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STEVE RINGMAN/  
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*Alden Mason, who died at  
93, liked wearing a fedora.*

## Alden Mason lived, painted with a flourish

### OBITUARY |

By LYNDA V. MAPES  
*Seattle Times staff reporter*

Alden Mason, a vivid splash of color in the Northwest art world, is dead at 93.

Born July 14, 1919, in Everett, Mr. Mason lived, studied and worked in Seattle and the Puget Sound region all his life, but his work was celebrated far beyond the horizons of the Northwest, with exhibits in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. His paintings hang in museums, galleries and private collections throughout the country.

Mr. Mason died Wednesday after a bout with flu and pneumonia. But he kept his sense of purpose to the end, said Claudia Mason, the third

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### NOTED PAINTER HAD A FLAIR FOR LIVING

#### Innovative Seattle artist dies at 93

of his ex-wives, who was at his bedside when he passed away.

"Even when breathing was his only job, he had that same expression of earnestness," she said. Yet Mr. Mason also lived richly in a spirit of adventure and wild abandon, she said, a spirit that also infused his work.

Mr. Mason is perhaps best known for his so-called Burpee Garden series, painted in the 1970s, and named for the seed catalogs that enthralled him as a child growing up on a farm in the Skagit Valley.

"They were big, glorious abstractions, with transparent, very thinned-down oil paint," said Sheila Farr, a Seattle author, arts writer and former art critic for The Seattle Times. The paintings were acclaimed and catapulted his career into the New York art world. But Mr. Mason paid a price for the works, as fumes wafting up from the thinners and paint sickened him. "He had invented this really unique style of painting, but he had to give it up," Farr said.

Mr. Mason took it in stride, Farr said, and went on to invent something new once more: squeezing acrylic paint out of mustard and ketchup bottles, right onto



STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

In a file photo from 2009, Alden Mason is shown surrounded by a few of his pieces that were being hung for a show at Foster/White Gallery in Seattle.

**“My paintings are a private world of improvisation, spontaneity, humor and pathos, exaggeration and abandon.”**

ALDEN MASON

canvas. Enthralled with the squiggly lines that looked like drawing but were paint, Mr. Mason had hit his next big thing.

That was Mr. Mason: inventive, and always pushing on to something new, whether it was travels to far-off lands to experience native art and culture, or try a new approach in his work.

The influence of nature, native art forms and the free-form artwork of children infused much of his work. "My paintings are a private world of improvisation, spontaneity, humor and pathos, exaggeration and

abandon," Mr. Mason wrote in an artist's statement for Foster/White Gallery, which has represented him since 2002. "Old-fashioned emotional involvement is still my main priority in painting."

He lived life with the same intensity with which he painted, recalls Phen Huang, director of Foster/White. She remembered traveling home from the Skagit Valley with Mr. Mason and watching his fascination with a rainbow as it bloomed across the sky. "These were things he would really revel in, not just notice. He would immerse himself in the experi-

ence of being there," Huang said.

Mr. Mason's work also once was at the center of one of Washington's great public-art dramas, when after commissioning Mr. Mason and Michael Spafford to paint murals for the state Capitol building in Olympia in 1981, some legislators later decided they didn't like the works and ordered them first draped, then taken down. The works eventually were installed at Centralia College in a misadventure that cost the public about \$500,000 by the time it was over.

Mr. Mason earned his



LAURA KOMADA

Alden Mason is perhaps best known for his Burpee Garden series.

Master of Fine Arts from the University of Washington, where he inspired generations of students, some of whose fame would eventually eclipse even his own.

"Alden Mason was my teacher, my mentor and my friend," said artist Chuck Close, a student of Mr. Mason's from 1960-62. "I consider him to be the greatest painter to come out of the Pacific Northwest, for me even greater than Mark Tobey or Morris Graves."

A flirt and a bit of a dandy, Mr. Mason invariably turned out with his trademark Fedora tilted just so, neckerchief knotted, and always, no matter the occasion, blue-jeans, Claudia Mason said. An avid swing dancer, he also was known to dance on the tables at the Skagit Valley Grange Hall.

Mr. Mason was "bubbly, funny, energetic," said former student-turned-gallery-

owner Greg Kucera, who was Mr. Mason's primary dealer from 1983 to 1996. "He approached life with a real sense of risk and very little trepidation. He would go off and live with the villagers in some Bronze Age tribe in New Guinea, or some God-forsaken place in Mexico to see birds, and would be completely OK with eating yams for two weeks or getting dysentery, that would be no reason not to go back.

"He would go off with the thrill of a small child, and no fear, and he approached his paints with that same sense of risk. He was never somebody who was content to be bored."

Mr. Mason is survived by a son, Roger, of Santa Ana, Calif., a sister, Virginia Haskins, of Mount Vernon, and a stepson, Andrew Thomas, of Seattle.

Lynda V. Mapes: 206-464-2736 or [lmapes@seattletimes.com](mailto:lmapes@seattletimes.com)