

A Lifetime of Art

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By Suzanna Parikh

The last time artist Alden Mason painted was two weeks ago. Considering the artist and retired UW art professor just celebrated his 92nd birthday, this is a feat.



92-year-old artist Alden Mason sits in front of his work displayed at the Foster/White gallery.
Photo credit: Karlie Roland

Like a true gentleman, Mason even tipped his hat to the crowd as they sang him "Happy Birthday" at his party this year. For the past four years, the Foster/White Gallery, which features the artist, has planned a party for Mason's birthday with a large gathering of friends, students and fans.

This year's party was where one of Mason's biggest fans, Wendy Alden, was able to meet the artist.

Alden was struck by Mason's painting and a desire to meet the artist after driving down to the Seattle Art Museum from her home in Vancouver, B.C. She drove down again a few weeks later, but this time to the Foster/White Gallery in Pioneer Square for a chance to meet the artist behind the masterpiece. "Being with Alden was a little akin to being with my dad," she said. "The feeling I had for Alden was the same kind of admiration and respect."

Even at his age, the artist is as fashionable as ever; Mason is known for his hats and always wearing a colorful handkerchief around his neck. He is young at heart - still painting and flirting, telling stories and calling staff members at the Foster/White Gallery by nicknames.

Mason seems to be at home in the gallery, speaking happily with the staff as they ask him what he'd like to name one of his latest paintings. With a smile, he automatically replies, "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," before even glancing at the painting. The painting had nothing to do with the Arabian tale,

but the name stuck. "He's just sweet. He's a positive-outlook kind of guy," said Phen Huang, director of the Foster/White Gallery. "He's very encouraging, and I think that's why people love him as a teacher and as a friend. He likes to tell silly jokes and flirt. He's got a good, strong life force."



The 92-year-old artist still has avid fans. During the interview, a fan approached Mason, wanting to finally meet the artist whose work she admired. He never seemed to tire of banter, and the fan was delighted when he invited her to visit him at his Ballard studio where he still paints often.

Mason puts himself in his painting as the man wearing the hat. The painting on the right represents him and his adventures of growing up on a farm.

Photo credit: Karlie Roland

Despite his dedication to painting, Mason hasn't been the same since he fell in Mexico six years ago. It's harder for him to hold a paint brush, and he has to be driven to his studio in Ballard. "You have to be stubborn and never give up," Mason said, and he certainly follows his own advice with a fierce determination.

The Pacific Northwest artist has been painting since he was a 17-year-old during the Great Depression, doing whatever it took to get art supplies. "It was the Depression, and I trapped muskrats in order to buy art materials," Mason said. "They traded, believe it or not."

He loves sharing stories from his youth, and he is a gifted storyteller with a sharp memory that belies his age. "My whole life is crazy," Mason said. Judging from his stories, this is not an overstatement. He once domesticated a beaver that got caught in his muskrat trap, he is the mentor of successful artist Chuck Close, and his ex-wife proposed to him last month, just to name a few of the stories he shared.

As for the art Mason creates, he uses his so-called "crazy" life experiences to continue his storytelling on canvas. "The Burpee paintings, for example - everybody loves those," Mason said. The Burpee Garden series, his most famous, took its name from the Burpee seed-company catalog because the oil paint looked cellular, almost like a seed. "I like them too. If I didn't like them, that would be a problem."

Unfortunately, the toxicity of the oil paint materials used to create the paintings seriously affected Mason's health. He started to lose his balance and had to find a new, less harmful medium. This has happened a few times throughout his career, causing him to change his supplies from oil to acrylic to his current medium, watercolor. Mason's paintings have been shown at more than 100 exhibitions, including one recently at the Seattle Art Museum, which had an installation spanning almost his entire career.

Huang attributes his success to the eye-catching power of his art, with paintings that she said draw viewers in from across the room. "He more often is seeking the freedom that little kids have with drawing," Huang said. "So there's an unconscious aspect to the drawing, and a freedom that isn't necessarily true for when we're adults."

Greg Kucera, director and curator of the Greg Kucera Gallery in Pioneer Square, has known Mason since about 1975, when he was Mason's student at the UW. He then worked for Mason in the evenings and eventually represented the artist, helping him to sell his work. "He would say, 'Oh, you gotta come by the studio tonight. I just made my best painting ever,'" Kucera said. "Completely disregarding that he made the same phone call the previous week and the week before that. So that became sort of an ongoing joke. Whatever he's working on is always the best painting he's ever done."

Mason said that, during his time as a student at the UW, he won all of the possible awards for his watercolor paintings. The UW School of Art hired Mason to teach almost immediately after his graduation. As a professor for 32 years, Mason gave students freedom to express their creativity. "He's very enthusiastic and very encouraging of all the freedoms of working with materials," Kucera said. "He was all about 'Just try it, see if it works, experiment.'"

Alden finds Mason's career as both a professor and painter remarkable, since he was able to balance both jobs for more than three decades, until eventually retiring to focus on painting full-time. She thinks that his determination presents an important lesson for students, and hopes to regenerate interest in the artist.

"For Alden to be a really good artist, well-known, and obviously selling pieces of art throughout his teaching career, that speaks to a great deal of determination and passion about being an artist," Alden said. "And he's still that person no matter how old he gets. He will always be that passionate artist inside himself."

Reach reporter Suzanna Parikh at arts@dailyuw.com.