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She Paints The Faces Behind The Smile



"I loved every one of the portraits, the Shrine people"

By CORINNE ABATT
Last week the world of Southfield painter - housewife Agnes Mezigian blew wide open.

The serious painter and mother of four children, Mrs. George Mezigian spent four days at the Shrine circus fulfilling a dream of a lifetime - and the fulfillment was better and more exciting than the dream itself.

Agnes, called "Aggie" by family and friends, has a houseful of her own paintings. Even she doesn't have an exact count of the hundreds of oils and acrylics she has done over the years, but a vast number are clowns.

SEVERAL WEEKS ago, George Mezigian asked that his wife be allowed to paint the Shrine Circus clowns and explained that his wife had been "nug up on clowns faces."

The upshot of the letter, sent without his wife's knowledge,

was a carte blanche invitation to set up paints and easels and go to work in clown alley.

As soon as the surprise invitation came, Agnes, like Toby Tyler, left home to join the circus. She painted seven clown portraits the first day and one from memory when she got home.

For the next four days, working at her customary speedy pace, painting directly with oil on Masonite as she likes to do, she splashed her vivid colors as the clowns sat briefly between acts, kept several portraits going at one time, kidded, laughed and maintained a running conversation with a constant gallery of sawdust superintendents.

THE CLOWNS were delighted. They welcomed her warmly. Police, circus officials and Shriners, to a person, did everything they could to make her visit memorable.

She comments as she picks up one after another of the completed portraits, "I loved every one of the clowns - the clowns, the police department, the Shrine people - they were fantastic."

Although as she says, "I never painted before anybody in my life," she was quickly caught up in the exhilarating atmosphere of the circus.

"It's in my blood, now. The clowns were adorable and they all wanted to look just like themselves."

Most wanted to buy their portraits, but the artist has other plans.

The pictures will serve as working drawings to be incorporated into a huge painting of circus life, at least four by eight feet, which will be the artist's interpretation of the whole circus - the color, the flowing motion, the peak of activity and artistry.

"This will be in my own

style and I can't wait to get started," she says.

HER OWN style, which has really been evolving ever since she started to paint as a small child, is loose, fluid, very colorful and strong, always positive in stroke - even in the later abstracts - sometimes applied with a brush and sometimes a combination of palette knife and brush.

The problem, if one exists, is that Agnes Mezigian is able to paint in almost any style she chooses. This kind of ability presents a special challenge - to develop a style and feeling that is exclusively hers. It is coming through now.

Several outstanding teachers have been influential. An early one was Edward Menetta, of the Marygrove College faculty; later Robert Wilber; and most recently Richard Koslow, whom she describes as "fantastic."

Koslow, whose style is recognizable, is to learn from him, to imitate.

But to a former neighbor, Kathy Trombin, goes the major credit for encouraging the career.

Dr. and Mrs. Trombin in Florida, but when the neighbors of the Mezigians was Kathy Trombin, would give Agnes a brush and encourage her force and encouragement was a great teacher.

The Trombinos have Agnes Mezigian painting the strong support forthcoming. Mrs. Mezigian enters shows, her paintings by word of mouth, are in collections at United States, Europe, Near East. One of the favorite clown hangs at Lathrup Village office of Armen Shakerjian.

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But to a former Detroit neighbor, Kathy Trombino, goes the major credit for encouraging the artistic career.

Dr. and Mrs. Trombino live in Florida, but when they were neighbors of the Mezigians, it was Kathy Trombino who would give Agnes a big bag of paints and brushes to reinforce and encourage what she sensed was a great talent.

The Trombinos have many Agnes Mezigian paintings and the strong support is still forthcoming.

Mrs. Mezigian does not enter shows, her paintings sell by word of mouth, and they are in collections across the United States, Europe and the Near East. One of the artist's favorite clown hangs in the Lathrup Village office of Dr. Armen Shakerjian.

THE SALE of a painting is

often a very heart-rendering experience for the artist -- there are many which she values too highly to give up. They have become an intricate part of her life. This is true of the Shrine Circus clowns.

Another outcome of the circus visit was an invitation to appear on the Oopsy television show.

She was asked to do a portrait of Oopsy on the show and complied, using a palette knife and brush and working with oils.

Even though her hands were shaking at the start, the colorful portrait of Oopsy, resplendent in the high, bright green hat and yellow flower, was completed on schedule.

She looks at each of the clown portraits with the ardor of a mother fondling a child. Each of the portraits is signed by the subject.

For Zero and Oopsy, Wimpy the 31-year-old veteran clown, Cuddles, the Shrine clown from Farmington -- for the many she met and painted, she has a word of love.

But for the imaginary clown she will create from the end of the day globs of paint squeezed at random on the masonite, she says, "This will really be my style."

GETTING OUT of her home for that much time was an unusual experience for the artist, whose friends and family will verify her statement that "the only time you can get me out of the house is when it has something to do with art."

Home and art are her life. She does all of her own housework, makes clothes for herself and her four children, does her own hair styling and setting, did all the landscaping around the house and maintains a large vegetable garden and has an enviable stock of home canned pickles, relishes and vegetables in the basement.

Her sister, Julie Couyoumijian, comments, "Anything this woman wants to do, she can." Julie says it all happens because, "she never sleeps."

Mrs. Mezigian uses her time well. The basement studio area is beside the laundry area.

While she is waiting for a load to come out of the washer or dryer, she sketches on canvas with acrylic or oil. There are literally stacks of these quick sketches and experiments.

She keeps two easels going, is constantly involved in a creative project of one kind or another and pursues each with joy and intensity.

Probably the richest well of support for the art career comes from her family. Children Debra, a Southfield-Lathrup High school graduate; Aveda and Artie, students at the same school; and Ruby, who attends Northbrook school, plus husband, George, who started the wonderful days at the circus, are very proud of their artist-mother-wife.

Their biggest problem, as George Mezigian stated in his letter, is convincing her that she is more than just a good artist.

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The problem with studying under a very strong artist like



CLOWNS OF ALL ages, sizes and personalities are one of the loves of Southfield artist Agnes Mezigian. The little fellow in the portrait is not yet a full-fledged clown. He was the bottom half of the lady who was sawed in half at the Shrine Circus. When Mrs. Mezigian painted the circus clown, they insisted that their youngest member be dressed in full regalia and