

Seattle Met

RIP

Remembering Alden Mason (1919–2013)

The prolific Washington artist, who painted well into his 90s, passed away today.

By Sheila Farr

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Alden Mason (1919-2013), a lover of life. Pictured at Foster/White Gallery, July 2009. Image: Foster/White

Alden Mason died this morning and a big splash of joy disappeared from Seattle's art world.

Mason was a gleeful motor-mouth raconteur who kept painting into his nineties and never stopped retelling the legendary tales of his long career. Hunched over in a wheelchair last year, hands gnarled and shaky, Mason was still chuckling over his past adventures and misadventures, which included trips to Papua New Guinea, Peru, Mexico, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Kenya, Australia. The exotic birds and eye-zapping colors he encountered became the stuff of his paintings. "I always wanted to see what was in the next place," he said.



In a way, that's the story of his life. Born in Everett in 1919 and raised in the fields of Fir Island, Mason learned about the natural world along the banks of the Skagit River. He studied cartooning and later, at UW, dabbled in entomology before wandering into a life-drawing class where a glance at the nude model convinced him to switch majors. Mason painted landscapes at first, but hit his stride in the 1970s with the glorious transparent gem-colored abstractions of his "Burpee Garden Series," named for the seductive seed packages festooned with flowers. Later, sick from long exposure to solvent fumes, Mason had to reinvent his technique in a less toxic medium. He did it with flair, switching to thick, squiggly, squeeze-bottle-applied acrylics.

Alden Mason, *George Doesn't Eat Red Meat*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 42 × 36 in.

As an instructor at UW from 1949–1981, Mason left his mark on generations of Northwest artists, among them Roger Shimomura and Gene Gentry McMahon. His most famous student, Chuck Close, remained a lifelong fan and friend, calling Mason, "one of the most generous, giving, open people I've ever come in contact with." Another student, Greg Kucera, later became his art dealer. But for Mason, the next place always beckoned, and he switched galleries a number of times over the years (eventually settling at Foster/White). He was married several times, too, had girlfriends, and ruefully blamed his wandering eye for failed relationships.



Alden Mason, *Warm Blusher*, 1974, oil on canvas, 70 × 82 in.

The low point of Mason's professional life came in the 1980s, when he and fellow UW professor Michael Spafford were commissioned to paint grand murals for the Washington state Capitol building. Even though lawmakers had approved the designs, a few politicians decided they didn't like the finished artworks. After years of bitter and sometimes insulting public debate, the murals were first draped and finally removed, at great expense. The whole debacle cost taxpayers more than half a million dollars and left both artists disheartened.

Mason soon bounced back, though, and headed off for the next place. That's how he was. He loved to paint, to travel, go bird-watching and fly-fishing. He loved to flirt and dance crazy-wild. He loved to make people laugh. He was 93 years old when he took off for good.

Good-bye, Alden. Happy trails.