

A Story of Hope



Artist: **Don Gillespie**

Title: **Hope**

48 x 24 Original Acrylic

Boxes hold captive what we cannot contain

Accessed in private, controlled in vain

Reach out to deal with the mysteries within

Encounter the truth and the journey begins

Touching realities distorted in time

Spirits reveal, all dark and divine

Burning transforming so able to cope

Till all that remains is our precious hope.

Introduction

In the summer of 2008 I took an extended summer vacation to Oswego New York. My hope was to investigate and solve an old family mystery.

In 1898 my great grandfather vanished without a trace.

William R. Shayes was a prominent photographer in the town of Oswego, in upstate New York. It was a thriving town where the Erie Canal system met Lake Ontario. Goods and money flowed and there was an emerging upper class that was developing a taste for the finer things. These were the early days of photography. The pioneers of the craft had to perform extensive retouching and were artists in their own right. William Shayes was no exception and had his own art gallery and studio. It seemed strange to me that a man of this caliber would just disappear. There were numerous speculations and rumors about him when I was growing up but never any details. It was one of those things that people were not allowed to speak of. You would catch uncles or aunts alluding to stories but never



William R. Shayes

WHAT HAS BECOME OF W. R. SHAYES?

**Rumored That His Wife Can-
not Find Him.**

**He Was Thought to Be in Geodetic
Survey Work As Photographer
But He Is Unknown
in Washing-
ton**

For some days a rumor has been in circulation that the whereabouts of W. R. Shayes, the photographer, were unknown to his wife. Shayes is remembered as the proprietor of a photograph gallery in West Bridge Street, which he sold to W. L. Northrop. His name was unpleasantly associated with that of Mrs. Stella Fletcher, who was afterward the defendant in a divorce action brought by her husband, William Fletcher.

Mr. Shayes went to Boston and when the trial of the divorce action was "on" before Referee Coon returned to testify. At the time he told Oswego friends that

any details and certainly nothing from a reputable source. Deep down I knew there was more to the story but asking my grandmother about her father was out of the question. As I grew older I began to ponder how such an event could have lasting ramifications.

I found an online resource which contained a searchable database of the local news papers of the late 1800s. It proved extremely helpful. This was not a story that was obscure in its day. It was spread all over the papers. Because of Shayes' prominence in the community, it was the talk of the town. I not only found the news related to his disappearance but stories that described much of his life. What emerged were pieces of a puzzle that when put together were as interesting as any mystery novel. My search led to the building where his art gallery was located. It led me to sealed Supreme Court documents that had not been opened in over a hundred years. The facts were suddenly there before me. It was all available, as if the story was opening up before me, wanting the truth to be told.

Background

My desire to understand what happened to William R. Shayer is about more than just solving a mystery. It's about understanding where I came from and past events that helped shape me. As we grow older and, we hope, wiser we begin to realize just how short a hundred years are. Generations overlap and we are directly influenced by our ancestors' traits and experiences. Family archetypes are formed and strengthened by events and bloodlines. Like my great grandfather, I am an artist. My brother, Robert Gillespie is also an accomplished artist. Could it be that we inherited this talent or was there an underlying drive for us to pursue this career? Whatever the circumstances that drove us to become artists, the fact remains that we share this common bond with our great grandfather William Shayer.

My grandmother was always very good to us growing up. Like most grandmothers, she would dote over us and treat us as if we were something special. There was also a harsh side to her. An ability to lash out at my grandfather and others with a shocking vengeance that almost seemed to be coming from another person. When we are young this type of dichotomy is hard to understand.

She passed away over 35 years ago and I am just beginning to understand some of her behavior. She was 11 years old when her father vanished. It was devastating socially, emotionally, and financially for her and the family. I have begun realizing in recent years just how wounded she must have been from that experience. I have learned that events like the sudden loss of a parent can have lasting trauma. This particular situation had the added complexity of having no closure.



My Grandmother, Erma Shayer

The Research

I began my investigation online by searching newspaper articles and putting them together chronologically. I was surprised at how much information was available. A man began to emerge who seemed nothing like the scoundrel that abandoned his wife and children. What surfaced was a person strangely familiar. He was a colorful character, a flamboyant individual with a lust and passion for life. Shayer was a member of The Odd Fellows Society and a successful business man who embraced modern technology. He not only was an artist but hired other artists to work for his business. He arranged art shows with live music for the community. He was a competitive man who loved to race his bicycle and was an official in the newly formed cycling club. His involvement in the church is well documented and he even produced multi-media shows that enhanced the pastor's message using the new "Magic Lantern", a kerosene lit 3D image projector. Shayer was involved in early forensic photography with the local police. He took pictures of murders and other crime scenes. This was not the man that others had painted him to be. I realized that we had similar interests and traits beyond our obvious genetic connection. This man was very much like me.

In 1892 William R. Shayer started a small photography business in Oswego, N.Y. The business began to grow and in April of 1893, he expanded by purchasing the photography business of W.R. Nesbit in Mexico N. Y.

In late 1894 he began to hire artists to paint with watercolor and crayon enhancing the portraits. In this year he also started to show his work with an emerging local artist named Charles Henry Grant. He later became a prominent marine painter and moved to San Francisco. Grant was the official artist of the United States Navy on its visit to Australia. His paintings were often on display in Shayer's gallery.



"At the Mercy of Neptune"- Charles H. Grant

March 25th 1896 was the Grand Opening of his new gallery at 23 and 25 West Bridge Street Oswego, NY

OSWEGO DAILY TIMES, SATURDAY MARCH 21, 1896.

Favreau's Full Orchestra will be Present and Many Beautiful Works of Art Such as Statuary, Paintings In Oil and Water Colors and Elegant Specimens of Photography will be Seen. The Parlors, Dressing and Operating Rooms are Bowers of Beauty-The Public Cordially Invited to Attend the Opening Wednesday Evening.

Next Wednesday evening, March 26. occurs the opening of W. R. Shayes' new art gallery which, we predict, will be a delightful surprise to the citizens of Oswego. It is something Oswego has always needed and needed badly, and through the enterprise of Mr. Shayes, although obtained at great expense, it has been supplied. What can we say that will fully describe this beautiful place? It must be seen to be fully appreciated, and at the opening next Wednesday evening, amid strains of melody from Favreau's full orchestra its contemplation by the entire inhabitants of this city we believe will add greatly to their pleasure. In the reception room floors in natural wood have been laid, polished, and covered with Turkish rugs, the walls having been papered with a delicate shade of terra cotta which greatly enhances the beauty of the pictures hanging thereon, as well as the other surroundings. A great eight armed electric chandelier has been placed in the center of the room which is in itself a work of art.

In the southwest corner has been placed on a pedestal a seven foot marble statue of the famous Venus de Milo, sculptured, as we have before mentioned, by the eminent Mr. M. F. H. De Marinaux. This work of art alone is worth going many miles to see. It is a perfect reproduction of the original which is in Paris and is considered priceless in value. Two other examples of De Marinaux's work in the shape of statues one entitled "Evening," the other "Morning," on pedestals, are in the room and are certainly masterpieces of the sculptor's art.

On the east wall, surrounded by a brass railing, hangs a marine picture, nine feet long, painted by our brilliant young marine painter, Charles H. Grant. Mr. Grant, we regret to say, is better known in the art line outside of this city, although' his native place, than in it, owing the fact that there is no market here for paintings, which compels him to send them to the larger cities. Consequently unless a visit is made to his studio few of his productions are seen by his fellow-townsmen. And strange artists visiting him have marveled at his remaining in a town of this size. Nevertheless, examples of his work are in almost every state of the union. In fact, two black and whites are the property of the national government at Washington. The marine which is in Mr. Shayes gallery was painted to send to New York, but through the enterprise of Mr. Shayes it was obtained as a permanent fixture of his gallery, where it can be seen by the people at any time. Of this we are very glad for it is indeed a noble picture. Its title is, "At the Mercy of Neptune." It represents a ship caught in the breakers near the cruel rocks. Her sails and rigging are fast going to pieces, while her crew are in the forestep trying to escape the doom which is soon to follow. So realistic is the picture that one can almost hear the roar of the breakers as they dash in fury against the doomed ship. These two works of art—the "Venus de Milo" and Mr. Grant's picture alone would well repay a visit to Mr. Shayes gallery. But this is not all by any means. Water colors, as well as Mr. Shayes peerless photographs adorn the walls. Handsome grill work fills up the niches; rope drapery portieries, divans, jardinier, filled with beautiful palms, and two wonderful chairs carved in India by the natives of Bombay blackwood, all help to make the place far more interesting

than any Weak description of ours can convey.

Even Mr. Shayes' operating room is as handsomely fitted up as the reception room of most photographic studios with its polished floors, newly tinted walls, new instruments, which are the largest and most perfect money can buy; and the dressing rooms are also artistically arranged with their ,electric lights, large French mirrors and different apartments. ' We will allow the public at the next Wednesday evening opening to judge as to whether our praise has been too extravagant or not. But we believe the verdict will be in the negative. At any rate Mr. Shayes is entitled to a great deal of credit for his efforts. He has faith in his city and we hope the people will show him their appreciation of his enterprise next Wednesday evening to visit his beautiful gallery

Sadly, 6 months later on Sept 30th 1896, his Gallery burns. The cause is determined to be a chemical fire. He collects \$3000.00 from his insurance Co.

**IN A PHOTOGRAPHIC
GALLERY.**

**SHAYES'S HANDSOME GALLERY
GUTTED BY FIRE.**

The Total Loss to Building and
Furniture placed at About Five
Thousand Dollars—Fully Covered
by Insurance—Lathrop's Damaged
by Water.

About 2:20 o'clock this morning
Policeman Grant, while patrolling his
beat in West Bridge street, discovered
smoke issuing from the photograph
gallery of William R. Shayes, in the
Hess block, between First and Second
streets. He hastily pulled box 31, at
the corner of First and Bridge streets,
and the firemen were quickly on the
scene.

The fire was found to be burning

OSWEGO DAILY TIMES

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 1896

The heat and smoke damaged these paintings so that it will be impossible to save them.

"At the Mercy of Neptune" the painting of Charles H. Grant, valued at \$1,500, which hung in the reception room is practically destroyed and will have to be repainted.

It is interesting to note that a few months after this event it appears in the paper (during the Spring of 1897), that he's implicated in a divorce trial for William M. (about 25 years of age) and Stella V. Fletcher (about 20 years of age) living between 3rd and 4th St. on W. Van Buren St in Oswego, NY. Stella V. Fletcher was Miss. Stella Perry, "a Syracuse girl a local Belle and very beautiful, as she is today".

The divorce trial was highly publicized as was Shayes involvement. The divorce was denied but the scandalous implications damaged Shayes' reputation. Another man was implicated in the same trial, "by the name of one Dykman, a boot and shoe drummer (a traveling salesman) about an indiscretion at the Doolittle home". Dykman's present whereabouts was unknown and it was said he would probably not figure actively in the divorce drama, Dykman had vanished.

Shayes was implicated in 45 imprudences at least one being at his studio December 11th. There was also another at the Fulton Fair. He denied that there was anything wrong between him and Mrs. Fletcher at the Fulton Fair in 1896.

In regard to the Thousand Island incident he said: "In regard to the Thousand Islands, where Syracuse parties claim they saw Mrs. Fletcher on my lap through a crack nine inches long and a trifle less than an Inch wide and standing eight feet away from the partition, I have this to say: There was no crack in this partition that a person could look through without prying the boards apart."

According to the newspaper, Mrs. Fletcher gave emphatic denial of all the charges of adultery, "and crude and inhuman treatment on the husband's part is likewise charged. It is said that the green monster hovered nightly about the husband's pillow, whispering jealous tales into his ears which blended with his dreams until he became as moon mad as Othello. It is also claimed that in farther imitation of the Shakespearian character he choked his wife with great vehemence on several occasions."

DENIED A DIVORCE.

Train Dispatcher Fletcher Did Not Prove His Wife Unfaithful.

Attorney S. M. Coon and Mrs. Coon left to-day for an extended southern tour. Prior to his departure Mr. Coon filed his report in the case of William Fletcher against Stella M. Fletcher, action for an absolute divorce.

The plaintiff is a train dispatcher in the Rome, Watertown & Ogdensburg railroad offices here and when he filed his complaint naming William R. Shayes, formerly Oswego a leading photographer, and others as co-respondents, Mrs. Fletcher set up a counter claim of cruel and inhuman treatment.

The principal witnesses in the case were Mr. Shayes, Mrs. Eckel and her daughter, Mrs. Essig, of Syracuse; Mr. and Mrs. Bailey, of Rochester, whose testimony was in relation to alleged in

During the divorce trial for William M. and Stella V. Fletcher, Mrs. Baily of Rochester spoke. The testimony of the latter was in relation to the alleged indiscretions between Mrs. Fletcher and Shayes at the Thousand Islands. Other evidence in the case was to the effect that Mrs. Fletcher was in the habit of "going to Shayes's photograph gallery in West Bridge Street and remain there for a considerable length of time with Mr. Shayes. It was alleged that during these periods the door leading into the gallery was locked.

The divorce was denied and the expense of the trial fell on Mr. Fletcher at a cost of \$250.00. It is said that he may appeal this to the Supreme Court, which he did. Mrs. Fletcher's lawyer was also awarded \$25.00 in lawyer fees. Mr. W. R. Shayes gave an affidavit. The affidavit was quite voluminous, but in substance, Shayes swore that he had known Fletcher for a number of years but his acquaintance with the defendant was of only a few months duration. The two families had been most intimate, visiting one another frequently. The defendant denied specifically the charges made against Mrs. Fletcher and himself and so far as he knows she was a chaste and decorous woman.

On March 10th 1898 Mrs. Nettie Shayes sold the photography business to S.D. Northrup of Lions and said she would move to Boston where her husband was now in business.

Then, on Sept. 29th 1898, W.R. Shayes was reported nowhere to be found. When the first trial of the divorce action was "on" before Referee Coon, Shayes had returned to testify, but now his wife was said to have received information in a letter from him some months ago. There were rumors of Shayes buying a photography business in Boston and rumors of him working for the U.S. Geodetic Survey in Florida. "Mrs. Shayes when seen at her boarding house this morning by a TIMES reporter, refused to talk for publication. She said that her family affairs were 'no one's business.'"

This was as far as I got with my online investigation. It was at this point that I decided to visit the location of the events. I drove to upstate New York and found the building that housed his studio. I walked into 23 & 25 West Bridge St. and was curious at what I found. It is now a business that performs tattoos and body piercings. One wall was covered with Bongs and other paraphernalia. The center was clothing. The young lady who owns the establishment was walking down the stairs and I introduced myself. I began to tell her that this location had been my great grandfather's art gallery and she started to get this look like she thought I was one card short of a full deck. Suddenly my eyes turned and saw the other wall. This wall was filled with art work. They were posters of paintings by my favorite artists. There were many Salvador Dali prints as well works by M.C. Esher and more. I was suddenly sucked into this wall, it was like a scene out of a movie when everything peripheral becomes blurry and you can only focus on one thing. It must have been more than a moment because when I regained composure, the young lady had politely moved to a more secure location behind the counter.



The back of the Gallery as it looks today.

I asked her if she had ever found any old photography equipment or anything unusual in the store or in the basement. She said no politely but I started to get the impression that she was uncomfortable with my line of questioning so I decided to stop asking. I took some time and looked around the store, purchased a few items then left and walked around back. The back of the store was very interesting because it was the original raw brick. Some of the windows had been bricked up but you could see scorch marks from the fire.

That evening I had a vivid dream. It was the Venus de Milo Statue in the midst of the fire. I woke up and had this revelation that Dali had painted the Venus de Milo. I started my computer and Googled, "Venus Dali" and clicked images. The computer page became filled with images of work that he had done with the Venus de Milo. I decided to return to the store the next day. I was curious if Venus de Milo was still in the gallery?

The look on the owner's face when I came in the next day was priceless. It seemed to say, "oh boy, this guy again". I started to look at the posters but there was no sign of what I was looking for. I asked the young lady if she had the Dali print with Venus in it and she said, "maybe" and pointing to a stack of posters leaning against the wall. The last painting in the stack was, "The Hallucinogenic Toreador". This painting contains the Venus de Milo 28 times within the painting and is my favorite Dali print. Right next to it was M.C. Escher's Print "Three Worlds". That print had inspired my last painting. I took the prints out and photographed them in the store. It was at this point judging by the look of the proprietors face, I better buy these prints and leave.

I was intrigued at this point. Here was the image of Venus de Milo, still in the building. I had come looking for something. I had no idea that it would be an inspiration. It became apparent that this experience was going to turn into my next painting. This whole story, no matter what the outcome, would need to be told in a way that only I could tell it.

From there I went to the county records building and the resident historian. I asked him for anything he had on Shaves and he produced some census information and some old business listings. It was another dead end until I asked about Stella Fletcher. He looked in his computer, disappeared down stairs and came back up with sealed Supreme Court documents. I said, "cool lets open it". He explained that he didn't have the authority to open them. He suggested I speak with another person in charge down at the county building. I arrived at county building and was surprised to find that the person in charge of the records was someone I recognized from high school. She said that the records were over 100 years old and could be opened without a court order. I thanked her and asked if she would call and let the historian know that I was on my way back to open and read the transcript. I returned and he was waiting there, seated with white gloves and a letter opener. The wax sealed envelope was lying on a large table in front of him. We carefully opened the Dec. 27th 1898 Supreme Court divorce trial transcripts for William M. and Stella V. Fletcher. He slipped the document out and exposed it to the light for the first time in over 100 years. It contained the testimony of several men including William Fletcher. They gave corroborative testimony that on the night of Nov. 25th 1898, along with Mr. Fletcher, they forced their way into a room at the Fruit Valley Hotel. They had heard voices coming from the transom over the door. They knocked and when a man cracked the door open Mr. Fletcher stuck his boot in and they pushed their way into the dimly lit room. The man was standing with undershirt, trousers, and dangling suspenders. When asked his name, the man replied with something like "none of your damn business". They stated that Mr. Fletcher went over to the bed where a woman was hidden. He turned her over.



Venus de Milo is still in the gallery.

They all identified the woman as his wife, Stella V. Fletcher. After this identification they left Stella and the man alone in the room.



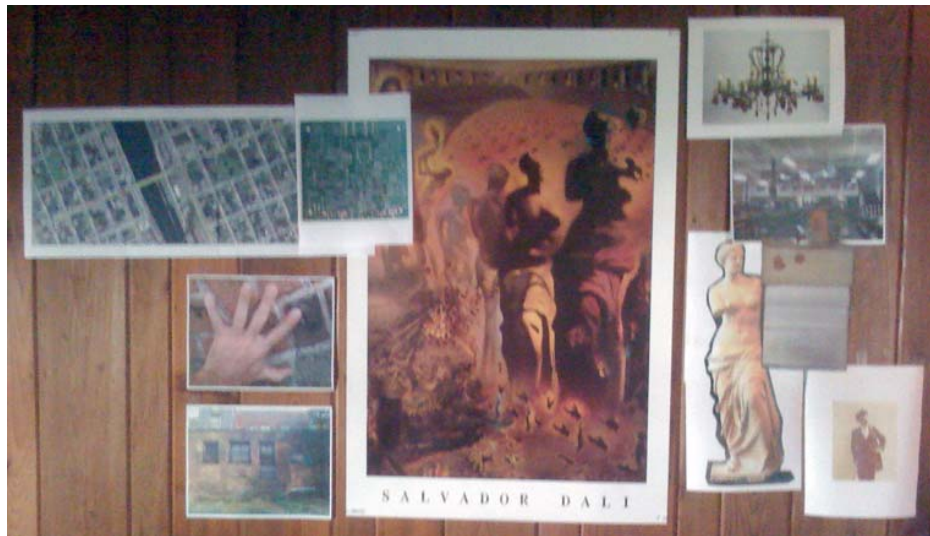
Supreme Court transcript sealed for over 100 years.

The divorce was granted. Once again, there was no definite answer to what happened to Shayer. What we do have is a clearer picture of the characters and events. Many questions still remain. Why would Mr. Fletcher, after all he had been through, not have obtained the identity of the man in the room? Wasn't there a hotel record? Why, being the insanely jealous type, would he leave Stella, his wife, in the room and just leave with his buddies? Could it be that they did know who the man was and took care of the problem? Could the man in the room have been William Shayer? Why would Shayer have never contacted any of his family again?

The Painting Process

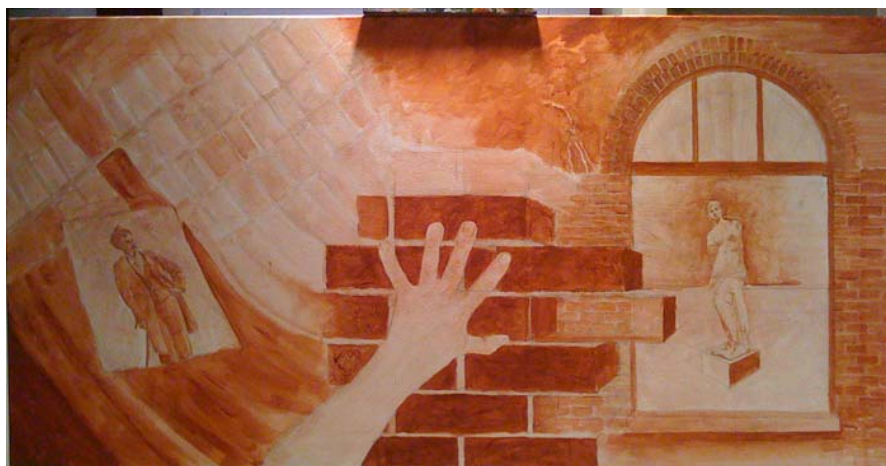
When I returned home, I began to gather the information and photographs. I posted them on a wall in my home. I looked at the images on the wall and got an overall sense of direction. I had recently begun painting using a different method. As a commercial artist, I had always used the approach that was drummed into students. When artists work commercially, they gather their information and develop the composition using sketch after sketch, they determine the lights and darks. Every aspect of the work is planned. Customer approvals are obtained and they execute the illustration. Years of working this methodical approach had left me asking the question, "Why do I enjoy doing this again"? The painting I had done previously incorporated a different method. I had returned to a way I used as a young artist, before art school had regimented the process for commercial purposes. I had a basic vision in my mind

with a feeling and message that I wanted to convey but what the end product would look like remained a mystery. This way of painting reminded me of a musician at a jam session. I worked the composition as I went and created as the spirit lead me. This way of painting on the fly was like painting a dream. The painting often went in directions I hadn't imagined. Elements were added as ideas pop into my mind and I incorporated them much like a dream.



The Wall

I roughed out some basic elements in burnt sienna. What began to emerge was a consistent theme of grids and boxes. Bricks, rooms, rectangles of various sizes started to emerge that made me realize that there was a bigger message here. As I contemplated the geometric shapes I was reminded that the largest things that humans build are cities and some of the smallest things we build are micro circuitry. These things are very similar in shape. We are able to control things better when we break them down and put them in boxes. This painting was about a situation beyond control. Shayes was boxed into a trap of his own making. The fire may have been a solution; running away may have been a solution, whatever the case, it was traumatic for everyone involved.



Under Painting

Painting Description

The painting starts in the lower left corner with Pandora opening a box. According to legend everything escaped from Pandora's Box except hope. The scene that emerges from the Box is my interpretation of the story. It flows upward and the smoke becomes clouds. An aerial view of Oswego is revealed below but quickly turns into a computer circuit board. Shays burning portrait escapes the scene along with the sealed divorce papers. A dead wilting red rose drops petals that become wax seals on the envelope containing the divorce court documents.



Detail of "Hope" Left Side – Don Gillespie



Detail of "Hope" Center – Don Gillespie

The center of the painting is a brick wall that hides much of the scene, covering the truth. I reach out and touch the scorched bricks of the wall and they begin to crumble revealing a portion of the story. On the wall is an image of Salvador Dali's crucifixion. Christ's covering of our sins as a symbol of the wall covering the portion of the true facts of the case. Behind the wall is a portrait of my grandmother as a young adult. The clouds become a storm over Lake Ontario, which mix with fireworks exploding behind her.



Detail of "Hope" Right Side – Don Gillespie

On the right side of the painting, is a scene from my dream. The Venus de Milo stands in the gallery while the inferno burns around her. The painting on the wall in the gallery is a representation of Grant's painting, "At the Mercy of Neptune" which was destroyed by the fire. It's a painting of a ship in a storm about to be dashed on the rocks. I painted this image before the historian provided me with a clear and accurate picture of the painting. It was painted strictly from the textual descriptions. As you can see, it's similar to the actual painting but it's almost a mirror image. Dali's melting watch has several meanings including but not limited to the heat of the fire and the warping of time. The painting concludes with the small photograph escaping the flames in the upper right. It is a photo of my Grandmother when she was a child taken by her father. The picture is expelled from the fire as a scorched symbol of hope.

I see the painting as a microcosm of our human condition. It depicts a real life story of Innocence, love, jealousy, lust, ambition, deceit, and loss. The scandalous situation caused many problems with lasting effects. I don't understand everything that transpired or all of its ramifications. My intent was to solve a family mystery but it still remains and maybe that's best. Sometimes the process is more important than finding an overall solution. I have found that the trials we experience in this life often seem impossible to withstand. With perseverance, our trials produce character. That character provides hope and hope never disappoints us! – Donald A. Gillespie



Compliments of W.R.Shayer