

WISCONSIN ICONS...FOR REAL? **A Gathering of Nominees**

The questions I pose, probably already answered by hundreds of academicians and art historians, are these: What makes a work of art an icon? (*For that matter, what makes anything iconic?*) AND...are there artists and art objects associated with WI that are icons? I am looking for examples and I ask you, the readers, to send me suggestions of artists and art objects related to Wisconsin that you think are or should be icons. Please send emails to saganguy@aol.com with the subject line noted "icons".

These men and women and their creations should be viewed as *highly significant within some larger context, in some way superior to any similar or general examples, perhaps unique and certainly memorable*. An already established reputation, even if only local, can be an element lifting a name to iconic status.

As working artists we don't often seriously analyze what happens to create an iconic reputation. We are busy with our own professional and business careers. And, frankly, we cannot gain the perspective in terms of the historical and contemporary art culture to know what of our own creation and time influences fellow minds and remains in the historical record. Objectivity is hard to find.

Specific Examples for Comparison...an Iconic Sculpture and One Unknown.

If you have background in the art history of the 20th C. you will recognize the Romanian, Constantin Brancusi, and his iconic bronze, "*Bird in Space*" circa 1923. It is a must see for anyone concerned or fascinated by art abstraction since 1910, and it stands as one of the premiere examples of 20th C. Modernist sculpture in the world.

For purposes of comparison of impact, ideas, reputation and success with the *Bird in Space*, let's consider another abstract bronze, *Pegasus*, made by a noted Wisconsin artist, Dean Meeker. Brancusi's piece is a world wide known icon while Meeker's is barely known even in WI. While the *Bird* appears in almost every art history book, the *Pegasus* has not gained any publicity, even locally. It simply hasn't been seen or discussed.

Dean Meeker, who passed away in 2002, remains a highly respected Wisconsin based artist, a professor, who taught for decades at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Much of his abstract work in prints, paintings and sculpture were derived from figural objects and creatures. About 1960 Dean created *Pegasus* based upon the mythological flying horse which we have all seen represented in some form or another...from ancient images to Disney's *Fantasia*.

Both *Bird in Space* and *Pegasus* are dealing with flight and both are derived from recognizable creature shapes. Both bronzes are of a bright color and finish and while the greatest dimension of *Pegasus* is smaller than the *Bird*, because of its broader horizontal width it is no less impressive. Both were unique invented abstract forms, not merely following closely studied preexisting examples. What makes them so different in impact and history? *Timing, history, location and publicity*.

Timing, History, Location and Publicity

Brancusi and *Bird in Space* were part of the early Abstraction “Movement” of the early 20th C., Brancusi gaining a reputation in Europe and America by his associations and early exposure to important and influential artists, critics and collectors. He was represented in America with the 1913 Armory Exhibit in New York, and the public continued to be exposed to his progressive work, along with others who have remained in the public eye. thru art history books.

Brancusi was there during the beginnings of Abstraction, and from our prospective he was a pioneer. Due to circumstances, his vision and interpretation, he was established among the “greats” during an exciting period of art history. He was a man of his time, a model among other abstractionists, and one who was extolled and promoted by his contemporaries. He made it into the history books and *Bird in Space*, by its own merits, became the premiere sculpture by his hand. It fit into a time when not only abstraction was evolving, but when interest in speed, streamlining and flight, interpreted in both fine art and industrial design shaping, were very public topics.

In comparison, Dean Meeker *et al* came into the art culture long after such Brancusi and *Bird in Space* were already recognizable as icons. By the time he established himself as a highly accomplished and unique talent, abstraction was no longer sensational in the eyes art enthusiasts, historians, and much of the public. Dean was not present in avant garde of the influential art world, not in New York, LA, London or Paris. Despite his skills and singular vision, like so many other artists, he was not garnering the attention of the most notable of critics and art historians, and despite a career that many 20th C. artists would have loved to experience, Meeker did not make a wave in a “new” form of expression...not a great impact in the national or international scene. However, his influence on his students and the example of his still important career nonetheless lifts him to an important stature.

Even though I, as collector and author, think that in an aesthetic sense *Pegasus* rivals *Bird in Space*, the sculpture remains unknown, never having achieved iconic status even regionally. While *Pegasus* recently emerged at a Chicago auction of the Meeker estate, that sale of Meeker's work was not witnessed nor reported by a class of authors or collectors that would lift Dean's reputation to a higher level. *(This particular bronze did sell for a higher figure than most of the other sculptures in the sale, so comparing one Meeker to another, this one did get more attention.)*

In terms of timing and good luck, we do not all participate in a wholly fresh progressive art movement. Dean and his WI contemporaries usually did not get a national reputation by “shaking things up” or impacting the art world. He did not get established as iconic in the emerging styles of Minimalism, Pop, Op, New expressionism, New Realism or other mid to late 20th Century classifications. He was talented, skilled and hard working, and while his work was progressive to an extent, it did not awaken enough interest with the national art intelligentsia or mass public.

And it must be recognized that our individual tastes and histories form the direction of our creative output. *We are not all looking for or interested in being part of the avant garde* if it does not relate enough to our individual experience and goals. The heart and soul may have a tighter grip on our inner life than the need to seek fame by glomming on to some less interesting but topical expression.

Over Stated But True...Location, Location, Location

Dean Meeker can serve as a Wisconsin artist example of someone who you “might” consider a regional icon. He was a professor in the Midwest, so in terms of physical environment, like many other talented artists, gaining the attention of the influential media and taste makers from major art centers was difficult. Reporting about artists in the Midwest would usually require that those artists make inroads into greater population and media centers. Some Midwest based artists certainly did, and some moved from the Midwest to find a place where they might gain stronger attention and a position in art history. Dean did have important exhibits outside of WI, but the impact was not long lived.

So, despite the lyrical, skilled and imaginative nature of one of his most successful sculptures, *Pegasus*, and others by his hand, Dean has not yet achieved a broad reputation built outside the limited sphere in which he was and still is known. Greater knowledge of Dean and others like him will only be built thru the efforts of estate heirs and regional venues that recognize their talent, until...maybe someday...attention might be gained in some public setting that stirs great interest. *An unfortunate fact, common to many, is that heirs of artists and regional venues have limited ability in terms of time and resources to create a groundswell of interest in those artists who may be deserving.*

Also Over Stated, But Also True...Big Fish...Little Pond

To give proper credit, it must be acknowledged that within the Midwest, in particular in Wisconsin, Dean Meeker is part of a group of minor gods, including those who have reached a certain level of status and recognition. Such artists have achieved successful careers within our geographical sphere but may not have become highly noted at a national level. Few get into the national art history books. That has to be expected and understood due to the simple facts that *there will always be a limited media involved, an ongoing huge quest for attention and space among competing wide ranging artists, a variety of institutions at every level, and the fact that those who are among the “first to be attached to important events, movements and places, get attention* while the limited interested public can absorb only so much.

For those who gain satisfaction from the creative process, and who can be comfortable in their own skins without national recognition, being actively involved in their own regional art culture can be fulfilling and plenteous enough. This does not mean that the artist failed, and in fact, the individual might have participated in a life style of great significance while creating a legacy that most of us would envy. *And even then it is true that we do not know what future historians or taste makers might arise to further the reputations of any vanished man or woman.*

Gathering The Wisconsin Icons

Certainly we do already have some Wisconsin made iconic artists and works of art, such as Carl Von Marr's *Flagellants* in the collection of the Museum of Wisconsin Art, Fred Smith's *Concrete Park* in Phillips, Wright's *Taliesin in Spring Green*, Dr. Evermore's *Foreveratron* near Baraboo, the *Andy Gump* (fiberglass) statue in Lake Geneva, and perhaps *The Bronze Fonz* on Milwaukee's Riverwalk...created by a WI sculptor. We can add to the list the *Dickeyville Grotto*, *Mary Nohl's Lake Michigan cottage*, and the *Oriental Theater*. There are some few recognizable Wisconsin works usually on display in the collection of the Milwaukee Art museum, outdoor sculptures in various cities around the state, and pieces with local reputations in collections of smaller venues. Perhaps some of the awardees found on the website of the Wisconsin Visual Art Lifetime Achievement Awards are icons, or objects they have created. (Visit WWW.WVALAA.COM)

Earlier I said art can become iconic depending on these factors: Timing, history, location and publicity. That last element is probably the most important factor. The Wisconsin icons mentioned above have or are achieving regional and even national iconic status due to "publicity". There have been authors in particular who have been impressed with these regional "products" and who believed either that the art objects "deserved" greater recognition, or that they themselves, as authors or promoters, would gain something beneficial by focusing on them.

Perhaps, with the forthcoming building of the Museum of Wisconsin Art in West Bend, and a reported broadened interest in studying art emanating from regions outside of the US coastal centers, at least some of our regional icons can emerge more broadly. Maybe as Wisconsin artists, supporters, academicians and the public become more aware of the uniqueness of our regional artists and their products, we will also see individual works, paintings and sculptures begin to stand out as "iconic"...our Wisconsin unique artists and objects that withstand the tests of wide critical scrutiny and time.