

**NJS Presents*****Museums, Archives, Artifacts, and Documents*****In This Issue:*****The Painting Techniques of the Simpson-Middleman Art Collaboration:******New Discoveries*****By Joseph W. Hammond****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v9i1.313>**

*Shortly after a lengthy article on the art partnership of Marshall S. Simpson (1900–1958) and Roslynn E. Middleman (1929–2003) appeared in the Summer 2022 issue of New Jersey Studies, one individual who owns three of their works contacted the author. Outlined below is the story of those paintings, which now brings to six the total number of original Simpson-Middleman abstract collaborations in their fully developed style that can be located today. Documentation that accompanied one of the paintings provides rare insight into how the unusual Simpson-Middleman team worked together to create a single composition.*

In 1958, a collector from Dallas, Texas, named Herbert H. Shore (1925–2000) purchased a painting by Simpson-Middleman titled *The Amboys*. It measures an unusual 7 3/4 inches high by 40 inches wide, is dated 1957 on the reverse, and is signed “Simpson-Middleman” in neat sans-serif lettering, along with their names in individual handwriting. The work depicts in abstraction Perth Amboy, New Jersey, in the foreground looking south toward South Amboy on the opposite side of the Raritan River, and at the point where the river flows into Raritan Bay. The vertical lines in the painting may represent the masts of sailboats, many of which are moored in this area during the summer months. Like other known works by Simpson-Middleman, the artists used a palette of subtle gray and white tones, which in this instance was enhanced with several areas of a brighter

light brown. *The Amboys* represents another late painting by Simpson-Middleman that applied abstraction to a landscape scene, similar in concept to *Sea Rain*, which was discussed in the previous article.<sup>1</sup> The buyer may have been attracted to the painting in a Dallas exhibit that included the work, as it is also inscribed “Texas/Heller” on the reverse, suggesting that it was sent there by John Heller (1906–1962), the New York gallery owner who represented and promoted Simpson-Middleman nationally.<sup>2</sup>



***The Amboys* by Simpson-Middleman, 1957, oil on masonite, 7 3/4 x 40 inches. Courtesy Andrew Shore, Rancho Mirage, California.**

In an effort to learn more about his acquisition, Herbert Shore corresponded with John Heller in July of 1958. Heller responded with a one-page letter on July 14 that provided brief biographies of Marshall Simpson and Roslynn Middleman, along with mention of where their work had been exhibited and which museums held examples of their paintings in their permanent collections. But Shore apparently wanted more information about how the unusual art team worked together. So, on September 5, Simpson-Middleman compiled a detailed description of their collaborative approach. This exceptional letter is transcribed in full below.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph W. Hammond, “A Convergence of Science and Art: Simpson-Middleman Paintings Featured in Boeing Advertisements from the 1950s,” *New Jersey Studies* (Summer 2022), 49–51. (<https://njs.libraries.rutgers.edu/index.php/njs/article/view/285/347>, retrieved 11/23/2022)

<sup>2</sup> As late as January of 1960, Simpson-Middleman were represented in an exhibit drawn from New York galleries that was held at the Student Center of Southern Methodist University in Dallas. *Dallas Morning News*, January 9, 1960, 7.

September 5, 1958

Dear Mr. Shore,

Mr. Heller has forwarded your letter of July 15 to us. He tells us that he has already sent you the biographical material and brochures you requested; however, he wishes us to write to you directly concerning our way of working.

Perhaps one of the questions we are most frequently asked is how two people can work on the same painting, since painting is generally thought of as the expression of an individual. Because we like to answer all questions honestly, and because that particular question is rather metaphysical, we usually answer that we do not know how we do it. Nevertheless, we can describe what we do.

First let us say that our painting begins in nature and by “nature” we mean everything there is, including human thought and feeling. We are more concerned with painting nature than we are with self-expression which, as a matter of fact, requires no art form.

We begin a painting with an “idea.” This “idea” may be touched off by almost anything—a clump of trees at dawn, the particular quality of light during an eclipse, the way electrons move, haze over industrial buildings, a description of some nebulosity in another galaxy, the moon reflected in water, the way rain falls, etc. Always it is some thing or event or idea that we found exciting and beautiful.

We begin by discussing our idea with each other, sometimes with words, usually with little sketches in pencil and paint until each of us knows what the other is thinking. From these little sketches we begin to design the form that will convey not only the quality of the idea but also the little twists that transfigure the idea, giving to it more of a sense of mystery and of our own wonder. At the same time we develop the color. After many small drawings and color notations, we arrive at a form which seems to us to be satisfactory. At this point we often do a fairly careful approximation of the painting. This color study is about twice the size of an ordinary postal card. We then begin the full size drawing on several sheets of tracing paper correcting and adjusting as we go along. Then the finished drawing is transferred to a primed masonite panel. Next, a palette is set, that is, we mix all, or almost all of the color and apply it to the appropriate areas. We work on a table rather than an easel. In this way we can both work on the panel at the same time. If the painting is very small, we alternate with one of us painting and the other one of us working at something else.

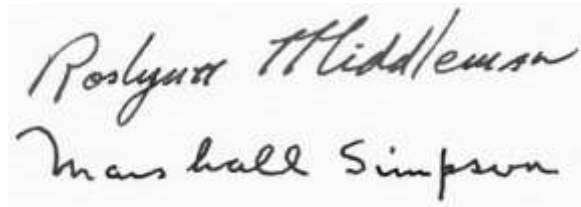
We have no set division of labor. Who does what depends on who feels like doing what. As a consequence, in retrospect, neither of us remembers who did what.

Should any difference of opinion arise anywhere along the way we usually settle it by trying both ideas and selecting the one that works better. After a certain point, a painting seems to paint itself, that is, it grows with a life of its own. It is at this point that we try to

keep out of the way of that growth. We then have the pleasure of watching something totally unexpected happen in a carefully controlled framework. It is the pleasure of creating a new unity where one never existed before.

We hope that this answers your question. Thank you for your interest. We should also like to say that we are pleased at being included in your collection.

Sincerely,<sup>3</sup>

A photograph of a handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored background. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first line reads "Roslynn Middleman" and the second line reads "Marshall Simpson".

The letter provides an unparalleled description of the process by which Marshall Simpson and Roslynn Middleman conceived a painting, worked out its details, and then executed the composition. This is a very rare window into their creative collaboration, only partial glimpses of which were available at the time the lengthy article mentioned above was written. Marshall Simpson passed away from heart disease on November 29, 1958, at the age of 58, only slightly more than two months after the letter was written.

Others from Dallas interested in art apparently also took notice of the distinctive abstract work of Simpson-Middleman. On March 11, 1961, prominent art collector and philanthropist Stephen S. Kahn (1901–2001) purchased one of their paintings from the John Heller Gallery in New York. It was titled *Jupiter*, cost \$125, and was further identified as number 5 in the series called *The Planets*, it being the fifth planet from the sun.<sup>4</sup> *Jupiter* is a small work, measuring only 8 1/2 inches by 12 1/2 inches. It came from the same series that depicted all then nine planets, as

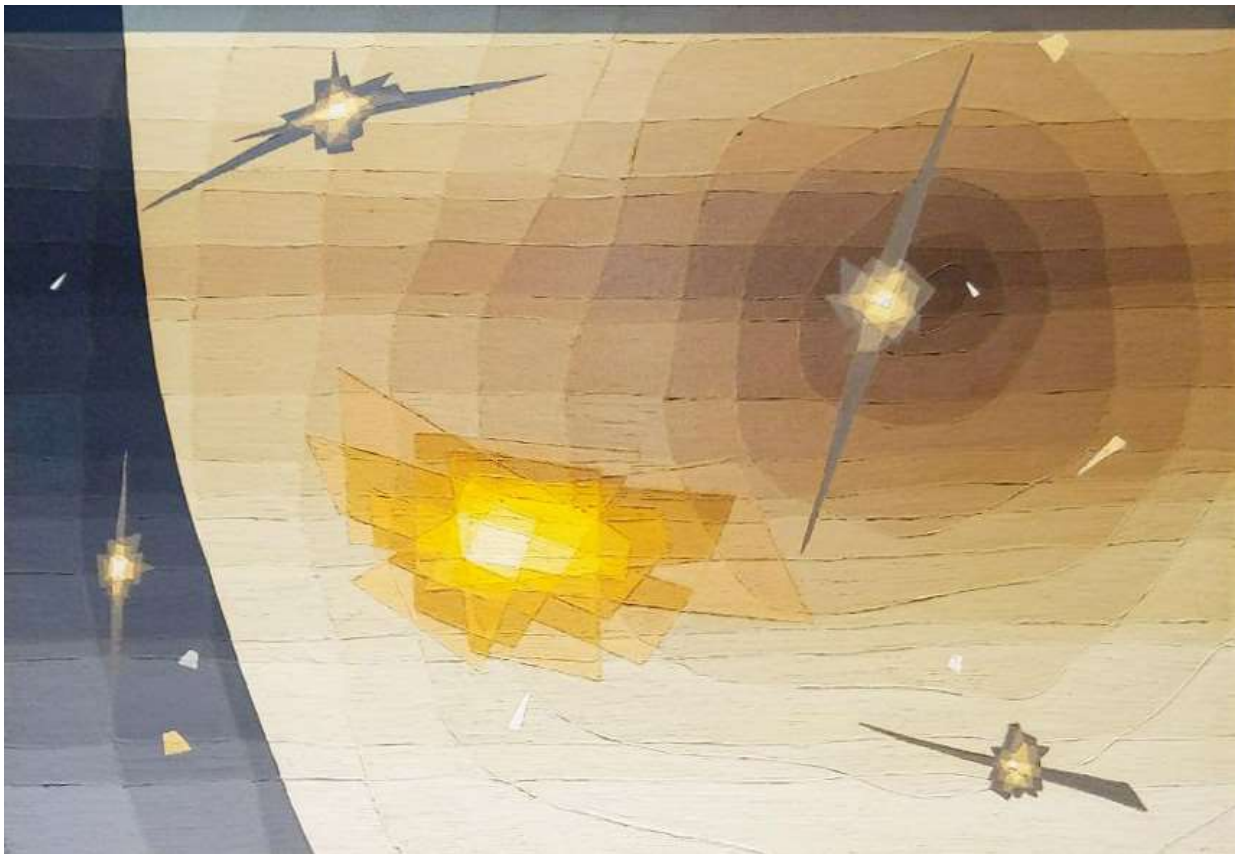
---

<sup>3</sup> Letter, Roslynn Middleman and Marshall Simpson to Herbert H. Shore, September 5, 1958. Courtesy Andrew Shore, Rancho Mirage, California.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen S. Kahn, Purchase Notes and Canceled Check, March 11, 1961. Courtesy Andrew Shore, Rancho Mirage, California.

did *Earth*, which had been purchased by the Boeing Company of Seattle, Washington, for use in their employment advertisements.<sup>5</sup>

*Jupiter* had been included in a Simpson-Middleman exhibit at the John Heller Gallery in New York that was held from December 18, 1956, through January 5, 1957.<sup>6</sup> The painting shows only a small portion of the gigantic planet with its distinctive red spot. What appear to be representations of Jupiter's moons look more like precursors of the space vehicles depicted years later in the Star Wars series of movies. *Jupiter* was among the very last Simpson-Middleman sales

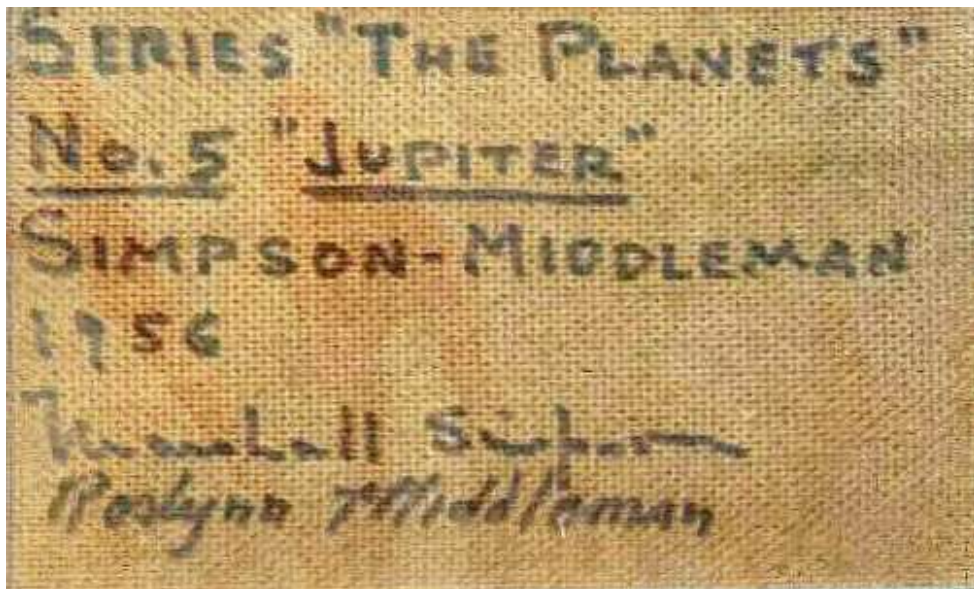


**Identified on the reverse as *Series "The Planets"/No. 5 Jupiter* and signed by Simpson-Middleman in their usual manner, 1956, oil on masonite, 8 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches. Exhibited at the John Heller Gallery, New York, New York, December 18, 1956–January 5, 1957; and at the Monmouth Arts Gallery, Red Bank, New Jersey, May 1961. Courtesy Andrew Shore, Rancho Mirage, California.**

<sup>5</sup> Hammond, *Op. Cit.*, 36–37, and 56.

<sup>6</sup> Exhibit Flyer, John Heller Gallery, New York, New York, Simpson-Middleman, December 18–January 5, 1956–57. Author's collection.

made by John Heller. In May of 1961, he sent his remaining inventory to a memorial exhibit on Marshall Simpson held in Red Bank, New Jersey. The lot included *Jupiter*, not yet shipped to Texas and credited in a handout as from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Stephen S. Kahn.<sup>7</sup> When the show closed, the residual works not sold were returned to Roslynn Middleman Smerilson and Gertrude Woodcock Simpson, Marshall's widow.<sup>8</sup> Stephen Kahn and his wife, Fannie Koenigsberg Kahn (1905–1996), were family friends of the Shores. In honor of his seventieth birthday on October 23, 1995, they gave *Jupiter* to Herbert.



**Inscriptions on the reverse of *Jupiter* showing the title and the ways in which Marshall Simpson and Roslynn Middleman typically signed their works. Courtesy Andrew Shore, Rancho Mirage, California.**

Following the deaths of Selma Epstein Shore in 1999, and her husband, Herbert, in 2000, the two Simpson-Middleman paintings passed to their son, Andrew Shore of Rancho Mirage, California. He has developed a great interest in this art collaboration. And to his good fortune, Andrew was able to acquire a third abstract Simpson-Middleman painting from the space and sky series he found on an internet art marketplace. The work is untitled, although signed on the reverse

---

<sup>7</sup> Monmouth Arts Gallery, Marshall Simpson Memorial Exhibition, including Simpson-Middleman Paintings, May 3 through May 20 [1961]. Author's collection.

<sup>8</sup> Hammond, *Op. Cit.*, 47–48.

and dated 1957. Measuring 28 1/4 inches by 18 1/2 inches, it is executed with the typical Simpson-Middleman palette of graduated gray and white tones with three small geometric areas of contrasting yellow. The composition features a transparent vertical mass floating in space that is illuminated by light emanating from a sun in the upper left corner of the panel.



**Untitled, but signed on the reverse by Simpson-Middleman and dated 1957, oil on masonite, 28 1/4 x 18 1/2 inches. Courtesy Andrew Shore, Rancho Mirage, California.**

As mentioned above, John Heller sent 14 remaining paintings to the Simpson memorial exhibit in 1961. Twelve of them were returned to Marshall's former partner, Roslynn Middleman Smerilson, when the show closed in late May. This impressive work, now separated from its title, may be one of those paintings, or it could have been sold by Heller in the five years he represented and promoted the creative duo. At any rate, it is an outstanding example of the Simpson-Middleman signature style and how together they created their meticulous geometric interpretations of the night sky and space.

The three Simpson-Middleman paintings owned by Andrew Shore contribute significantly to the visual appreciation of their work in abstraction. One example from *The Planets* series, an excellent composition from the space and night sky series, and a late landscape scene expand on our ability to examine their original artwork by increasing the number of paintings in their mature style that can be located today from three to six. The detailed 1958 letter from the artists to the owner's father, Herbert H. Shore, provides exceptional insight into the creative techniques of the unusual art team of Marshall S. Simpson and Roslynn E. Middleman.

*The author is greatly indebted to Andrew Shore of Rancho Mirage, California, for providing quality images of his three Simpson-Middleman paintings, plus scans of the original documentation that accompanies them, and allowing these new Simpson-Middleman discoveries to be published.*

*Joseph W. Hammond writes on New Jersey history topics from his retirement home in northern New Hampshire. His interests include decorative and fine arts, architecture, and social history. A resident of Freehold for more than 40 years, he has in the past served the Monmouth County Historical Association as director, consulting archivist, curator of museum collections, and director of collections. Hammond holds a BA in American history and civilization from Boston*



*University, and an MA in history museum studies from the Cooperstown Graduate Program of the State University of New York, College at Oneonta. He can be reached by email at [jwhammond@aol.com](mailto:jwhammond@aol.com).*