

## Interview with William A. Schneider AISM

<https://www.schneiderart.com/>

We recently had the pleasure of talking with AIS Master artist William A. Schneider. I hope you enjoy reading about his background and hearing some of his sage words of advice for artists! Doreen St. John, AIS Board Secretary.

### 1. Please share some of your background.

William A. Schneider's work has evolved since he finished his studies at the American Academy of Art. Workshops with Carolyn Anderson, Dan Gerhartz, Scott Burdick, Harley Brown, Scott Christensen, Huihan Liu, David Leffel, and Richard Schmid, among others, solidified his understanding of the basics. But he credits the many hours he spent studying and copying masterworks by Nicolai Fechin with loosening up his brushwork and approach to edges.

He also describes four days of intense study at an exhibit of the works of J.W. Waterhouse in Montreal as an "epiphany" in his understanding of composition. William commented, "The wonderful thing about art is that you can always get better. I view myself as a perpetual student!"

Bill was awarded Master Signature status in Oil Painters of America (OPA). In addition, the Pastel Society of America has recognized him as a "Master Pastelist," IAPS (The International Association of Pastel Societies) has named him to the *Masters' Circle*, and AIS made him a *Master Signature Member (AISM)*.

Bill has won countless awards, has been featured in more than 20 magazine publications, and has been featured in many books/videos. If you go to his website you can learn more, [www.schneiderart.com](http://www.schneiderart.com)

### 2. How did you decide to go into art?

"We don't decide to go into art; art decides to take us." Bill created many art projects with his mom as a child, and there were many creative folks in his family. Bill's Great Grandfather was a well-known sculptor, Kristian Schneider, who designed (or had a hand in designing) many of the well-known sculptures in the Midwest, including creating much of the ornamental work on the Louis Sullivan buildings. His Great Grandfather worked for American Terra Cotta Company, and in addition to work in clay they were also cast in bronze. His parents and Grandparents thought people could earn a living in the art business and they encouraged him. At age 9, Bill's parents gave him a set of oils and said to 'go out and play with them'.

Bill was – and is - also into music and is a professional musician in addition to his career in art. He was playing in rock bands on bass, slide guitar, and keyboards while in art school. After playing gigs into the wee hours of the morning, Bill says he couldn't get up early enough to get to the studio to paint, so he switched to psychology and got a degree in psychology in 1968. He also got a degree in music composition in 1973. He played in several bands, including the band 'Freeze', where his (now) wife was the lead singer. Bill says one of the best things about his psychology degree is that he had to take statistics, and when his rock band days were done, he got a job in the business world with Kidder, Peabody, & Co. an investment banking firm. He worked for them for a number of years and later started his own investment firm. He went back to art school in 1991 after seeing the show, "Monet in His 90's", and it blew him away. He first went back to school at the School of the Art Institute but then switched to the American Academy of Art in 1992; he was 45 years old at that time. He's still recording music. His new album "Steady Rain", by the Schneider Ross Band, was released in December and is available on I-Tunes, Amazon Music, Spotify etc. The band plays mostly progressive rock/blues. His band has collaborated with Michael Angelo Batio, a well-known guitarist (who makes a fortune on U-

Tube videos). He does more collaboration right now than performing as a solo artist. On the album just released his daughter is the lead singer on some of the songs. The album, 'Steady Rain', is similar to the Alan Parsons project, a loose collection of different musicians.

<https://www.amazon.com/Steady-Rain-Schneider-Ross-Jamie/dp/B082FRW1RL>

It's interesting to note that many of the top artists also list music as one of their talents; Bill wrote an Article in Fine Art Connoisseur on the connection between art and music...both are language systems.

<https://www.scribd.com/article/450903494/Painting-And-Music-The-Mystical-Connection>

- 3. Obviously since we are the American Impressionist Society, our focus is on impressionism. We've discussed the history of Impressionism and various definitions and qualities of impressionism at every show during our educational programming. Can you tell us how you define Impressionism? Does it have to do with the subject matter (scenes of everyday life and landscapes), technique (broken color and brushwork), the use of light, all of these or something more?**

Bill classifies himself as an Impressionist painter in that he's not trying to get a detailed, sculptural rendition. He would rather paint his reaction to what he's seeing. Bill shared a quote he likes, attributed to Richard Schmid: *'People don't want to know what you SEE, they want to know what YOU see.'* "I want to convey motion, a shorthand, summation, or impression of what I'm seeing as opposed to a tight photograph." He likes the broken color/strokes of impressionists, especially the work of the Russian artists with their broken form, and most notably the work of Nicolai Fechin. Bill states, "It's accurate and simultaneously loose. The viewer fills in the missing pieces. I try to see how far I can go (to destroy the form while still keeping the image recognizable." Bill studied Fechin's work to learn more about his technique, "It looks like it was painted very quickly, but often there are several layers. Looseness is the way something LOOKS, not necessarily the way it's painted." Bill copied Fechin's paintings and he discovered if he took thick paint (no thinners) and held his brush parallel to the canvas the paint would come off the brush in chunks and he was able to get that broken stroke effect. He starts on white canvas using a 3/4 "wide brush with unthinned paint. Some other artists whose work he likes are Michelle Torres, Carolyn Anderson, Jeremy Mann, and Peggy Kroll Roberts. He likes the term 'simplified impression'... "It's NOT the broken color of French Impressionism, but an immediate reaction. There's lots of abstraction; what tools do you use? how do you get the paint on the canvas? In my life drawing classes with the legendary Bill Parks, he had us do quick sketches: get the gesture of the pose; the put the contour on top of that. Next, he had us draw the contour of the shadow pattern. This creates a very simplified impression of the light and shadow pattern on the figure...similar to what Peggy is doing."

When he teaches workshops, he is blessed/cursed in having left and right brain organization. "I think it's easier to retain information if you have a module or 'bucket' to put that information in. For example, one module might be labeled *Edges*. In that "bucket" there is information on how to see the hierarchy of edges from razor-sharp to completely lost. There is also information on techniques to paint those varied edges. There is also information on how the edge relationship affects the viewer. Similarly, there are other "buckets" of information on color, shape, composition etc." and that's how he teaches his workshops. It's not easy to learn effective composition and design...he had to pull it together from many different sources. When he teaches, he tends to have each workshop focus on one module at a time. So, there's a workshop on composition, one on color, one on loosening up, one on painting hands, etc. "By the way, what do we mean by 'loose'? It has to do with edges most of the time."

- 4. Are there specific Impressionist painters that you draw influence from – California impressionists, Russian, French or others?**

Bill is an admirer of Nicolai Fechin and the Russian Impressionists, but he also likes the broken color of the French Impressionists. He says they were, in one way, a 'one trick pony' in the way they broke apart light and color that read well from a distance. Monet discovered that dabs of complementary placed next to each other created an optical vibration. That vibration created a similar visual sensation to that of seeing nature under bright sunlight.

**5. Do you feel your works leans more toward impressionism or realism or both and how so?**

Bill says his work is really on a continuum between impressionism and realism. He likes broken edges and broken color, but leans more toward broken edges. Bill doesn't use little dabs of color as much as fragmented edges, and forms.

**6. We'd like you to talk about juried exhibitions and competitions, since that is one of the areas of focus for AIS. How important have juried shows been in building your career? About how many of these do you enter each year and how do you decide or choose the ones you submit to?**

Juried shows have been very important to Bill. When he first entered a competition, he was rejected. His first reaction was, "Those bastards!" His second reaction was to look at who got in and analyze what they were doing right. "If you are thin skinned and want to be an artist you picked the wrong profession." Bill looks at rejection as a learning experience. He started doing local shows and shipped his work there. He started entering National shows. When he got rejected, he started asking himself, "what do the others in the show have that I don't have?" When he looked honestly, he saw great drawing, values, shapes, color temperature, and design. From a personal development aspect, it was very valuable. The first time he won a prize he was ecstatic.

"The competitions are good because a. they make you reflect on the quality of your work and what needs improvement; b. if you get in and get initials after your name you get validation, and to collectors that can be important. They'll never buy a piece they don't like but if they are on the edge, the validation may help them make the decision. Having organizations like AIS, OPA, NOAPS, etc., has gone a long way to giving validation for representational artists. The true "modern art" is representational art.

**7. How do you approach paintings you plan to submit to juried show? In other words, how do you plan for and decide what to submit?**

"I don't make paintings for shows specifically. I try to paint what I like and what I find interesting and when it comes time to enter a show, I look at the criteria." Bill keeps a spreadsheet with all his paintings on it and can sort images by the date it was shot and picks ones he likes. His wife helps him pick; Bill says she has a good eye. He asks his artist friends for critiques, tells them to be honest, and tries not to take it personally. He will sometimes put a new work out on Instagram, and shared a story that one of his friends contacted him and pointed out a drawing error that Bill had missed...great feedback.

**8. Any other advice you can give about juried shows and competitions? Please include anything you want to share about what makes a successful painting.**

"It's helpful to enter as many competitions as you can afford. If you are getting rejected by one show and accepted by a bunch of others that doesn't give you much information, but if all are rejecting your work then you need to work on what you are doing. Perhaps you are not at a high enough level compared to others. You have to figure out why you are being rejected. It may be that your drawing is inaccurate, your values may be off, or your composition, edges, and color temperature relationships are flawed. These 5 elements are basically all there is to art. Drawing is the most important; your painting can be very abstracted and fragmented, but the right parts must be in the must be in the right

places. Go down the checklist; check to see if the difference between light and shadow is accurate. Check your edges: Are they uniformly hard? You need a full range of edges; the world is only in focus in the very center of our field of vision. Working from life is critical; working only from photos is deadly to the development of an artist. In a photo, the values are always wrong; the edges are always wrong. The color temperature relationships are always wrong. If we work too much from photos we get very good at rendering incorrect information...and we don't even know that it is happening."

**9. How have art associations/organizations you belong to (local, regional or national such as AIS) helped you with your art career? How do you choose which ones to join?**

Bill joined art organizations mainly to participate in their competitions and also based on their reputation. When he first started joining, he joined OPA and was told he should be on the Board, and he did serve in that capacity for a while. "The major organizations have evolved to include more than just competitions and the activities are immensely valuable. It's great to go to Portrait society of America, or AIS or OPA and talk to other artists, network, broadens your horizons...a welcome addition. The main benefit to an artist as a result of membership in various art organizations is that it sharpens your game."

**10. Since AIS includes works in several mediums, how has working in a variety of mediums influenced/affected your work as an artist?**

"I work primarily in oil and pastel and also do a lot of charcoal drawing. Drawing is the root skill." They have open studios at the Palette and Chisel in Chicago where you can draw from a model and Bill has been doing a 3-hour pastel from a virtual model twice a week during the pandemic. Bill says each medium has its strengths and weaknesses. "There are certain things in pastel that are easy as pie. If you blend pastels (I do), you can apply thin layers, cool over warm or vice versa; if you do you can get the same vibration that you get when you look at skin. Skin is translucent. In areas where the bones are close to surface, such as on the bridge of nose, you can see the ivory of the bone there. Around the eyes you see the color of veins; on the cheeks you're seeing the red of the capillaries. You also see the melanin in the skin. Sitting on the surface of the skin you see the reflection of the light source... there are 3 different layers.

In pastel, (again if you blend) edges are automatically soft; you have to consciously work to make some sharp. In oil, you have to think to make the edges soft. In oil, it's easy to get a rich transparent dark, but it's hard to get a deep, warm dark in pastel. In oil, light passes through the thin transparent dark layer, bounces off the canvas underneath and back out. Each medium enhances the other.

Watercolor, on the other hand is the most difficult because it's so unforgiving. Very tough to fix mistakes; it's the medium of the masters!"

**11. Let's talk about the business of art. What advice can you give to an artist who feels they are ready to show and sell their work? Should they have a consistent style, consistent subject matter, a certain number of available paintings? Please share your thoughts...**

"The business of art is a conundrum for most artists. The world will tell you when it's ready to begin accepting your work. If it won't sell, the gallery can't do anything to make it sell. The fastest route is through the competitions and exhibitions, if you start getting into shows, getting awards, etc. Most professional artists make most of their income from teaching, commissions, or commercial work. It's less common to earn the bulk of one's revenue from competitions, and gallery sales. Teaching is traditionally the most predictable. Unfortunately, the world doesn't reward art the way it should. Some are trying to build a direct internet sales business. I don't know if that is the best way to spend our time. The selling of artwork is an art unto itself." Bill took a course, "the strategic coach", that had participants identify their "*unique ability*." "They had us make a list of all the things we really sucked at and we were supposed to immediately delegate that task to someone else. Hire someone who can

do that stuff. We were supposed to get rid of tasks that we were incompetent at, then those at which we were barely competent...then those that we were good at...until, ultimately, we were left with only doing that which is your *unique ability*. My best advice: enter a bunch of competitions and take the feedback (inferred) and try to figure out what you need to do to improve. Get brutally honest with yourself. Get so good so the world can't refuse you. Master your medium. Dan Gerhartz says "attack your weakness."

For example, Bill was having trouble with hands. He brought the Bridgman Book of 100 hands and drew every one of them. "If you figure out what you need to work on, you attack it and work on it. Another piece of advice: borrow best practices from musicians. They are very clear about the distinction between *practice* and *performance*. Most artists try to create a masterpiece every time they paint. Musicians practice scales and arpeggios so that when it's time to perform, they can just "wail." Do exercises to work on all the things where you are weak. Perfect practice makes perfect...not just easel hours, but **focused** hours. Practice chunking...work on a small area of skill, or "chunk" until you master it, then move on to the next."

**12. Are you represented by galleries and, if so, how did you gain their representation? What advice would you give to artists who feel they are ready to take that step?**

"Gallery representation: My experience is that if I have approached galleries and have been taken on it's never as well as the galleries that have approached me. If you have a gallery owner or a person at the gallery who loves your work, they will sell a ton of it. The first one is the hard one; once you are in a well-known gallery, others tend to approach you." The way he started showing at Illume was he was the juror of awards for a national show that was held there and the gallery owner Jane Bell Meyer invited him to show with them; Reinert Fine Art in Charleston called him and said they thought they could do a good job selling his work...and they have

**13. Do you sell your work through your own website, on social media, through plein air events, etc and, if so, what advice would you give to artists who wish to do so?**

He doesn't do it much; he relies on his galleries. "I take commissions rarely; I'd rather paint what I want to paint. Selling is a skill set, but you have to spend a lot of time doing that and I would rather paint." The one exception: Bill sells his head studies to students in his workshops unframed as learning tools; those are the only direct sales he makes. "You get a reputation...if the gallery knows you will direct the work back to them, they will work for you. I would never undercut my galleries. It's a changing environment...people are buying art online now with the pandemic."

**14. Do you set weekly/monthly/yearly goals?**

"My goals are for self-development. I don't set sales goals because I don't have control over that. I can't control the economy. I can control my own personal development. If you are not getting better then you are getting worse. What you did 5 years ago was great but everyone else is getting better. One of the things I'm really focusing on this year is how can I become more uniquely 'me'? If an artist's skills are his or her "vocabulary," great! So, what do you have to say? Be true to your own voice. One "aha" moment for me was trying to understand what I love in other artists' work, and what do I want to see in my work? Art is technical but also emotional. The technical works to support the emotional. What is uniquely appealing to me? There are 7 billion people on the Earth; that works out to probably 35 million that buy art in some form. If you do something a specific way that really floats your boat and is what you like, there will be enough people out of that 35 million to have a market for your work. The world doesn't need another Fechin, or Sargent. There will be somebody that likes your voice. Here's an exercise...we all collect art magazines...tear out every picture you really like...big stack...narrow it down to your top 20 and ask yourself, what do they have in common? I did this and

discovered what I like is something where the viewer has to infer and have an involvement in order for it to make sense. I don't enjoy photo-realistic work. Do more of what you really like.... find your path."

**15. How can an artist raise the level of their work?**

"I mentioned this earlier, but you first need to have Technical mastery of the 5 elements; once you have technical mastery, then decide what are you going to use them for?"

**16. Color! A fun subject... What colors do you usually have on your palette?**

I tend to use the same colors on my palette...my website has some blogs on color...warm and cool in each of the primaries plus white, and sometimes I use the Zorn palette. The magic is not what tubes of paint you have, it's what's in your brain. I'm getting ready to shake up my palette. The entire activity of art is very intellectual.

**17. Do you have a "signature color" that you use often in your work? Or is there a special color (or colors) that you've discovered just can't live without?**

"No, I don't have a 'signature' color and don't want to have one. I've found that transparent oxide brown mixed with ultramarine blue makes a rich, transparent dark; but I probably should change that "go to" combination just to shake things up. I have my students do a very simple exercise, paint a subject in a specific way, and then I ask them to vary it...'what-if'... keep thinking of ways to do it. What you discover is that there are countless ways to paint."

**18. We've seen some very passionate debates about the use of black as there are some who believe it does not belong on the Impressionist palette. Do you use black and if so, how and why?**

Well, Sargent used black. Schmid used black. Fechin used black. Zorn used black. Gerhartz uses black. So, why again should I not use black? Artists give other artists false information. I think the French Impressionists discovered that outdoors shadows were not the opaque blackish-brown that earlier studio painters had used. Later artists turned that Impressionist discovery into a "thou shalt not". Black is a greyed blue...it makes some great greens. I don't use black to darken things but I use it all the time for skin tones in the light."

**19. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected you and your art?** "This year I've had to cancel 3 workshops. People will find a way to work around it. Open studios online...palette and chisel is running an open studio for members. Since we are socially distancing it's keeping me from wasting time doing things I used to do, so I have more time in the studio. I've also been talking on the phone with other artists and getting into some meaningful discussions."

We want to say a huge 'thank you' to Bill on behalf of the American Impressionist Society, not only for taking time for this informative interview, but also for agreeing to serve as Awards Judge for our AIS 2020 National Juried Exhibition!

