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A legend in his own time: Beloved artist Charles McGee hits new heights

Michael H. Hodges / The Detroit News

Press Charles McGee on the origins of his artistic obsessions, and he's likely to take you back to that ax handle.

McGee was 9, and still working with his grandfather on a sharecropper's plot in South Carolina, when one day the ax broke.

"I just felt I could fix it," says the longtime Detroiter, now 84, "and my grandfather let me. From that moment on, I carved all the new ax handles."

From such humble beginnings, McGee fashioned a life that would ultimately make him one of Michigan's foremost artists, and one of the state's most beloved. A longtime teacher, his courtesy toward and encouragement of younger artists have become the stuff of legend.

And some 40 years ago, when African-American artists were blocked from many galleries, McGee pulled together Detroit's first group show of black artists, and then founded his own gallery to promote black and white artists alike.

Not bad for a guy who didn't start school till he was 10.

At an age when most careers are long over, McGee -- with pieces at the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History -- is still working at the top of his powers.

Just two months into his year as the first Kresge Eminent Artist -- a \$50,000 prize awarded by the Troy-based foundation of the same name -- plans are in the works for a large installation at Wayne State University. He's also wrestling with a layered collage slowly taking shape in his unheated studio across from Detroit's Marygrove College.

But back to that ax.

"That was the beginning of my understanding," says McGee, speaking one snowy morning in his Rosedale Park kitchen, dressed in black wool cap and a heavy gray vest, "my first introduction to my abilities."

A new life in Michigan

McGee's mother had tuberculosis, and was hospitalized for much of his youth. So McGee came to Michigan to live with his aunt and uncle in 1934.

The budding artist's focus emerged early, spurred by a very practical concern.

He couldn't help but notice that an artistically talented pal in elementary school got special treatment from the teacher.

"He would skip a class and make art," McGee says, "and get away with it. Because he was that good. And I decided I wanted some of those favors, too."

So the young McGee buckled down, and soon found himself in the same privileged position. Eventually, he morphed into something like a resident artist.

"I got to be the art guru," he recalls, "until my uncle died in 10th grade. Then I had to go to work to help my aunt."

Life accelerated from there. McGee joined the Marines, and served in the occupation of Japan at the end of World War II. Once back in Detroit, he used the GI Bill to enroll in the old Detroit Society of Arts & Crafts -- now the College for Creative Studies. With a full-time job, it took him 10 years to get through. "It was such a labor of love," he says of his studies, "I didn't even know it was work."

McGee was single-minded, deliberately seeking out no-account jobs that would leave him time and energy for his art, before he finally landed in teaching.

"I would get a menial job -- anything to free my art," he says, "to make sure that whatever I did, I didn't have to kiss butts to do it. You know what I mean?"

Styles across the board

The Kresge Eminent Artist award was created with CCS to honor a Michigan artist who, as foundation President Rip Rapson says of McGee, "has selflessly contributed to the artistic growth of others, and who creates art of the first order."

Stylistically, McGee's adult work ranges from the primitive to the utterly abstract, from the color-suffused to canvases composed of tangled black lines bristling with energy.

He is, in many respects, an artistic pragmatist, with an allergy to what he calls "isms."

It doesn't matter whether work is representational -- that is, a recognizable object -- or abstract. "If it's good," McGee says, "it's just darned good. If not, its energy is lethargic, and it doesn't work."

The current project consuming McGee is a 5-by-10-foot painted collage, slowly taking shape on the floor of his studio, surrounded by neat piles of exotic fabric that may, or may not, get integrated into the work.

He's also built the mock-up for an enormous assemblage, "United We Stand," that will go in front of Wayne State University's Old Main whenever the funding comes through.

Pushing black artists

Beyond the hundreds of exhibitions of his work over the years, McGee organized "Seven Black Artists," the first all-black group show at the Detroit Artists Market in 1968. For a time, he ran his own business, Gallery 7, helping to promote dozens of artists, black and white alike. His now-closed Charles McGee Art School gave free lessons to legions of Detroiters while, at a higher level, he taught at Eastern Michigan University for 18 years.

Jennifer Clark, an artist living in Half Moon Bay outside San Francisco, studied with McGee 20 years ago at EMU and calls him one of the "really significant" people in her life.

"Charles is very much one of those people who lifts you up," Clark says.

"He's very encouraging, in a way that inspires people to find their own voice.

"I not only learned a lot about art from Charles, but a lot about life -- in the way you look at things, the 'honing of vision,' as he would always call it."

Now retired from college teaching, he still gives weekly art classes at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center.

"Not only is Charles very talented," says Valerie Mercer, DIA curator of African-American art, "but he's influenced generations of artists through his example, his dedication and commitment to his craft."

An easy choice to honor

As far as the Kresge jury was concerned, says juror Cledie Collins Taylor -- owner of Detroit's Arts Extended Gallery -- McGee's mix of artistry and outreach to young artists put him easily over the top.

The three judges, who also included former Cranbrook Academy of Art director Gerhardt Knodel and art historian Dennis Alan Nawrocki, all voted for McGee, and then, says Taylor, "These three old people jumped up and high-fived one another."

In discussing his prize, McGee characteristically turns the spotlight from himself toward the wider community, noting that its real value is the encouragement it can give to younger artists -- that somebody out there is paying attention, and ready to reward excellence.

Still, anyone who's dealt with McGee knows he's no pushover.

That sets Taylor laughing. She admits that in negotiations to get McGee's work into her gallery, she

found herself repeating, "Why sure, baby," to any conditions he laid down.

"One does not argue with Charles," she says. "He has a very clear notion of where he's going. Charles was always the complete artist, from the bone out."

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