

Shikler Discusses Painting the Kennedys

By ROBERT McG. THOMAS Jr.

Aaron Shikler, the artist who painted the recently unveiled official White House portraits of President and Mrs. Kennedy, has become the latest family associate to share his intimate observations with the public.

Mr. Shikler's account, which appears in the March issue of *McCall's*, published today, is based on the almost three years he spent sketching Mrs. Aristotle Onassis and her children in their Fifth Avenue apartment and reportedly has the former First Lady's full blessings.

Mr. Shikler received \$55,000 from the magazine for 13 sketches and paintings and the 2,500-word article. He also received \$15,000 for each of the official portraits from the White House Historical Association and an undisclosed sum from Mrs. Onassis, who owns the rest.

'Almost Spooky Beauty'

According to the article, the artist's very first impression of Mrs. Onassis was "of a woman of extraordinary, almost spooky beauty and extraordinary inner tension," with both a "childlike, magical quality and at the same time an aspect of great force."

Mr. Shikler, who was disappointed with one attempt because it was "too girlish, too coy" and failed to capture her "mystery" or suggest "her reserve and her strength," wrote that he found Mrs. Onassis's view of painting "sure," her grounding in art "good," her artistic tutelage "the best," and her smile "radiant."

Even her apartment, Mr. Shikler said, is a "lovely place done with such skill that no decorator's touch is visible."

Of the Kennedy children, Mr. Shikler regarded Caroline as a "born model," whose "every movement, every rest is an unconscious pose," and who was, herself, "always a spontaneous, unrehearsed performance, always a painting" while John, on the other hand, was "monumentally bored with the whole business," and "the sooner he could get out of the room the better." But, Mr. Shikler com-



Commissioned to paint Kennedy children, Mr. Shikler also did this grouping

mented, he is "all boy—restless, impatient, all elbows and knees."

One Sour Note

Mr. Shikler's tone sours only once—when he describes the White House collection of First Lady portraits as for the most part an "uninspired lineup . . . of carefully composed, pompously gowned nonpersons." But by the next paragraph the style becomes a "meaningful tradition."

Mr. Shikler disclosed that the White House assignment grew out of a commission to paint Caroline and John three years ago when she was 10 years old and he was 7.

"They look just right to me now," the then Mrs. Kennedy told him. "I would like to re-

member them at this age. As they are now."

The assignment was soon expanded to include Mrs. Kennedy in a family grouping; then came the commission to do the former First Lady's official portrait and still later the assignment to paint the late President from photographs.

Her Taste in Art

Mr. Shikler, who wrote that Mrs. Onassis's taste in art "runs to the sketch, the unfinished suggestion rather than the spelled-out likeness," said she would have liked her official portrait "even more lost in the shadows, less specific, more impressionistic," but he added, "I think she understands why it is as it is."

The artist said the color of her hair, which he found has a "redder glint" than he had imagined, suggested "the pinky earth color that pervades the painting," which is

illuminated by "the late afternoon sun that fingerlicks her dress."

The pastel study on the *McCall's* cover is a virtual duplicate of the official White House oil and created a furor when Maxine Cheshire, a columnist for *The Washington Post*, secured a copy of the cover and thwarted the historical association's elaborate precautions to keep the oil hidden until the unveiling. A ceremony was ruled out, and the unveiling was advanced as a result.

As for the Presidential portrait, Mrs. Onassis laid down only one restriction, Mr. Shikler reported. "I don't want him done the way everybody does him—with that puffiness under the eyes and every shadow and crease magnified."

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While painting official White House portrait of the former Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy, Aaron Shikler also produced this informal portrait of the former First Lady. It and other Shikler studies are in current McCall's.