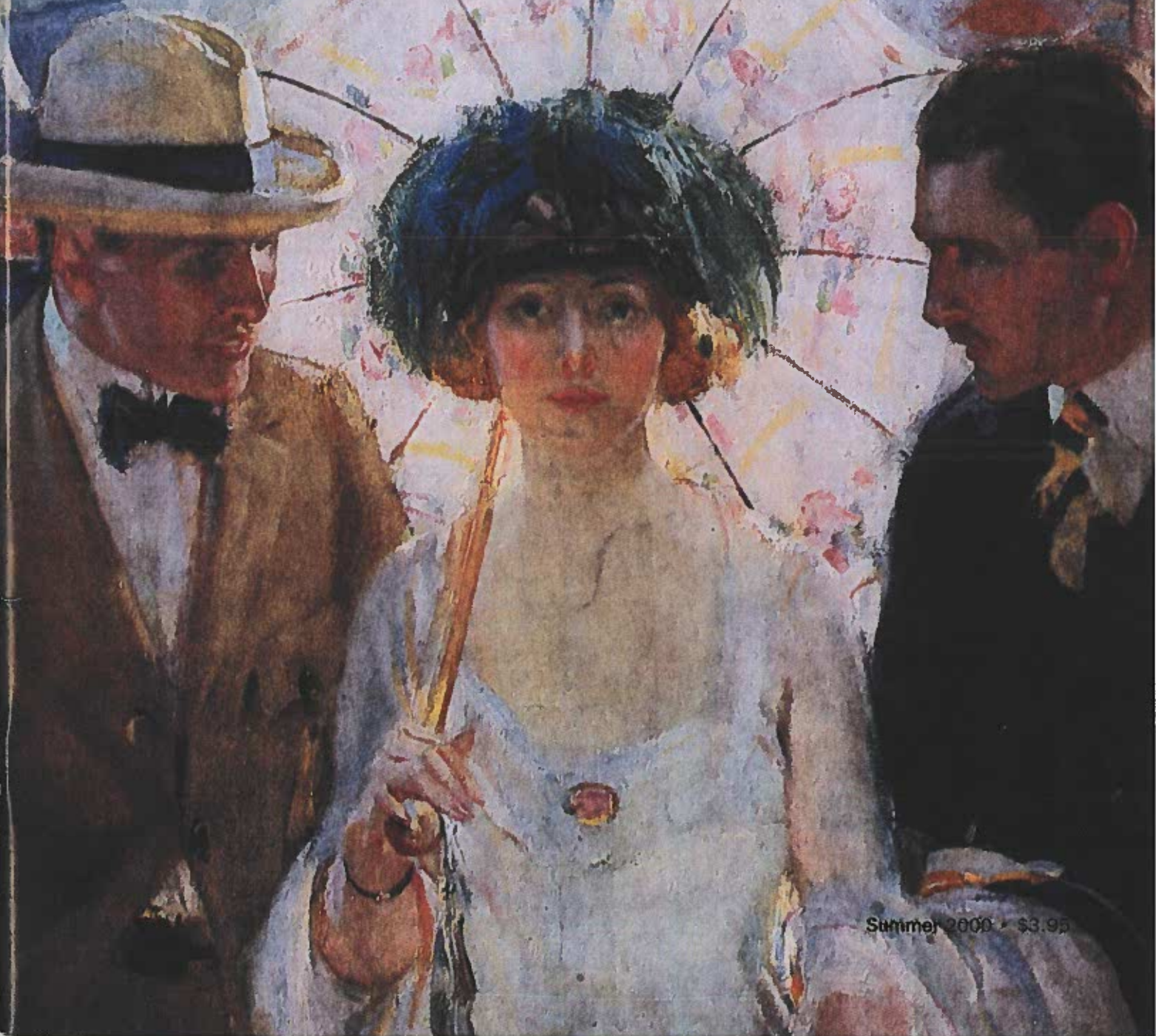


Virginia *Cavalcade*

The quarterly illustrated magazine of Virginia history and culture



Summer 2000 • \$3.95



Wedded to His Easel: A Life in Illustration

Walter Biggs, 1886–1968

DON GUNTER

In December 1902, sixteen-year-old Walter Joseph Biggs Jr. packed his bags and left Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College and Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech), in Blacksburg, to make the short jaunt to his parents' house in nearby Salem. His classmates were glad for the break, but for Walter the holidays loomed as bleak as the wintry skies above the Blue Ridge Mountains. As his parents, Walter and Annie Biggs, had wanted, he had enrolled that fall, planning to obtain a degree in mechanical engineering. But after one semester, it was clear he had no real interest in his studies. His gloomy mood deepened at the prospect of telling his family that he did not want to return to school. He wanted instead to draw.

Art was the thing he loved most. From an early age, when his family lived on a farm near the village of Big Spring (later called Elliston), in Montgomery County, he had taken such pleasure in setting down on paper, with crayon, pencil, or pen, the shapes of things that caught his eye. The trains that rumbled past the Norfolk and Western depot at Big Spring were a favorite subject. In grade school, he doodled and drew figures while frustrated teachers tried to guide him back to his books. "He was a nice quiet little boy and did his lessons well, but all he wanted to do was draw," teacher Mary Pepper Northcross remembered. When he was twelve, he sharpened his skills by enrolling in a correspondence course for pen and ink. At college, he entertained classmates by sketching campus scenes and the popular Gibson Girl (drawn by one of his artistic heroes, Charles Dana Gibson), instead of burrowing in his books or bothering with the spit and polish of cadet life at Virginia Tech. An indifferent college student, he wanted to find out if he could make his way in the

world as an artist. Biggs did not return to college in the new year. Instead, he remained at home, trying to figure out a way to tell his disappointed parents that he wanted to go to art school.

A simple, somewhat audacious plan took shape. Biggs was fascinated by the western paintings of Charles Schreyvogel, a previously obscure artist who had created a sensation in 1899 when his oil painting, *My Bunkie*, won the top prize at the National Academy of Design's annual exhibition in New York City. The *New York Herald* and other newspapers across the country reproduced it, and Schreyvogel became famous virtually overnight. In the summer of 1903, Walter decided that the artist could help him, somehow obtained his address, and sent a sample of his work with a note asking whether Schreyvogel thought the drawing showed any ability.

Good news soon arrived. "You have talent," Schreyvogel wrote, "and ought to study as much as possible from life." He recommended the National Academy of Design. Producing the letters he and Schreyvogel had exchanged during the summer, Walter pleaded with his parents to let him enroll in art school. Normally obedient and deferential, on this issue he was adamant. His reluctant parents finally consented. They decided instead on the New York School of Art, in Manhattan, and arranged for Walter to attend classes in the autumn.

On the train ride north, the boy tempered his elation with the knowledge that he must make good. He would be on his own in a huge, bustling city bearing no resemblance to the quiet, rural life he knew. His earliest memories were of the farm at Big Spring and

From "The Little Road," by William Almon Wolff, *Ladies Home Journal*, January 1922 (courtesy *Ladies Home Journal*)



a rambling, fifteen-room farmhouse with a four-columned porch, which overlooked U.S. Route 11 and the limestone pond that gave the area its name. His grandfather Kader Biggs, a Norfolk merchant, had purchased the property in 1881. Walter was born at the farm five years later, on 4 June 1886. He and his older sister, Lucy, were the only surviving children of the six born to "Captain" Walter Biggs and Annie Southall Biggs. In 1890, the family moved to a nearby house when Captain Biggs sold the farm. He later had the farmhouse dismantled, hauled to Salem, and reassembled. By early 1900, the family had settled into their old house and new surroundings.

On arriving in Manhattan in 1903, Biggs probably lodged at the YMCA near the New York School of Art, which was located just south of Central Park at West Fifty-seventh Street and Sixth Avenue. The school's second-floor studios were large and airy, with high ceilings and skylights. Chairs, stools, and easels littered the bare wooden floors, and pot-bellied stoves and model stands completed the furnishings. Adjustable lamps dangled overhead, their rounded shades capturing artists and easels in pools of light. The male students painted while clad in shirts and ties, garnished with jackets or smocks, their canvases astride an easel or set against the backrest of a chair. A separate studio on the other side of sliding doors housed the female students.

Established in 1896, the school originally was named for its founder, William Merritt Chase, a distinguished painter and one of the country's most successful instructors. But Chase was a careless businessman, and he relinquished control to an instructor in 1898 who reorganized and renamed the facility, although Chase stayed on. Chase had recruited an excellent faculty—Biggs studied under

Above: From "Black John's Rock," by Mary Louise Mabie, *Ladies Home Journal*, February 1937 (courtesy *Ladies Home Journal*). Right: *Young's Magazine*, January 1905. Opposite: A Robert Henri class at the New York School of Art in 1903. Biggs is the slightly blurred figure, shown standing, third from the left, in the back row.

such well-known artists of the time as F. Luis Mora, Kenneth Hayes Miller, Edward Penfield (a former editor at *Harper's Magazine*), and Lucius Hitchcock. The school exuded a refined ambiance modeled after Chase's carefully cultivated, gentleman-artist persona, which embodied the prevailing values of the conservative New York art establishment. The students imitated his formal attire, chose traditional subjects for their paintings, and generally behaved with decorum.

When Biggs arrived, a second-year teacher, thirty-seven-year-old Robert Henri, conducted the most popular classes. Prominent among the progressive artists in New York, Henri was an odd fit for the conventional Chase School. Rejecting Chase's art-for-art's-sake philosophy of painting, Henri preached a social realism celebrating subjects generally considered inappropriate for the artist's easel. He despised orthodoxy, valuing individuality more than the doctrines promulgated by the art establishment he sought to reform. To Chase, who prized technique, Henri's methods were vulgar. A rivalry developed between the two men, ultimately dividing the loyalties of the students and culminating in Chase's departure in 1907.

Walter's initial encounter with Henri occurred that fall in the men's afternoon life-drawing class.



Library of Congress

He quickly felt the power of the instructor's personality. The school attracted other young men, and for two years or more, Biggs received instruction as a fine artist alongside many classmates who went on to exceptional careers, including Edward Hopper, Rockwell Kent, W. T. Benda, and Guy Pène du Bois. George Bellows came in 1904, and soon Clifton Webb, later a gifted actor, and Vachel Lindsay, aspiring artist and poet, were taking classes. Biggs, at age seventeen, was one of the younger students. Another Virginian, Frank Graham Cootes, of Staunton, who was twenty-four, helped ease his transition to big-city life.

Walter found that art school was not all work. Henri's classes in particular were subject to school-boy pranks, and newcomers endured good-natured hazing and practical jokes. Henri extolled physical activity, so students engaged in boxing, basketball, and other sports. Baseball was a favorite, and the school's team trounced its rivals at the National Academy of Art and at the Art Students League. Bellows called Walter "String Biggs" because he was tall and thin, but Biggs was a fair outfielder. The students also engaged in spirited contests with a team led by showman George M. Cohan, who invited his

ball-playing pals to his Broadway productions, where Biggs sat backstage, busily sketching the gaudy goings-on of theater life. On occasion, the school opened the sliding doors separating the men's and women's studios and held dances.

In such a stimulating and artistic environment, Biggs's talents quickly developed. In January 1905, he published his first drawing, on the cover of *Young's Magazine* (opposite page). Six months later, another appeared on the cover of *Field and Stream*. He received hearty congratulations from instructors and classmates, and his family and townspeople back home were delighted, sharing copies of the magazines and bragging good-naturedly about their local celebrity. Never one to seek the limelight, Biggs was nevertheless proud of this auspicious start to his career. His joy turned to sadness in December, when his father died after a lingering illness. On the train ride back to New York after the funeral in Norfolk, he consoled himself with the thought that at least Captain Biggs had lived to enjoy his son's early success.

After completing school in 1906, Biggs joined the second wave of illustrators who were beginning to succeed pioneering giants like Howard Pyle,



Collection of Rev. Arthur R. Sanborn. Courtesy of Lee Brian, Palm Beach, Florida



Library of Virginia

Left: This image graced the inside cover of *St. Nicholas*, February 1907. Opposite: Cover, *Woman's Home Companion*, June 1913.

Frederic Remington, and Charles Dana Gibson. The trio's fame had arisen during the publishing revolution around the turn of the century, when magazine-circulation rates soared, new titles entered the market, and the demand for writers and illustrators swelled. Technological advances in printing and engraving further fueled the industry's growth. In the days before mass entertainment, people relied heavily on periodicals for diversion and information. Leading literary artists published short fiction in them, and their novels often ran as serials before appearing in book form. The magazine cover became a crucial feature, and a school of illustrators emerged that transformed the magazine's content as well.

Some artists, such as Biggs's classmate Edward Hopper, bridled at painting on assignment. They insisted on choosing subjects and on painting as they saw fit rather than working in some prescribed way. Biggs was unruffled by such restrictions. Although the art community argued about the distinction between fine art and illustration, he was happy to be doing work he loved. Early in his career, Biggs

established himself as a painter of southern scenes, and he often was able to incorporate in his work the themes and subject matter that appealed to him.

Biggs's experiences at art school had a lasting effect on his career. As his style evolved, his work assumed a spontaneous appearance that belied hours of painstaking labor. He combined loose brushstrokes and complex color applications with elements of French impressionism to create atmospheric, romantic paintings that led admirers such as Priscilla Young, an art writer for the *Roanoke Times and World News*, to describe him as a "contemporary impressionist." But he did not merely imitate the French school. The style suited both his subject and his sensibilities, and he brought to the canvas his own unique imprint. Chase, a rebellious young artist who had helped import impressionism to the United States, would have approved. At the school, Biggs adopted a slogan scrawled on a locker, "Conscious art defeats itself." The words have a Henrian ring, for that instructor taught that one never set out to create "art," but focused entirely on the subject of the painting. Above all, Henri insisted that artists be true to their own visions rather than follow the dictates of any school of thought. This was certainly true of Biggs, who was immune to the fashions of his time. "My idea," he told Young, "is that we must have all types of art. I like variety myself. You can have good abstractions and good traditional work." But he also thought that some progressive painters took shortcuts and thereby neglected the fundamentals of good painting.

For the next few years, Biggs spent a good deal of time at the Lincoln Arcade Building at 1947 Broadway, where George Bellows lived on the top floor. A bohemian atmosphere pervaded the creaky old building, a popular residence for artists struggling to jump-start their careers. Living arrangements were irregular, and Bellows shared his quarters with a series of roommates, among them the budding playwright Eugene O'Neill. Others drifted in and out, and at one point four or five squatters bunked regularly at studio 616. Biggs slept there on an old army cot.

Their favorite hangout was Sharkey's, a private athletic club on Columbus Avenue. One summer evening in 1909, Biggs invited Bellows to the smoky confines to watch a boxing match. Inspired, Bellows immediately began *Stag at Sharkey's*, one of his most famous pictures. Bellows wanted to paint Biggs, but he never sat for his friend. Instead Biggs composed

several drawings of Bellows, always picturing him with a pipe stuck in his mouth.

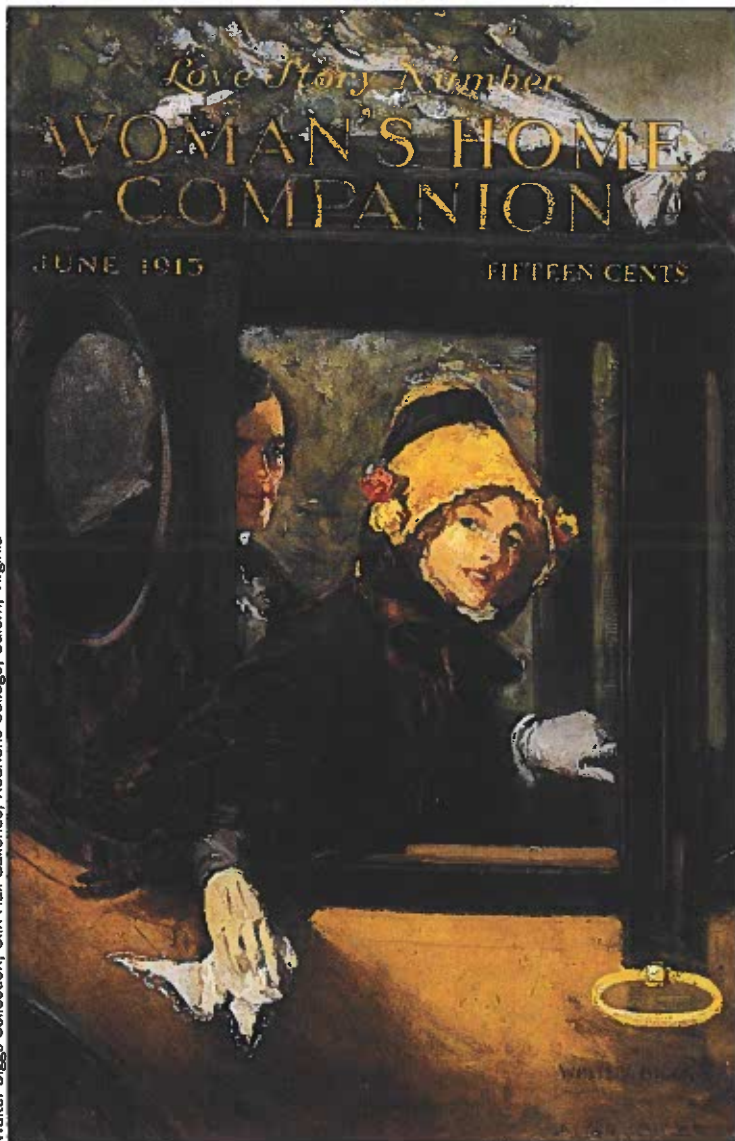
Biggs continued his fledgling career as a freelance artist for the domestic and sentimental fiction popular with readers of women's magazines. Searching for work, he haunted the doorways of publishers, a portfolio tucked under his arm. One of his earliest commissions came in 1906 for "The Indecision of Margaret" in *Gunter's Magazine*, published by best-selling novelist Archibald Clavering Gunter. In February 1907, he completed the first of several drawings in *St. Nicholas* magazine, a publication for young people (opposite page).

Late one snowy evening in 1907, as he trudged along West Twenty-ninth Street with a bundle of unsold drawings, he stopped at the offices of *Metropolitan Magazine*. An older man led him to a table where Biggs displayed his artwork. The man

bent over the pictures and inquired if they were for sale. He selected several, then thrust out a manuscript and asked for an illustration. To Biggs's surprise, the man was none other than the owner of the *Metropolitan*, R. H. Russell. In 1907 and 1908, Biggs produced a number of drawings for the magazine, always working through Russell. About this time, his pictures also appeared in *McClure's Magazine* and *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*. In January 1909, the first of his drawings for *Harper's Weekly Magazine* appeared, and for that publication he illustrated short fiction, some of it set in Virginia, for the next three years.

Biggs's magazine work led to a notable association with Virginia writer Thomas Nelson Page. In September 1911, Biggs debuted in *Scribner's Magazine*, contributing two illustrations, one a color frontispiece, for "The Trick-Doctor," the first of two stories he illustrated for Page. Although the Virginian's literary career was nearly over, he remained one of the South's best-known writers. After the Civil War, Page's stories had provided readers with a window to the past that looked at the Old South, particularly Virginia, as an idyllic, medieval land ruled by a noble aristocracy until military defeat destroyed forever an ancient, honorable way of life. This moonlight-and-magnolias portrait possessed an enduring appeal, and many of the stories that Biggs illustrated over the years derived from Page's fiction. Between 1914 and 1917, Biggs illustrated a series of stories for *Scribner's* by another Virginian, Armistead C. Gordon, of Staunton, a writer to whom Page acknowledged a literary debt. Like many other southerners, Biggs's own impression of the past was formed in part by romantics like Page and Gordon, whose sentimental fiction infused the cultural milieu of the time.

Over the next few decades, the pace of his career accelerated as Biggs became a skillful, well-known illustrator of magazines. From 1912 to 1924, he illustrated dozens of stories for the venerable *Harper's Magazine*, the parent publication of *Harper's Weekly*. In June 1913, a painting titled *The Wedding Journey* appeared on the cover of *Woman's Home Companion* (left), marking the beginning of another lengthy relationship with a top publisher, which lasted until 1932. In January 1915, he began a sixteen-year partnership with *Good Housekeeping Magazine*. His association with the premier *Ladies Home Journal*, which began in 1919, was easily the longest and most



Walter Biggs Collection, Olin Hall Galleries, Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia



productive of his career. Over the next thirty-six years, the relationship yielded two cover paintings and illustrations for nearly eighty stories, two serials, and several condensed novels, all by some of the country's most popular writers, among them Mary Roberts Rinehart, Stephen Vincent Benét, and Sinclair Lewis. During the 1920s and 1930s, he worked occasionally for *McCall's Magazine*. Between 1925 and 1951, he illustrated fiction for *Cosmopolitan* by popular writers such as Stark Young, Edith Wharton, and Hervey Allen, whose "Action at Aquila," a Civil War story set in the Shenandoah Valley, became a best-selling novel.

Biggs also illustrated novels. James Shelley Hamilton's *Butt Chanler, Freshman* (1908) was the

Above: *Night, Calhoun Street*, watercolor (photo courtesy of the Society of Illustrators, Museum of American Illustration, New York). Opposite: *The Storyteller* featured Watt Jones and illustrated an Armistead C. Gordon story, "Baytop," in *Scribner's Magazine*, May 1915.

first of at least nine on which he worked between 1908 and 1917. Other novelists for whom Biggs created illustrations included popular Georgian Will N. Harben, Richmond writer Kate Langley Bosher, and Belle Bushnell, for whom he illustrated his first Civil War romance, *John Arrowsmith—Planter* (1910) (page 112).

Biggs typically employed professional models in New York. When he visited Salem, however, he recruited friends and neighbors, even his mother and sister, to sit for him. He often used his own likeness to save on modeling fees. When he worked, the mustached Biggs draped his lanky frame in a well-made shirt, tie, jacket, and trousers. (Late in life, he thought nothing of wiping paint on his pants, then scraping it off after it dried.) He seldom worked from photographs, as did some artists, preferring to sketch preliminary drafts from life.

Biggs's portrayals of African Americans were free of caricature, despite his interest in nostalgic literary works about the South. From the beginning of

his career, black subjects frequently appeared in his work. In Salem, his favorite model was a well-known elderly man, Watt Jones. Before his death in the mid-1920s, the former slave appeared in Biggs's illustrations for *Scribner's* (below, and page 113) and *Ladies Home Journal*, and in other images (page 114). Such sensitivity did not go unnoticed. In 1951, he told the *Roanoke Times and World News* that *Ladies Home Journal* had once received a letter from a black school in the South commending Biggs's depiction of blacks. The *Times* also observed how he "endowed with dignity and humanity" the local African Americans whom he painted.

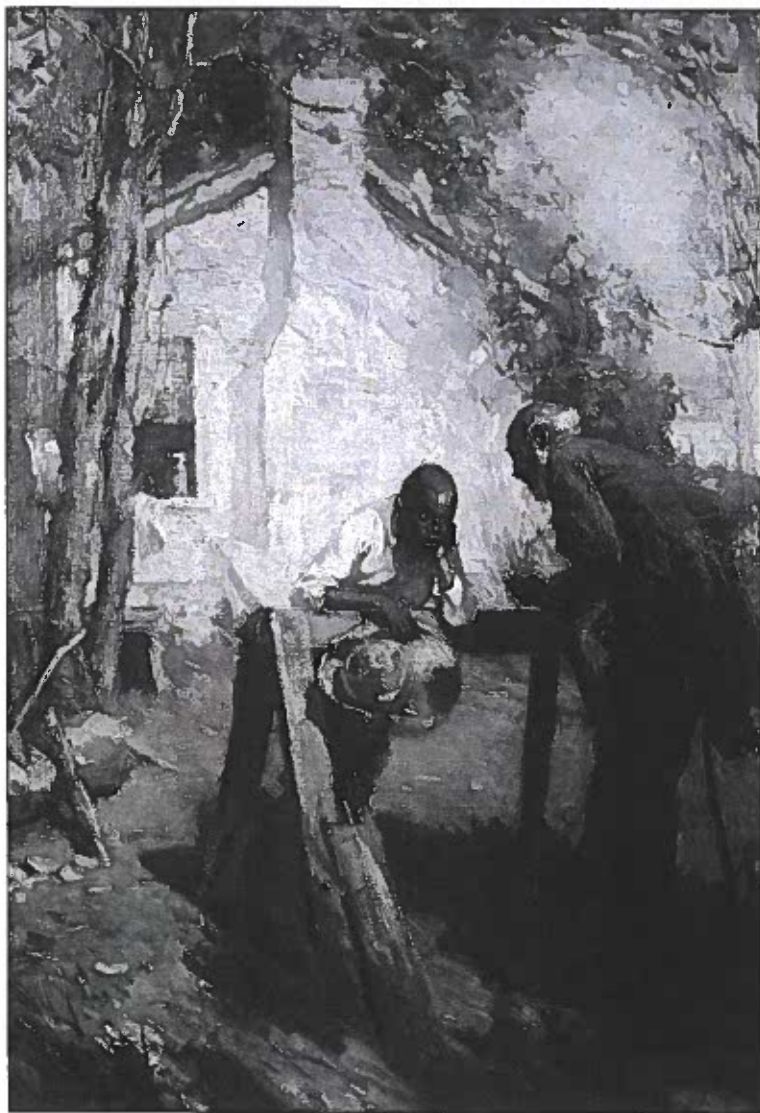
In 1913, after living at different addresses in Manhattan's Chelsea district, Biggs moved to a studio on Wadsworth Avenue, where his former classmate W. T. Benda also lived. Biggs's admission to the prestigious Salmagundi Club in 1913 signaled another benchmark of success. Membership included some of the most famous illustrators in the country, and the old brownstone building on Fifth Avenue housed a gallery where Biggs showcased his paintings over the years and won a number of prizes.

Biggs also became interested in teaching. In the fall of 1915, he joined several of his former teachers in conducting an evening class in illustration and composition at the Art Students League. Patient and knowledgeable, he enjoyed the classroom experience and from then on taught periodically, especially at the Grand Central School of Art and the Phoenix Art Institute. He credited his teachers Edward Penfield and Lucius Hitchcock for his own success as a teacher, and many of his students enjoyed distinguished careers. Biggs's style and use of color especially influenced Pruett A. Carter, who later was inducted into the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame. Biggs's desire to excel led him to continue his own studies, and he enrolled in a class that Thomas Fogarty taught.

By 1921, Biggs had moved to a studio apartment on the top floor of the Colonial Studios at 39 West Sixty-seventh Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Once a rough-and-tumble neighborhood, the block was famous as an artist's colony. It comprised six modern high-rises inhabited by an assortment of painters, sculptors, musicians, and literary and theatrical types. The mock-Tudor structures featured handsome apartments and roomy

studios with twenty-one-foot-high ceilings, balconies, and fourteen-foot windows—just the environment for artists. At one time or another, well-known illustrators lived there, including Norman Rockwell, Dean Cornwell, Howard Chandler Christy (who lived on the corner at the Hotel des Artistes), James Montgomery Flagg, and Frank Graham Cootes, who was becoming a successful illustrator and portraitist. Syndicated journalist O. O. McIntyre occasionally featured the block in his column, "New York Day by Day," and once mentioned Biggs in a piece that extravagantly compared the neighborhood to the Latin Quarter of Paris.

During the 1920s, Biggs neared the top of his profession, with admiring art editors demanding his work. Earlier in his career, production costs had dictated that magazines and books reproduced many of his illustrations in halftone or in one or two colors. As advances in technology reduced costs, his subtly



Courtesy of Charles Palmer, Roanoke, Virginia



Painted pieces usually appeared in full color—sometimes to the frustration of art directors, for the works were difficult to reproduce. None other than Norman Rockwell praised Biggs's application of "color in a brilliant and poetic way." Biggs later viewed this period as a "golden age," as he told Harrison Cady, a friend and fellow artist.

In 1921, Biggs had a studio built behind his mother's new house at 310 Second Street in Salem, Virginia. He returned to Salem as often as his schedule allowed, particularly in the summers and during holidays, for a respite from big-city pressures. He found no rest from deadlines, however, and during the retreats, he painted and filled his notebooks with

sketches of surrounding scenery. Photographs show him inspecting the unfinished structure, squatting proudly on a crossbeam that anchored the six windows facing the backyard, his only source of natural light. When he wasn't working, he grabbed his hat and walked downtown to banter with the locals at Dillard's Drugstore or Powell's Pharmacy. Whenever there was a football game, he loyally trekked to Blacksburg to root for his alma mater, Virginia Tech.

About this time, Biggs fell in love with one of his models, Mildred Armstrong. A vivacious, blue-eyed brunette, Armstrong was born in 1899 in Minneapolis and grew up in Chevy Chase, Maryland. After high school, she worked in Washington, D.C., and competed in the Miss Washington beauty pageant in 1922. She then moved to New York, where she won a small part in a play and began modeling. Her first assignment appeared in October 1922 in *Ladies Home Journal*. On 4 August 1923, the "society girl" who had "fled the drawing-rooms of Washington," as the newspapers described her, married the thirty-seven-year-old Walter Biggs at the Church of the Transfiguration, in New York City. The bride had just celebrated her twenty-fourth birthday. The wedding was an impulsive, hastily arranged affair. Because Biggs did not drive, the honeymooners motored down to Natural Bridge, Virginia, with their artist friend H. R. Ballinger and his wife. A model from New York tagged along so that Walter could meet deadlines.

In Manhattan, the couple lived amid talented and successful people. Through Walter's associations, Mildred established her own friendships, including one with James Montgomery Flagg, who sketched a charcoal portrait of her. She enrolled at the Art Students League and developed well enough as an artist that she occasionally helped Walter on assignments and eventually published her own artwork. Between 1929 and 1936, she illustrated more than a dozen stories for *Household Magazine*, a fine Kansas publication to which Walter contributed five covers, and one for *Cosmopolitan*. She also tried writing and unsuccessfully shopped stories to several top women's magazines. Mildred continued to pose for Walter, and her likeness appeared on the covers of *Ladies Home Journal* (left) and *Household Magazine* and in *American Magazine*. From time to time, magazine articles about successful artists and their models mentioned the couple, and their photographs appeared in *Colliers* and *Red Book*.

By now, Biggs was so well-known that he endorsed manufacturers of art supplies in such publications as *International Studio* (page 112) and

Opposite: Mildred Biggs posed for the July 1926 cover of the *Ladies Home Journal*. Below: Walter and Mildred Biggs in their Manhattan apartment.

Magazine of Art. The Walker Engraving Company's ad in *Printers' Ink Monthly* placed him "on the very top rung of his calling." In 1926, this piece and others featuring leading illustrators were collected in *A Book of Notable American Illustrators*. Biggs also worked as a commercial artist, creating attractive advertisements for clients such as Chesterfield cigarettes, Woodbury's skin-care line, Cutex nail products, and Ivory soap. The companies sometimes offered free color reproductions of Biggs's artwork to customers.

In September 1931, Charleston author DuBose Heyward asked *Woman's Home Companion* to commission Biggs for the serialization of his new work, "Peter Ashley" (page 110). Heyward was pleased with Biggs's earlier work for the *Companion's* condensation of his book *Mamba's Daughters: A Novel of Changing Times*. For that project, Biggs had traveled to Charleston to examine architecture and compose background sketches, and he returned in February 1932. Heyward chauffeured him around while Biggs took photographs for use in New York.



Courtesy of Susan Birge Iselorp, Cupertino, California



Left: An illustration for "Peter Ashley," by DuBose Heyward, *Woman's Home Companion*, August 1932. Right: *War News* (courtesy of Jim and Mary Gacek, Roanoke, Virginia).

where. Open tubes of dried paint lay among the debris. Friend Mario Cooper described Biggs "standing against a background that looked like the building had caved in." On one occasion, actor and old friend Clifton Webb brought his mother, Mabel Webb, for a visit. Biggs welcomed them in his warmest southern manner, seating Mrs. Webb on the only chair not buried in clutter. To his horror, she toppled onto the floor—the chair was missing a leg.

For all of Biggs's professional success, the demands of the work and the dedication he brought to his craft produced marital tensions. Mildred complained that he spent all his time before the canvas. He was, in her words, "wedded" to his easel. Happiest in his studio, even Biggs admitted that his marriage could not stand the pressures of his profession. Too, differences in age and temperament began to show. Walter seemed to solve life's problems by ignoring them, as a longtime friend, Richard Persinger, once observed. Certainly, no hint of the growing marital discord ever appeared in his letters to Mildred. He was unwaveringly affectionate in his correspondence and always closed with an appeal for his wife to join him when he wrote from Salem.

Occasionally, he apologized for the mess as she tried to bring order to the chaotic studio.

By March 1933, the marriage was over. Mildred took her own flat in Greenwich Village, though she and Walter remained friendly, and she continued to work in the studio. In June 1937, she obtained a divorce and married a wealthy businessman from Buffalo, New York. Walter, now just over fifty years old, depended more than ever on his cadre of friends at Child's Restaurant on Amsterdam Avenue, the camaraderie of his colleagues at the Salmagundi Club, and his art.

Around this time, Biggs befriended Allen Ingles Palmer, a young Roanoke man who had come to New York to study with Biggs and at the Art Students League. Biggs introduced Palmer to associates in the art community and sponsored his membership in the Salmagundi Club in 1937. For a time, Palmer tried to

He loved the old seaport and returned again in the spring of 1937 with John Alonzo Williams, his neighbor at the Colonial Studios. Day and night the two artists prowled the city, filling their notebooks with sketches. The *Charleston News and Courier* even published an account of their excursions, and Charleston became the subject of several Biggs paintings. In 1937, back in New York, he also painted his longtime friend, titling the watercolor *Alonzo Williams in his Studio*.

Biggs's own studio was "without doubt the most disorderly one in New York," according to one visiting reporter. When he finished painting for the day, he simply walked away. Hundreds of used brushes poked out of jars, waiting to be cleaned. Canvases were stacked against the wall or laid on the floor, tattooed by shoe prints. Artist supplies, boxes, heaps of costumes, and assorted props were piled every-



establish himself as an illustrator, but photography was transforming the profession. He and his wife eventually moved back to the Roanoke Valley, where he doggedly pursued a career as a watercolorist. The two men remained close, however, often working together when Biggs was in Salem.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Biggs reserved more time to paint for himself and established a reputation as a fine artist. By 1939, he was a member of the American Watercolor Society. He had begun showing his watercolors at society exhibitions the previous year. Many of the works depicted Virginia scenes, such as *Duke Street*, site of his grandparents' home in Norfolk, and a study of Salem's black community, *Water Street Night*, that a newspaper reviewer described as "romance plus." With his good judgment and appraising eye, he frequently served on exhibit committees for the organization.

In the 1940s, seldom satisfied with a painting and hounded by increasingly short deadlines, he set aside his oils to work in gouache, a watercolor technique that allowed him greater freedom to experiment and rework an illustration if necessary. In 1945, *American Artist* magazine examined his style in an article that was subsequently enlarged and published in a book, *Forty Illustrators and How They Work* (1946). Biggs's gouache method was unusual, employing an intriguing application that used minimal water to work the paint and draw out detail. A demonstration of his technique at the National Academy of Design had puzzled, even astounded, some observers. Yet when he finished, a distinct pattern emerged that held "great technical charm," according to the article in *Forty Illustrators*.

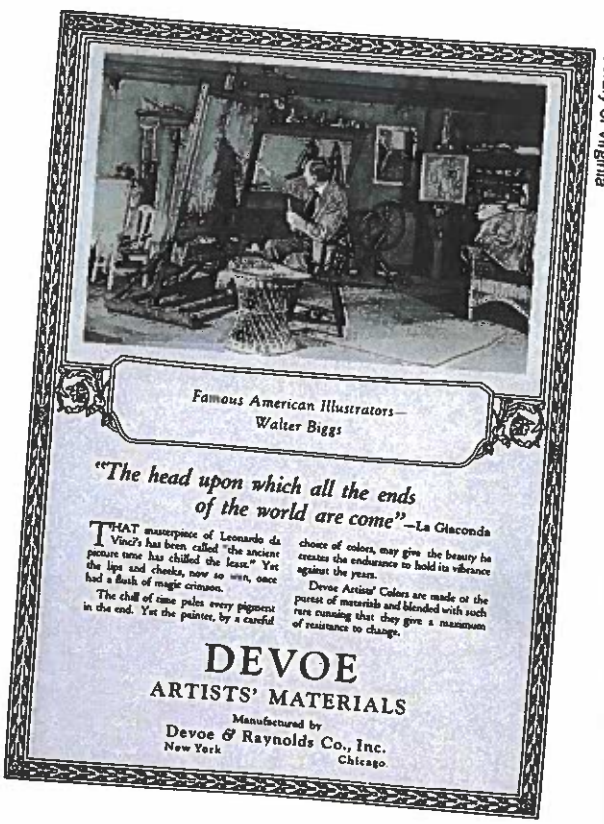
In the late 1940s, Biggs suffered two important losses. When his mother died in August 1948, Allen

Illustration from the scrapbook of Mildred Biggs Birge, Bethesda, Maryland



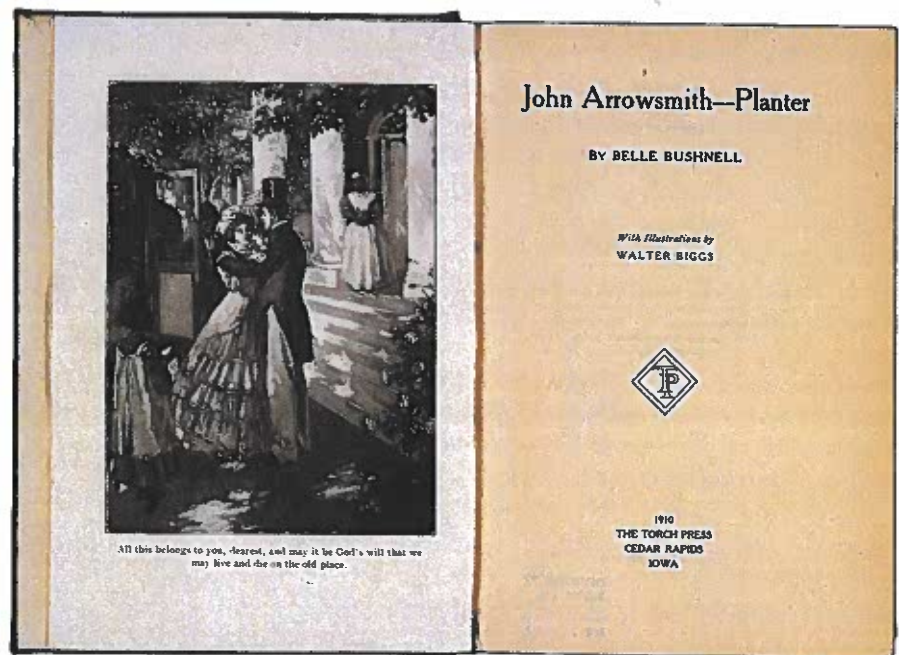
Advertisement, Fisk Cord Tires, 1921

Library of Virginia

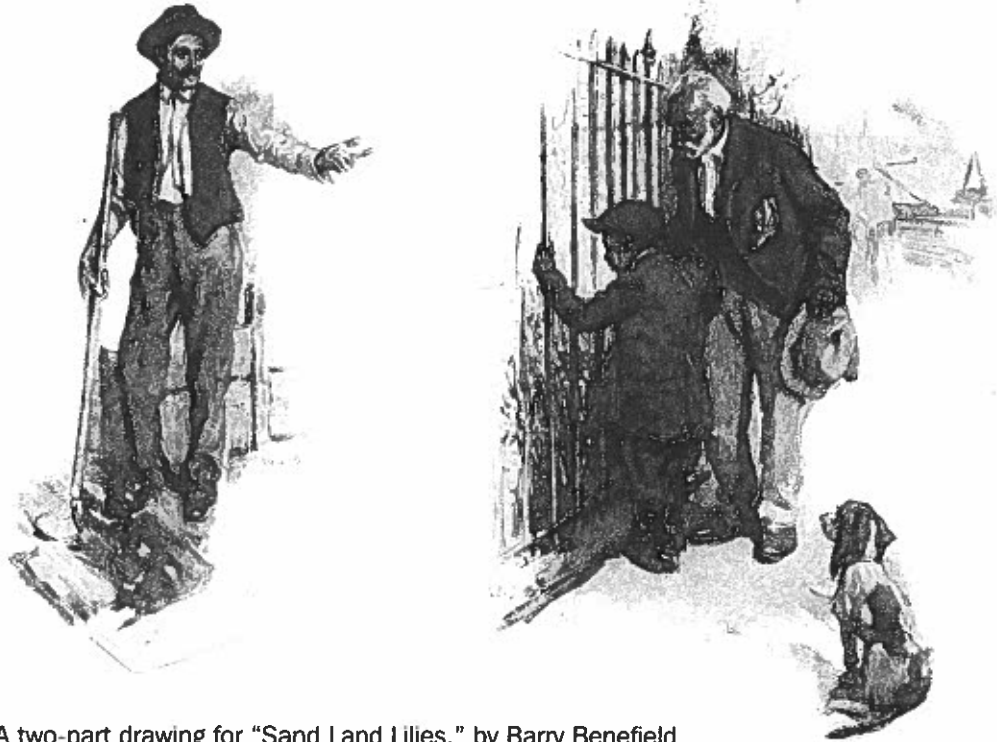


Biggs endorsed Devoe Artists' Materials in *International Studio*, February 1923.

A book illustration from Biggs's early career.



Library of Virginia



A two-part drawing for "Sand Land Lilies," by Barry Benefield, appeared on facing pages of Scribner's Magazine, February 1913 (Library of Virginia)

This advertisement featured a sketch of Biggs's wife, Mildred Armstrong.

**THE MOST BEAUTIFUL
WOMAN I KNOW!**

By **WALTER BIGGS**
 famous illustrator for such magazines as WOMAN'S HOME COMPANION.

I had had my morning swim on the brilliant beach at Nantucket—was passing the oak-weathered studio of a friend—dropped in. And for the first time saw Mildred Armstrong! Flawless features . . . eyes as blue as that Nantucket sky . . . skin as fresh and delicate in its natural tint as tea-roses. Of course I wanted to paint her! And eventually I did—used, her for an illustration I was doing. Now—she is an illustrator in her own right, and an excellent one—and still the most beautiful woman I know.

(Signed)
W.B.G. & S.

We sent a representative to ask the beautiful artist Mildred Armstrong how she cares for her lovely skin which Walter Biggs describes as being "as fresh and delicate in its natural tint as tea-roses." She, too, uses Camay, the soap of beautiful women. You will find that Camay keeps your skin fresh and delicate, too!

And She Uses
CAMAY

**The Soap of
Beautiful Women**

Miss Mildred Armstrong, of New York City—from a sketch by Walter Biggs—Miss Armstrong uses Camay Soap—and has granted us permission to use this advertisement. This is not a reproduction of the "tongue-and-pipe" jar size.

©Used with permission. The Procter and Gamble Company.



Palmer was one of the pallbearers. The younger man was unstinting in his admiration for his mentor, declaring him one of the finest painters in the country. By September 1950, many people thought Palmer also was on the threshold of national recognition. But that month, he crashed and died in a plane full of his artwork, bound for a one-man show in New York City. Devastated by the loss, Biggs arranged for the restoration of his friend's damaged paintings.

Biggs, now in his seventies, retired from illustrating about 1959 and moved from New York to Salem to be with his widowed, ailing sister, who lived alone in their mother's house. But he could not bring himself to close his studio in New York. He still painted daily, believing that "working is more fun than anything else," as he confided to Roanoke journalist Kenneth Hood. Still, it was time to quit. The painterly qualities that had distinguished his profession no longer were much in evidence, and even he now felt that there was a separation between illustration and fine art. His eyes troubled him, although he continued to paint "nearly every minute of the day," in his sister's words. He no longer used the

backyard studio but worked in an upstairs room adjacent to his bedroom. With more leisure time, he resumed working with oils.

As he settled into Salem, Biggs looked back on a career spanning fifty years and filled with acclaim. From the Salmagundi Club, he had received the Shaw Prize (for *A Little Game*), the Auction Prize (for a winter scene on Clay Street in Salem), the Mischa Lempert Memorial Purchase Prize (for *Still Life*), and the Herman Wick Prize (for *From My Window*). The American Watercolor Society had awarded Biggs its Gold Medal of Honor for *War News* (page 111) and its silver medal for *At Home*. The National Academy of Design had honored *At Rest*, his rendering of a snow-filled Fincastle, Virginia, cemetery (right), and bestowed the Adolph and Clara Obrig Prize for *Old Church Fincastle*. In the 1920s, he had shown advertising work at the Art Directors Club of New York and won first prize for an assignment for the International Silver Company (page 116), among other advertising awards. In 1954, the Artists' Fellowship, in New York City, had honored him for "exceptional artistic merit."

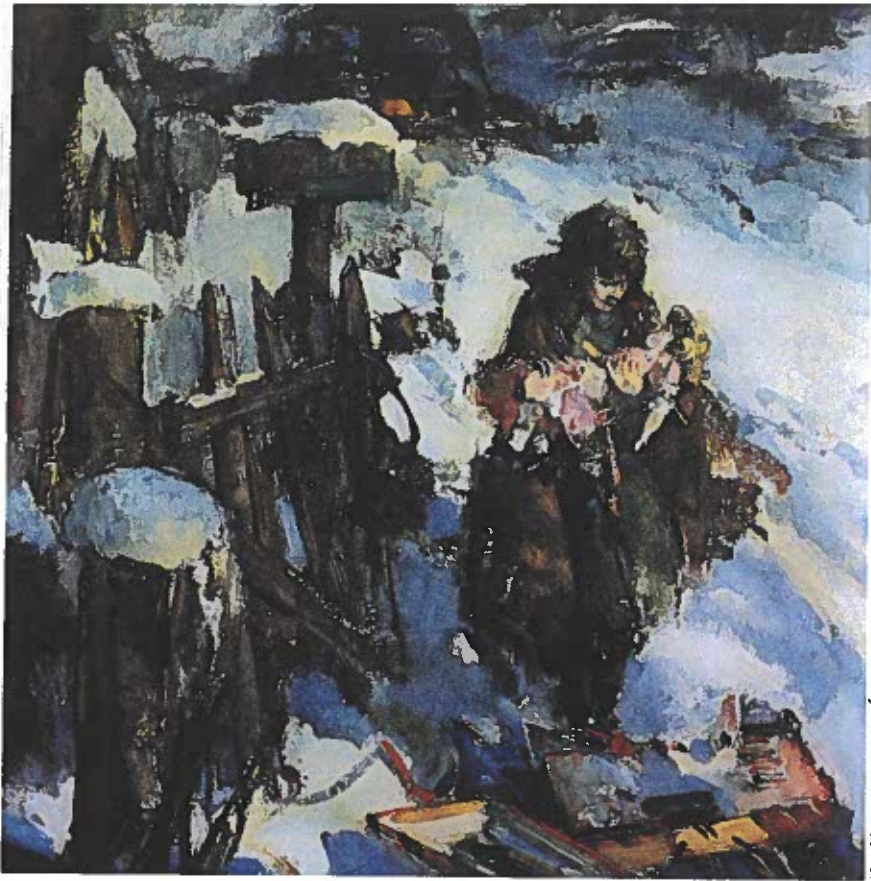
Opposite: *The Letter*. Below: *At Rest* (Walter Biggs Collection, Olin Hall Galleries, Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia).

As gratifying as he found all the awards, one in particular underscored the esteem in which other illustrators held his work. In September 1963, the Society of Illustrators elected him to its Hall of Fame. He was the sixth artist so honored, joining a select group of painters that included Norman Rockwell and Dean Cornwell. Such recognition only increased the pride that folks back home took in Biggs's career. For decades, Salem residents had delighted in seeing the familiar sights of their hometown reproduced in gorgeous color in the pages of national magazines. On 18 November, the mayor of Roanoke presented Biggs with a key to the city. Two days later, he received the Society of Illustrators' medal in New

York. Meeting the occasion with customary humor and brevity, he entertained the audience with stories of the old days and was warmed by the telegrams from friends and admirers back home. He reluctantly closed his New York studio for good before returning to Salem, where the town council honored him. His life as a painter was ending.

Biggs also had years of exhibitions in Virginia, New York, and other venues in his portfolio. Of a 1930 show at New York's Ferargil's Gallery, one *New York Times* critic wrote that his work left "no doubt as to the nature of his medium, water-color." In the 1930s and 1940s, he exhibited at the 52 East Nineteenth Street Galleries, the Philadelphia Water Color Society, the Little Gallery, and the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, and five times at the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1953, the Roanoke Fine Arts Center sponsored his first





Courtesy Ladies Home Journal

Clockwise from left: An illustration from "No Man Could Ask More!," by Katharine Haviland-Taylor, *Ladies Home Journal*, December 1937; *White Roses*, oil on canvas; *Gospel Meeting*, undated; an award-winning advertisement for the International Silver Company, 1925.



Courtesy of Illustration House, Inc., New York



Walter Biggs Collection, Olin Hall Galleries, Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia



Courtesy of Illustration House, Inc., New York



one-man show in the Roanoke Valley, giving local admirers the opportunity to view his Virginia scenes, such as *Blue Ridge Morning* and *Winter, Catawba Valley*, as well as his prize-winning canvases.

In 1961, Roanoke College added to his honors a doctor of fine arts degree, and the Roanoke Fine Arts Center sponsored another exhibit. In 1965, he exhibited for the final time at the Salmagundi Club and the National Academy of Design. In 1966, Virginia Tech displayed his paintings. That year, Biggs served as artist-in-residence at Roanoke College and chose an illustration (from 1932's "Peter Ashley") for the New Britain Museum of American Art's permanent collection of American illustration. In an effort to get his work before the general public, his artist friends arranged a June 1967 exhibit at a shopping mall, with memorabilia from his long career also on view. It was his last one-man show.

Biggs's health continued to deteriorate. He found consolation from friends who sympathized

with his problems with cataracts and eye surgery, but old age was overtaking him. As he and his sister grew increasingly feeble, friends and neighbors stopped by with covered dishes and desserts, including boiled custard, his favorite. He tried to stay active. During the summer of 1967, he offered a picture to *Writer's Digest*, but the magazine gently rejected it. In September, his sister, Lucy, died in a local nursing home. By February 1968, the eighty-one-year-old Biggs was so ill that he entered the hospital. On 11 February, a local artist and close friend, Mary Hackman, watched him drift in and out of consciousness. Suddenly, he asked for a pencil and inscribed on the paper she held for him a swirling,

Above: Biggs featured a Virginia landscape in *Twelve O'Clock Knob*, oil on canvas (courtesy of Katherine Burke, Salem, Virginia). Opposite: A drawing from "Mr. Durgan and Violet," by Maude Radford Warren, *Harper's Magazine*, October 1914 (Library of Virginia).

abstract image unlike anything he had ever communicated to canvas. Within hours, he was dead.

Interest in Biggs's work lived on. The editor of *American Artist* magazine, Norman Kent, called him one of the "deans of American illustration," praised his reputation as a master watercolorist, and mentioned the integrity that he brought to his illustrations and to his expressions as a fine artist. At an auction in June 1968, an overflow crowd of sixteen hundred grabbed up more than one hundred pieces of his art, including oils and watercolors from his heyday in the 1920s and 1930s and drawings dating back to 1911. As his will provided, Roanoke College and the city of Salem divided the proceeds and the remainder of his estate. In 1967, the first of four major Biggs exhibitions occurred in the Roanoke Valley, including one in 1980 at Roanoke College that his former wife, Mildred Birge, attended. In 1986, the one-hundredth year of his birth, the Virginia Watercolor Society arranged an exhibition at Roanoke College, *Walter Biggs Remembered: A Memorial Exhibition of his Life and Work*. For the occasion, Mario Cooper, president emeritus of the American Watercolor Society, dedicated the Walter Biggs Studio in Olin Hall, the student art center. In 1998 and 1999, his paintings appeared in a major exhibition on American illustration at the Art Museum of Western Virginia. New York publishers remembered him as well by including his work in several books about major American illustrators. His art remained so popular that occasionally bogus Biggs paintings showed up in the Roanoke Valley.

Walter Biggs created perhaps thousands of illustrations during his six-decade career and produced a large catalog as a fine artist. He was often unsatisfied with the results. "Whatever you do should be so much better than it really is," he once observed, "you can never allow yourself to be very proud. Now and then, you do something that clicks within you, but that is so seldom." His admirers, however, found a lovely quality in his paintings. "Poetic" is a word they frequently applied to his work. "Nostalgic" is another. These elements set his paintings apart and make them instantly recognizable. "Has any artist before ever painted snow like Walter Biggs?" asked Priscilla Young, the Roanoke art critic. In *At Rest*, the snow is palpable, lifting off the canvas. In *Twelve O'Clock Knob* (above, left), the old, abandoned farm-

house, set deep in a valley, emerges from the swirling fog as from the depths of a dream. Biggs often invested his paintings with tender emotions, but he did not allow sentimentality to overtake sentiment.

Toward the end of his life, whenever his spirits were low, Biggs recalled the glamour of New York and the good times strolling down Fifth Avenue. He was something of a paradox, an artist who relished the urban setting but chose not to paint it. His heart was in the Roanoke Valley, where he returned throughout his life for inspiration, brushing shoulders with home as he walked down a Salem street, sat with a sketchbook in a Fincastle cemetery, or stood on a corner in a black neighborhood, waiting for the perfect melding of color and light. He painted for a national audience, but when he painted for himself, he conserved the charms of small-town life. Like the southern literary artists whose stories he illustrated, his paintings evoke the remembered past, the hallowed place. As the *Roanoke World News* said after his death, he made "an art of ordinary things." Walter Biggs was moved by life's simplicity. ☐

Don Gunter is an assistant editor of the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, a publication of the Library of Virginia. This article grew out of a biographical sketch he wrote for volume one of the *DVB*. For their help with this article, he especially thanks Mildred Armstrong Biggs Birge (who turns 101 on 26 July 2000) and her daughter, Susan Birge Isetorp.

