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Institute prepares Coggins retrospective

The massive exhibition, opening to the public on Friday and running into November, contains many heretofore unseen works by the legendary local artist who died earlier this year. Curating such a collection is a story itself.

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Honoring the life of one of Reading's own special artistic personages, the Institute of the Arts' Yocum Gallery will hold a benefit exhibit of all the remaining paintings left behind in the residence of recently deceased artist Jack Coggins and a number of works done by his widow, the artist Alma Woods. Coggins, a skilled and respected painter, taught advanced painting techniques at the institute for 45 years.

"Remembering Jack: A Tribute to Jack Coggins" will encompass more than six decades of work from the artist's early days as an illustrator to later paintings of landscapes, stilllives and his more well-known maritime paintings. The show continues through Nov. 10 but opens to the public on Friday with a pre-exhibit invitationonly party, early sale and tribute on Thursday.

Consisting of about 300 oils, watercolors and printed material by the artist, the newly refurbished gallery will be jampacked with his work; his wife's art will fill the adjacent hallways. And since there are too many paintings to fit comfortably within the gallery space, the show is designed to be a "rotating" exhibit, in which all of the work will be considered "cash and carry," the sold works immediately removed and another put up until they are gone.

As a benefit, the majority of proceeds will go to Alma Woods to help relieve her living and medical expenses, with the remainder going to the newly conceived Coggins Award that will be given once a year by the institute to a deserving local artist (more details will be announced at a later date).

Volunteer organizers of the show, Christopher Miller and Ann Woodward, working with institute director Susan Rohn in what may be considered a monumental effort, delicately rummaged through the artist's Pike Township home with the permission of Woods and found artworks stashed in corners of places one would have never thought to look.

With tongue-in-cheek categorizations such as "behind stairwell on left," or "closet, under shoes," they uncovered works that surprised even diehard Coggins fans like themselves.

Miller, in his search, said he found paintings uncharacteristic of the artist's known output, such as technical illustrations of guns, trains, numerous science fiction, fantasy and adventure works, still lifes, seascapes, water lilies, fishermen, portraits and more.

It would appear he did not trouble himself about what he painted, as long as he could paint it and bestow the same care and skill to each and every piece. There was, apparently, much more to him than what met the eye.

As far as a chronology, one will need to fill in the blanks and conjecture as to dates and times of some work since he was so consistent in his style and procedure yet rarely dated a work. And at the time of this writing there was still much more to be done.

In any case, what follows in an attempt to relay an abbreviated synopsis of the artist's life so one may at least get an idea of the breadth of this man's experience.

Jack Banham Coggins was born in London on July 10, 1911, and in 1923 migrated with his family to Long Island, N.Y., where his father, upon being released from British military service, found employment. The young Jack studied at the Grand Central School of Art, New York City, from 1931 to 1933, and at the Art Students League, also in New York, from 1933 to 1934.

Afterward he worked as a free-lance illustrator for Life magazine and PM newspaper, receiving many commissions from the U.S. War Department and various advertisers.

In 1943 he became a U.S. citizen and joined the Army but was pulled from basic training to serve as U.S. Army artist correspondent for Yank magazine until the end of the war. While in Europe, he witnessed a good share of combat and had even accompanied the U.S. ground forces after the D-Day assault on Normandy.

Upon returning to the States, he joined the faculty of Hunter College, and while in New York City met his future wife, Alma Woods, who was a top fashion model. She learned to paint from him, and they were married in 1948. They moved to Berks County in 1953 and exhibited with each other frequently.

Later in the artist's career he executed a number of covers for science-fiction magazines, following the wave of interest in space travel that swept the country during the 1950s. Most notable among these were Fantasy and Science Fiction and Galaxy magazines.

In the 1960s, he wrote and illustrated books on the American Revolution, navigation, Vikings, submarines and various military, marine and historical topics. Crediting his father's years in Her Majesty's Cavalry, he wrote and illustrated "The Horseman's Bible," which sold a half-million copies in 1966.

In the following years he frequently was called a "living legend," and was inducted into the International Association of Astronomical Artists' hall of fame. He received the Americanism Award from the Daniel Boone National Foundation, the Rudolph Shaeffer Award four years running from the International Maritime Exhibition and the Pagoda Award from the Berks Arts Council.

His works are in the public collections of the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Smithsonian Institution and the Philadelphia Maritime Museum.

Also included in this show are photo documentations of the artist and his wife, which is not to mention that Jack and Alma were a hot couple. Theirs was a love affair to last — he always the dapper, goateed artist's artist and she the gliding grace of fashion. Both they and their art looked fabulous together.

I've said very little about the art — and deliberately so. There will be more on that subject when the show actually opens. First the man.

Jack died peacefully in his home early on the morning of Jan. 31 at the age of 94.

It is very difficult to put together a show such as this, especially as a volunteer, which is a matter of cataloguing titles, sizes, pricing, sales tracking and record-keeping, conservation, insurance and of course esthetic. This is it, however, the last of it. And when it's gone, well, it's gone, and the rest is history.



Photos by Ron Schira Ann Woodward and Christopher Miller, volunteer organizers of the Jack Coggins show opening this week at the Institute of the Arts, Wyomissing, unwrap works in the basement of the facility.



Coggins' "Courtesan and Companion," oil.



Coggins' "Lily Pond," oil.