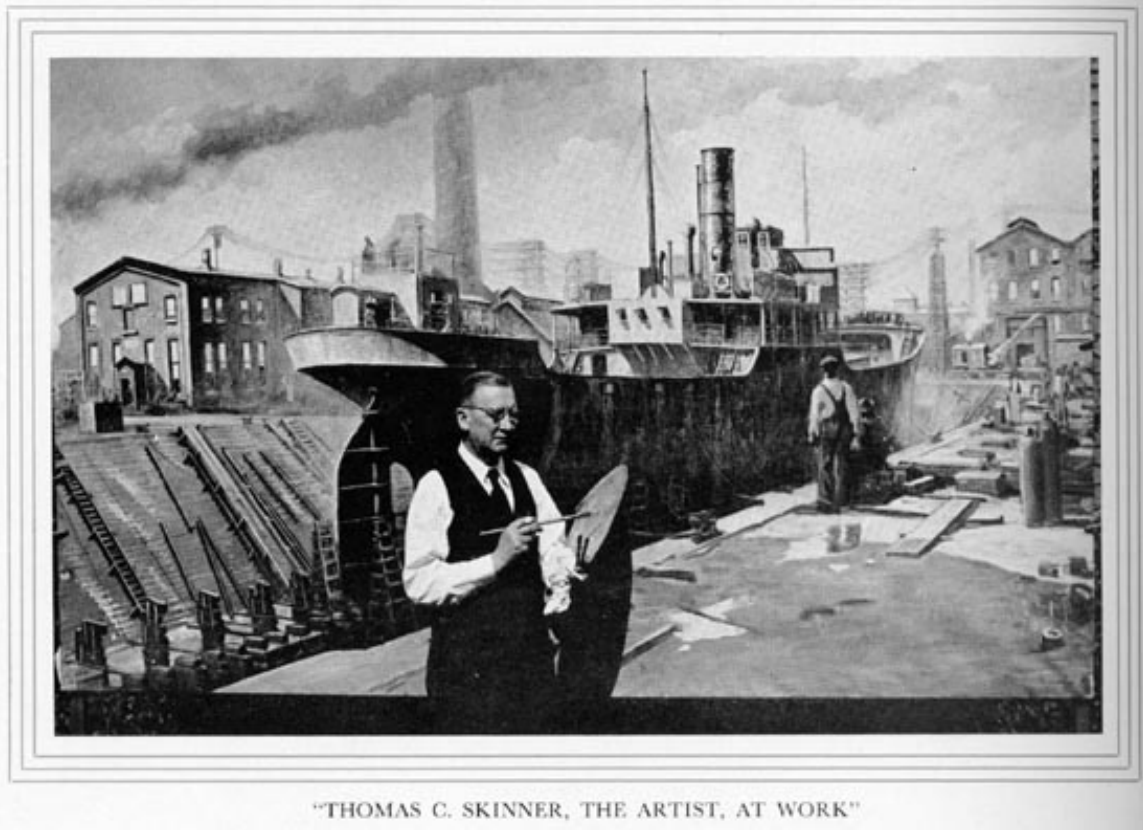
At age 23, while studying in Spain, T.C. Skinner met Therese Tribolati. They were married in 1914, but never had children. After returning to this country, he entered the field of commercial art, illustrating magazine stories and painting cover designs. This example of his work dates from that period, and is entitled '*Scene with Flags*'. He also painted murals for churches, public building and ships. The latter type of art work eventually brought him to Newport News.



Shortly after Archer M. Huntington founded the Mariners' Museum, Skinner was appointed staff artist in 1932. He was recommended to Mr. Huntington by the shipyard's president, Homer L. Ferguson, who had good reason to know of and appreciate Skinner's artistic abilities, for Mrs. Ferguson was the artist's sister.

Mr. Ferguson also assigned T. C. Skinner studio space within the shipyard proper. Here Skinner was encouraged to paint from contemporary life all phases of modern steel ship construction. As might be expected, his 'in-yard' studio did not possess the quiet decorum of a conventional studio. Riveting hammers provided a continuous tattoo, and the floor shook with the vibration of heavy machinery. But purposeful and to Skinner picturesque activity was going on all around and in a manner of minutes he could set up his easel and start sketching such activities as a vessel being eased into the big dry dock his windows overlooked.

The result, in part, was ten huge murals that were installed in the Mariners' Museum Great Hall of Steam. This is a series of un-posed paintings that are bold, colorful and almost noisily true to life. Some critics say he sought to over-glamorize shipbuilding and other aspects of things maritime. Anyone who has participated in building ships knows quite well that there is a lot more dirt and a lot less color in the crafts depicted by the scenes Mr. Skinner captured on canvas. Perhaps his critics cannot fully appreciate the human appeal of scenes of bygone heavy industrial practices because they never were 'privileged' to participate in the gritty business of shipbuilding.



The above image, which shows Skinner posing with palette in front of one of the museum's murals, was included in the 1942 NNS&DDCo Apprentice School yearbook. That edition of *The Binnacle* also featured, as section dividers, reproductions of eight Skinner murals that colorfully captured what shipbuilding was like in the 1940s.

Scenes included in that yearbook featured the shipyard's machine shop, forge shop and mold loft, plus two dry dock scenes and a bending slab and one simply entitled "Chipping, Scraping and Painting" which shows workers precariously perched on stage boards hung high on the side of a ship under construction. This latter image, with nary a safety rail in sight, is decidedly pre-OSHA!

In addition, the 1942 yearbook edition includes reproductions of his beautiful oil paintings of the USS Ranger (CV-4) and USS YORKTOWN (CV-5); the first of many and famous NNS-built aircraft carriers. Unfortunately, all of those images are in black and white, but this cover for a shipyard brochure of the same time period provides some idea of the colorful maritime scenes T. C. Skinner so often created.



Skinner's work that is most familiar to decades of apprentices is the Memorial Mural that still graces a wall in the Education Building's auditorium. Created shortly after World War Two ended, this multi-panel mural is flanked by the names of those apprentices who gave their lives during that conflict. This memorial display measures 22 feet, ten inches wide by five feet, nine inches high.



The 1947 edition of *The Binnacle* was dedicated to the Apprentice School's twenty-eight lost souls of the Greatest Generation. The mural reproduced above was appropriately included as a two-page spread in full color in that publication. Also included in that oversized book was this photo of T. C. Skinner working on the Memorial Mural.



Sixty years later, the 2007 Apprentice Alumni Directory was dedicated to the hundreds of apprentices who served in World War Two, and to the memory of the twenty-eight who made the ultimate sacrifice.

William A. "Bud" Cole, Toolmaker, 1948, served as Skinner's model for the apprentice on the mural's left side, shown standing in the machine shop with draft notice in hand.



Bud Cole, whose apprenticeship had been interrupted by two years of service in the navy, was walking to work from the Apprentice Dormitory in either late 1946 or early 1947 when he was spotted by Skinner. The artist immediately asked Cole if he'd pose for the mural, and Cole gladly complied, but only after carefully clearing it with his apprentice instructor.

As Bud Cole recently remembered the experience:

*"I posed for about two hours in the school building. Mr. Skinner created a small sketch that was later enlarged and incorporated into the mural. I remember him as a kindly man, thoughtful and considerate. During our short time together he asked me about my apprenticeship and service experiences, and inquired as to my ambitions, after completing my apprenticeship."*

Graduating exercises for the Apprentice School's 1944-1947 classes were held in the Newport News High School auditorium on January 16, 1948. In addition to the names of 369 graduates, the commencement program also included the names of the twenty-eight apprentices who died during World War II.

Those ceremonies were concluded with a eulogy to the war dead, followed by a public unveiling of the Memorial Mural, which was later moved to its present location in the Apprentice School.



The acknowledgement page of the 1947 year book credits T. C. Skinner with the Memorial Mural, plus numerous sketches used throughout the book. The most impressive of his sketches is a wintry scene depicting the Apprentice Dormitory, which was included as the end covers of the annual.

Skinner's last known contribution to the Apprentice School came in 1948, when he created the following cover for the school's catalog that year.



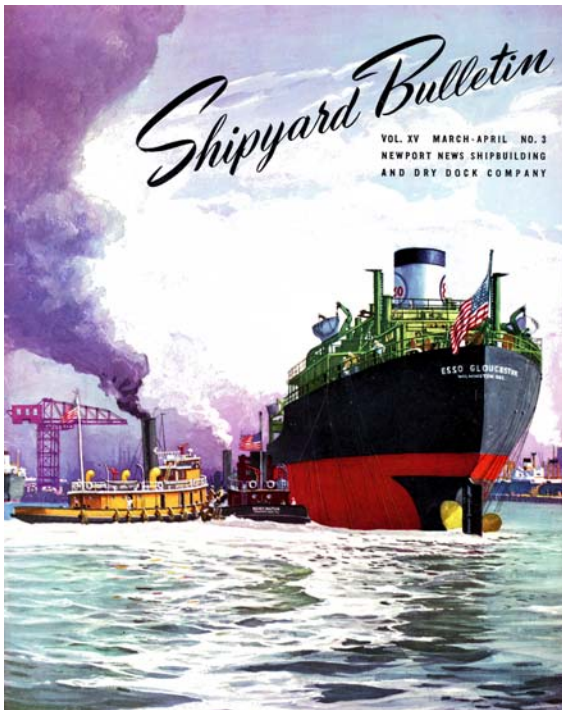
During the late 1940s and the early 1950s, T. C. Skinner produced an amazing number of shipyard-related images. About every other issue of the *Shipyard Bulletin* between December of 1945 and April of 1953 featured a full color reproduction of one of his paintings.

Typically, these images depicted one of the shipyard's latest creations. But Skinner also produced historical images, such as one that shows the NNS-built USS NASHVILLE firing the first shot in the Spanish-American War. Others provided glimpses into the daily routine of various aspects of shipbuilding at Newport News.

This painting, for example, reflected the extreme pride of NNS' craftsmen when the heavy cruiser NEWPORT NEWS (CA-148) was commissioned in 1949. Undoubtedly, Skinner took great pleasure in painting this famous naval vessel, because his sister, Mrs. Homer L. Ferguson was the ship's sponsor.



A much more somber example of his work is the cover of the March/April 1953 issue of the *Shipyards Bulletin*. The flags on the yard tug HUNTINGTON and the incomplete Esso tanker were at half-mast; in memory of Skinner's brother-in-law, former shipyard president Homer L. Ferguson, who passed away on March 14, 1953.



Nevertheless, true to his passion for 'likeness', Skinner accurately included a number of now-obsolete features. Included are the hammerhead crane that once dominated the shipyard's skyline, a coal-burning C&O tug; NNS-built, of course. Less prominent but accurately depicted are the lines holding the tanker's aft launching cradle in place as she was being moved to an outfitting pier following her sliding launching.

Interestingly, this cover was the last one that Skinner ever produced for the *Shipyards Bulletin*. He became ill in early 1955, and on March 10<sup>th</sup> of that year, one of the country's foremost marine artists succumbed in Newport News.

Thomas C. Skinner's work endures. The Mariners' Museum's murals and other works of this artist are frequently on display there. The Museum's library, as well as the personal collections of former shipbuilders, include past issues of the *Shipyards Bulletin* whose covers so frequently were graced by this artist's concept of 'likeness'. In addition, many a home in Newport News displays one or more of the over-sized lithographs that, collectively, reflect Skinner's maritime depictions.

Anyone who has not seen his artistry first hand can do so at the Mariner's Museum. Starting on November 15, 2008, and lasting for several months thereafter, a number of Thomas C. Skinner's colorful and heroic-sized murals that depict mid-twentieth century shipyard scenes will be featured in a museum exhibit entitled *Building Good Ships*.

~ Postscript ~

Perhaps the vessel whose likeness he reproduced more times than any other was the SS *AMERICA*. Her pleasing lines and colorful red, white and blue streamlined smokestacks were depicted by him at least six times; starting with a launching scene in 1939, and climaxing with a set of portraiture of her in 1946, as she appeared following her post-war restoration period.

But the best of his “America” works, in my biased opinion, is a poster-sized pencil drawing that shows her in almost full profile on July 27, 1940, the day when she left Newport News to first enter service. Bedecked in decorative signal flags from stem to stern, and accurately depicting her pre-war ‘neutrality’ markings; the Queen of the American Merchant Marine is shown leaving the shipyard in her wake, and with a slight bone in her teeth, heads seaward...to her destiny.

This sketch was reproduced by the Mariners’ Museum in both large lithographic format and postcard size, with suitable title and dedication added to commemorate the delivery of *AMERICA*. Hand-colored versions of this lithograph are treasures that few have seen in contemporary times, and fewer still possess. This treasured image of my all-time favorite ship is also my all-time favorite Skinner masterpiece. Numerous other artists have been attracted by her all-American beauty, and have captured her in a variety of mediums. But none have ever done so with such unerring accuracy as T.C. Skinner...with the eye of a draftsman.



*Bill Lee*  
November 2008