



Eldridge
in his
Denver
studio,
2007

Eldridge Harkins

Remembering a True Gentleman

by Tom Davis

Editor-at-Large

I think most of us who knew Eldridge Hardie had pretty much the same two-part reaction upon learning of his death last August. The first part was disbelief – as there always is when death comes unexpectedly. While at 81 El was no spring chicken, his health was good. He watched what he ate, drank in moderation, exercised regularly – all the things you’re supposed to do.

More than that, though, he was just such a tough, resilient old bird – like one of those *bois d’arc* fenceposts out on the prairie that stands up to every insult Mother Nature can deliver – that the idea of him dying one day simply never crossed your mind. You just sort of indulged in a kind of magical thinking and assumed he’d go on, and on, and on.

Hell, this was the guy who’d stared down melanoma, one of the most aggressive of all cancers, when he was in his 50s. The prognosis was grim, but with the steely resolve so utterly characteristic of him he insisted, “I’m going to beat this.” And he did. He was a little caved in one side as a result of the surgery that saved his life, but if it slowed him down it wasn’t so you’d notice. His painting only got stronger, and he still bird-hunted and fly-fished as hard as he ever did. Which is to say, as hard as anyone – and at a higher level of accomplishment than all but a very few.

“That was one of the things I so admired about El,” says his friend Mike Paderewski, the dealer in sporting art. “He was still out there crushing it in his 80s. Who does that?”

Hard on the heels of the disbelief, of course, followed the sadness – the kind that leaves you feeling hollowed-out inside, the kind that only time can heal. While the world at large will remember Eldridge Hardie as one of the premier sporting artists of his generation, those of us who were privileged to know him will remember him as simply one of the finest human beings we ever met. In the words of his friend and fellow artist Bob White, who’d admired Hardie’s work for decades before finally meeting him in person, “Often one’s heroes have a difficult time living up to the expectations we place upon them. Such was not the case with Eldridge Hardie.... I feel blessed to have shared time with him.”

“What you saw with Eldridge was what you got,” reflects professional trainer Gary Ruppel, who helped Hardie with the female black Labs that he was never without. “He was the most humble, unpretentious person you could ever meet. He may have been a famous artist, but he put on no airs whatsoever.

“We loved the same things,” Ruppel adds, “and that’s what drew us together. We shared a passion for dogs, first and foremost, but also the outdoors in general. He loved to come out to my place [Kiowa Creek Kennels in Kiowa, Colorado] and just walk around. It’s a pretty spot – we have a pond and some creek bottom – and El just enjoyed being out in it with his dog.

“I really miss him – but I’ll always have his art. When I look at El’s paintings of dogs pointing and birds flushing, I feel like I’m right there.”

“A client of mine put it best,” muses Paderewski. “He knew El, and when I called to tell him El had passed away he didn’t say anything for a while. Then, with a little catch in his voice, he said, ‘He was a true gentleman.’ That was El in a nutshell. He was modest, down-to-earth, hard-working; he treated everyone with kindness and respect...but when it came to his art, he was totally uncompromising. That’s where his toughness came through.”

Paderewski explains that over the course of the 25 or so years he knew Hardie, he connected him to a number of people who wanted to commission paintings by him. Now, the kind of guys who commission paintings are invariably wealthy; plus, they’re often high-powered, captain-of-industry types who are used to giving orders and seeing them carried out.

That approach didn’t fly with Eldridge Hardie. At most, he’d allow the client – or should I say, the *potential* client – to give him a rough idea of what he had in mind, but after that the matter was closed. “El always promised to paint the best piece he could,” says Paderewski, “and if that wasn’t good enough, he had no problem shaking hands and walking away.

“He was uncompromising,” Paderewski adds, “but he wasn’t inflexible. I remember a time when El delivered a commissioned quail hunting painting. The client really liked it, but he thought that there should be a little more grass on the ground in front of one of the dogs on point. El looked at it, said, ‘You know, I think you’re right,’ and put in more grass. It wasn’t an ego thing with El; it just always had to be in service to the painting.”



Homeward, by Eldridge Hardie

Paderewski notes, too, that while Hardie's work ethic was second-to-none, he wasn't a fast painter – the upshot being that he wasn't terribly prolific. "I courted him for six years," he laughs, "before he finally gave me a painting for my gallery. I tell people that I only had to court my wife for one year before she agreed to marry me!"

"Seriously, the body of work El created is just so strong. Over the long haul, when people start talking about the great American sporting artists, El's going to be right in the thick of the conversation. In my opinion, he's right there next to Ogden Pleissner, and I can't think of higher praise."

The readers of this magazine, of course, associate Hardie primarily with his paintings of pointing dogs. He probably painted more pointers than anything – Bob Wehle commissioned him to do a portrait of three of his dogs to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of Elhew Kennels – but he also depicted English setters, Brittanys, Vizslas, German shorthairs, and a smattering of other breeds. He did a lot paintings of Labs, too.

The thing is, it wasn't until the mid-1980s that Hardie, who'd been painting full-time since 1968, added dogs to his repertoire. One day when I was visiting him at his home in Denver – I was there to gather material for the Introduction to his 2019 book *The Sporting Art of Eldridge Hardie* – I asked if he'd made a concerted effort to study canine anatomy.

"I sure did," he answered. "When we get to the studio [upstairs in his home], I'll show you the book on animal anatomy that I used as a reference when I was learning to depict dogs."

Later that day, when Hardie dug out the book – *Atlas of Animal Anatomy for Artists*, it's called – he unexpectedly found something else tucked inside: dozens if not hundreds of pencil drawings that he'd done, literally from the skeleton up, of the individual "pieces" of canine anatomy: legs, ribs, muzzles; ears, tails – everything. Many of these drawings were accompanied by notes Hardie had written as reminders to himself of how best to represent that particular element pictorially.

"I'd kind of forgotten about these," he admitted, pulling them out and spreading them on the table where he did most of his drawing and watercolor painting. (He did his oil painting – he was equally adept in both mediums – at a traditional upright easel. Hardie was left-handed, just FYI, and he always worked standing up. "I can't think sitting down," he said.) "They really helped me to understand how the muscles and bones fit and work, and that stood me in good stead later on."

Looking at these and the many other sketches and drawings Hardie showed me over the course of my visit – some done preliminary to specific paintings; others done simply in order to learn, grow, and build artistic muscle from the exercise – I thought of the writer Malcolm Gladwell’s oft-cited assertion that mastery of a discipline, whether artistic, athletic, or anything else, requires at least 10,000 hours of intensive practice. Knowing that what I’d glimpsed was barely the tip of the iceberg of years of meticulous preparation, it occurred to me that Hardie’s 10,000 hours – the *first* 10,000 hours, that is – were as far in the rearview mirror as the VW Beetle he drove when he moved from El Paso to Boulder way back in 1966.

By then he’d graduated first in his class from the School of Fine Arts at Washington University in St. Louis, illustrated a couple of books, and decided that somehow, someway, he was

going to make a living painting scenes of hunting and fishing that, in his words, “people would want to hang on their walls.”

He was an aspiring artist, yes, but he was also a young man – and we all know where a young man’s fancy tends to turn. One night over beer and pizza, Hardie told me the story of his first date with his future wife, Ann, and while it has nothing to do with dogs, or hunting, or art, it’s too good not to share.

“When I first moved to Colorado,” he recounted, “my sister-in-law gave me the names and phone numbers of three girls she knew here. I called the first girl and the second girl, but struck out with both of them. So I just put the name and number of the third girl, who was Ann, on a piece of paper and tucked it into my wallet.

“About six months later, I moved from Boulder to Denver, where Ann was living, so I decided to give her a call. I picked her up at her apartment, and we went to a movie called *A Man for All Seasons*. The movie had an intermission, during which we both went to use the restrooms.

“Well, it was dark when I picked her up, and it was dark in the theater, and while I was using the restroom I suddenly had the terrifying thought, ‘What if I don’t recognize her?’ It turned out she had the same thought; but we did recognize each other, and I guess you could say the rest is history. She eventually found out that I’d had her phone number for six months before I called her, though, and boy did I hear about *that*....”

They married in 1968, and in 1970 their daughter Abigail (Abby) was born. Son



(left) Eldridge with fellow artist Bob White. “Often one’s heroes have a difficult time living up to the expectations we place upon them,” says Bob. “Such was not the case with Eldridge Hardie.”

(below) Eldridge and Zinnia setting decoys, 2019



Tom followed in 1974; in between, Hardie acquired the first of his female black Labs, Maisie. Making ends meet was a struggle for a long time, but by dint of perseverance, talent, and the good fortune to make a few key connections, including Bubba Wood of Collectors Covey Gallery in Dallas (see November/December 2021), he eventually got over the hump.

Nothing breeds success like success, of course, and as Hardie's recognition and reputation grew, he found himself being invited to the kind of hunting and fishing destinations most of us only dream about: Scotland for red grouse, Tierra del Fuego for sea-run brown trout, Cuba for permit, the most exclusive duck clubs, quail plantations, and salmon camps in North America. For a man who liked to say "I was born to paint, hunt, and fish," his life was a dream come true.

No one worked harder to get to where he got, or was more deserving of the good things that came his way, although Hardie – who as Bubba Wood observes "didn't have an ounce of brag in him" – preferred to use words like "lucky," and "fortunate," and "blessed." Looking at the extraordinary body of work he left behind – work that exists at the intersection of experience, imagination, and desire – I lean toward the opinion that we're the lucky ones.

And I'm reminded of something another great painter of dogs, Maud Earl, said: "Art lives! We die!"

Vaya con Dios, my friend.



Eldridge and Iris lining up for a retrieve on an eastern Colorado farm pond, 2016



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