



Wesley J. Wagner - *Music and Fine Arts*

Walk down a hall at the Oglebay Institute headquarters or turn a corner inside Peterson Hospital and you might find before you an example of the work of Wesley J. Wagner, painter, artist and educator.

According to the committee that nominated him to the Wheeling Hall of Fame, Wagner's "gifts are evident in the quality of his works. His greatness is apparent in his ability to share his genius and his quest for learning with others. His body of work numbers in the thousands and his paintings hang in hundreds of homes and many businesses locally, nationally and internationally... In his more than 50-year career, he has captured and documented on canvas the local and regional landmarks of our developing community. He has recorded images of rural life, historic structures and industrial sites.

"His skilled and artistic eye has enabled everyone who views his work to appreciate first hand the essence of our city's history and greatness. At the heart of his artistic soul is not just a practicing artist but also a teacher. Since 1952, Wes has taught young and old continuously in elementary, secondary and college classrooms and in non-traditional settings, including camps, prisons and nursing homes. Wes is an advocate for nurturing the creative spirit he believes dwells within each person.

"He is a mentor to artists and teachers throughout the country. His reward is in the knowledge that each of his students has grown from his expertise, kindness, character and desire to inspire others. Those gifts then have been carried to new generations," the committee declared.

From 1952 to 1962, Wagner was art instructor at Wheeling Country Day School and art specialist with Oglebay Institute. From 1962 to 1990, he taught many classes for Oglebay Institute, including OI extension classes in Barnesville, Woodsfield and New Martinsville. He also conducted many workshops and classes at varied places that included Camp Walden, Mass.; West Virginia Penitentiary at Moundsville; Cedar Lakes; Parkersburg; Wheeling Jesuit University and West Liberty State College Elderhostel.

Wagner taught full-time at the college level for 25 years. He began teaching art, including drawing, painting and two-dimensional design, at Bethany College in 1963 and retired as associate professor of art in 1988. The college awarded him an honorary doctorate of letters degree when he staged a Retrospective exhibition of his works in September 1994. At that time, he also was presented the Distinguished West Virginian Award from Gov. Gaston Caperton for outstanding achievement and meritorious service.

While he works in varied media, including collage, pastel and oil, Wagner has become best known for his talents as a watercolorist. He has had 17 one-man shows and more than 40 group shows in several states, winning many awards. He has been active with many community organizations, most recently as one of the 35 founding artist members of Artworks Around Town.

Interested in music, he sang for 30 years in the Edgwood Evangelical Lutheran Church choir. He played jazz drums during his Army days and later in a Wheeling group known as the Rhythm Kings Orchestra. An accomplished organist, he has played for Oglebay Institute events and is a member and past president of the Wheeling Hammond Organ Society. He is a past co-chairman of the Wheeling Symphony Orchestra Viennese Ball. He also has been a member of the Wheeling Civic Center Murals Committee, Wheeling Rotary Club, Oglebay Mansion Committee, Blue Pencil Club, Bethany Faculty Club (past president), American Legion, Victorian Wheeling Society, Friends of Wheeling, Wheeling Hall of Fame Board, Historical Restoration Investment Association, International Torch Club (past president), the Forum Club and the Visual Arts Committee for the West Virginia Arts and Humanities Council. Wagner also played tennis and won several tournaments in his younger years and was an avid pool player.

Wagner was born Nov. 24, 1917, at Ambridge, Pa., one of the five children of the late August John and Amelia Henrietta Gable Wagner. In 1937, the family moved to Wheeling where Wagner graduated from Triadelphia High School in 1937 and joined the U.S. Army in 1942.

After receiving his Army training at Camp Chaffee, Ark., Wagner was transferred to Camp Campbell, Ky., in preparation for shipping out for combat duty with his unit, Company B, 19th Armored Infantry Battalion, 14th Armored Division. However, during a maneuver, a 75 mm artillery shell accidentally exploded about 20 yards from his group. One soldier was killed and five others were injured, Pfc. Wagner "critically" with leg and arm wounds.

Since childhood, Wagner would draw constantly. While recovering from his wounds, he met artist Virginia McCall, who encouraged him to attend The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia where he was a student from 1947 to 1951. He also studied "Traditions of Painting" at the Barnes Foundation, a prestigious Philadelphia center for the arts. He returned to Wheeling and began his painting career in a studio above a garage on National Rd.

In 1958, Wagner married his first wife, Mary Lou Weible Wagner, who died in 1976, and the couple had one daughter, Leslie Wagner Hanson. Wagner married his second wife, Ruth K. Mangus Wagner, in 1982. Wagner's family includes five stepchildren: Steven Weible, Linda Weible Yertzell, Jeffrey Mangus, Randall Mangus, and Timothy Mangus; and 10 grandchildren.