

Artist strives for greater self-expression



Jack Whittlesey, longtime area resident, is a successful full-time artist who likes to keep growing and improving his work.

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

Jack Whittlesey may never completely come to terms with his art. Maybe it's because he paints so well in a way that everyone can understand and many are willing to buy. In that sense his talent is both a curse and a blessing.

A native son of this metropolitan area, Whittlesey's artistic roots go back to the days of the Saarinens, Carl Milles, Zoltan Sepeshy and Marshall Fredericks at Cranbrook Academy of Art and many more at Yale University School of Fine Arts.

Whittlesey, married for 41 years to Gerda, the most loyal and supportive of all his fans, worked in General Motors styling doing product design until a couple of years ago.

In his mid-60s, he decided to get serious about his painting, something he has been doing all of his life, but more as avocation than vocation.

Now, it has top priority — and he asks himself what took him so long. It's the kind of life he's always wanted to lead.

"I studied with Marshall Fredericks (well-known Birmingham sculptor). I studied sculpture at Yale. I never really studied painting. It was a hobby when I was at GM."

THEN he recalled the day he was driving to Kingsville, Ontario, (he has done several watercolors of scenes in and near there) when he said to himself, "I'm gonna paint the rest of my life."

He has and still does a lot of commission work for metropolitan area business concerns.

He said National Bank of Detroit has 75 of his paintings in the executive offices and other places. Detroit Bank and Trust has a sizeable collection of his work.

Both Joe and Chuck Muer have his work as does Arthur Anderson Co., Ford Motor Co., Detroit Chamber of Commerce, Michigan Bell, Manufacturer's National Bank, General Motors, Bethlehem



Whittlesey's watercolor of a scene just west of Manitoulin Island, Ontario, shows the Canada shield (granite) and the summer home owned by Frances Langford, singer-movie star of the late '40s.

Staff photos by Mindy
Saunders

Steel, Pre-Header Division of Combustion Engine and the Buell Building.

Many of these are local scenes, Detroit landmarks, the boats on the river, the Ambassador Bridge, the Bob Lo boat, rural landscapes and an occasional group of game birds. Others are scenes inspired by trips to Capri, Virginia or northern Michigan and Ontario.

Because he works so much on commission, Whittlesey said having free time to paint to totally please himself, rather than a client, is a luxury he can hardly get used to, but is determined to try.

PAINTINGS which record landmarks such as the Detroit Club, the Detroit Yacht Club, Fort Street Presbyterian Church or the Hecker home on Woodward in Detroit, occupied by Smiley Brothers for many years, are carefully rendered with the tight control needed for successfully painting familiar scenes of historical significance.

A series he did on the historic landmarks of the Birmingham Bloomfield area, of which was displayed in the window of Stewart's Fabrics last month, also illustrate this colorful, but controlled approach.

Speaking of this latter series particularly, he said, "I went back and reviewed the work of Winslow Homer and some others and I studied Andrew Wyeth's work."

He paused for a moment as if wondering how to phrase his next thought, "I'm so used to pleasing the customer, it's hard to please myself — oh, you have to please yourself whatever you do, but I get new ideas and I'm still sorting things out."

AND THEN as he talks about his art, that statement begins to clarify. Whittlesey knows the beautiful, done, realistic paintings are an important

This abstract landscape (at left) is a recent Whittlesey painting which pleases the artist and suggests the path his work could take.

source of income. Admittedly, he does them extremely well, but his true love is a looser, more abstract approach, particularly landscapes and seascapes.

He recalled seeing a program on TV with a Canadian artist who spoke of "trying to lose the horizon line."

Whittlesey said, "I try to lose the horizon line, but I'm so used to doing landscapes that it's hard to change . . . I love abstract work. I like a lot of different kinds — it's like music in that respect."

"I'm painting commissions. In that sense, I'm commercial, but I'm not ashamed of that. So was Picasso (commercial)."

Whittlesey has one small watercolor that he did on board, on a spur of the moment, for himself. It is a rich colorful semi-abstract landscape.

It pleases him and neither he nor his wife, Gerda, want to part with it. It points to a direction he's like to go with his work. It has the freedom of expression which he enjoys.

"It's just a sketch," he says, "but I was thinking a lot more than when I do the realist."

He added with a shake of his head, "It's tough to be completely free."

ALL THROUGH the recession, Whittlesey has been busy with commissions. He figures now that building is picking up he will continue to be and that makes him happy.

But, in the back of his mind is the idea of the free, loose, impressionistic style which he truly enjoys and wants to keep working on.

As an artist, this unresolved desire will predictably keep him growing and changing — and for the truly creative person, that's the name of the game.

Whittlesey's work is handled by Allen Rubiner Gallery which will have it to show after the gallery moves to West Bloomfield next month.



Saying it with music Meadow Brook Festival turns 20

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

Appropriately, Michigan composer Dr. James Hartway was commissioned to write a piece to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Meadow Brook Music Festival.

Hartway's "Monuments" will have its world premiere at 8 p.m. Sunday at Baldwin Pavilion with Sixten Ehrling conducting the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

As he spoke about having Ehrling as the conductor, Hartway said, "This is a plus for me — one of his strong points is 20th century music. . . I've never met the man, so I have no idea what his reaction will be."

And yes, of course, Hartway will be at the rehearsal. "Try to keep me away," he said with a quick smile.

Hartway, associate professor in the Wayne State University music department, is a busy composer as well as teacher. For the last six summers he has been doing commissions.

"Monuments" is a one movement work for large orchestra and percussion. The composition, 11 minutes in length, is dedicated to the men and women in both musical and administrative positions who have been associated with Meadow Brook Music Festival. It was commissioned by festival director Stuart Hyde with assistance from Michigan Council for the Arts and the American Music Center.

HARTWAY said, "It is meant to be a strong, substantial piece that's quite straightforward." . . . He said it isn't avant garde in the way some contemporary music is,

separating musicians and audience and musicians and composer, with nobody excepting the composer understanding the music.

"Now," said Hartway, "there is a return to the mainstream, but it is not going to sound like a 19th century piece. This has melody, rhythm and harmony that's understandable, but it's also avant garde, so it's a blend — definitely it's a new movement."

There was a time that as a teacher of composition, I wouldn't allow my students, or myself, to write in too functional, too romantic kind of style. . . I say me, but that includes teachers all across the country. There was a box on that kind of writing. Now the box and the taboos have been removed."

Hartway said he felt the move into the avant garde was important. It served a purpose and changed the current approach to composition even though the pendulum has swung back to the acceptance of the more traditional forms.

"I must admit I was a pretty active member of that avant garde at one time," he added.

AND WHILE Hartway is excited about the premiere of "Monuments," he is tough enough to know there's still a long road ahead to have it become part of the standard repertoire. "If you really want to get down to it, it's not the first premiere that's difficult. It's the second and third — to make it what ASCAP calls a "re-composable piece."

But, even then, he said, a work is not assured of immortality, for the composer has to constantly push to get his works played.

He said he sends out 30-40 copies of his scores with a tape, for conductors and artistic directors to see and listen to, "What if they need something as a pop machine. . . It occurs to me after being in business why so many composers have become famous after they died. To become widely recognized, a composition needs gigantic exposure. Pieces of this ('Monuments') genre generally don't get that."

Then, he paused for a second or two and said slowly, "But, this wasn't written to make a bundle. It's not to take the money and run kind of deal."

Hartway, a versatile composer, has written many different kinds of works. In 1975 his "Seven Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" won the Young Musicians Foundation of Los Angeles Composition Award and was the winner of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's American Music Composition prize.

"Three Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" has just been recorded and released by Advanced Recordings.

HIS "Motor City Sequence" for jazz band was premiered at the 1980 Montreaux International Jazz Festival in Montreaux Switzerland. It has since been recorded and choreographed for performance by the Nonce Dance Ensemble.

In 1981 Hartway directed seven performances of his "Etonness" for the Harbinger Dance Company at Music Hall Theater.

In 1982 the Detroit Symphony Orchestra performed his concerto for jazz quartet and orchestra, "Cityscapes," and earlier, this year his mul-

ti-media work, "The Ninth Circle," was premiered at the Bushnell Performing Arts Series.

His "Panfare for a Sacred Occasion," commissioned for the 150th anniversary of the Archdiocese of Detroit was given its world premiere by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

Hart, who served as artist-in-residence for the Livonia Secondary Schools and project director of Young Audiences, also wrote a 50-lecture series on the History of Jazz which is currently being shown on cable TV.

He has received many national and regional honors and awards. Although many leading symphony orchestras are interested in performing his work, Hartway doesn't get excited until a firm commitment is given.

Felix Resnik has programmed a Hartway work, "Cityscapes" for the May concert by the Birmingham Bloomfield Symphony Orchestra (formerly the West Bloomfield Symphony) at Seaholm High School.

Tonight's 8 p.m. program which opens the Meadow Brook Festival season will be a repeat of the first festival program 20 years ago. Maestro Ehrling, the festival's first artistic director, will conduct — the Act I Prelude to Wagner's "Meistersinger," the Brahms Concerto in A for Violin and Cello, Op. 103 with concertmaster Gordon Staples and principal cello, Italo Babin as soloists, and the Schubert Symphony No. 2 in D, Op. 48.

The grounds open at 6 p.m. for picnicking or dining on Trumbull Terrace. For ticket information, call 377-2010.



James Hartway said that, like many others in the arts, the composer has to get into the mainstream and push his own work if it is to be widely heard and accepted.