

A painter, a model, a class act



She personified style and elegance. Born Alma Wood, she painted under the name Alma Woods. She probably was happiest as Alma Wood Coggins, reflecting her respect for her beloved husband and teacher, the late Jack Coggins. Whatever name she chose, she was an artist.

By Ron Schira
Reading Eagle Correspondent

Berks County, PA - On Sunday, March 4, at 11:34 a.m., artist Alma Wood quietly passed away in her home near Hill Church in Pike Township.

The widow of the prominent artist and art teacher Jack Coggins, she was 82 years old and a renowned artist in her own right. Coggins died Jan. 31, 2006, and was the subject last fall of a major three-month retrospective and benefit auction for Wood, who was even then in failing health.

The event was held at the Institute of the Arts in Wyomissing, where Coggins taught for more than 40 years. More than 300 works by him and a handful of work by Wood were on view.

Unknown to many, Wood (who painted under the name of Alma Woods) was a top New York fashion model during the 1940s and 1950s. Besieged by the war effort, Paris had temporarily lost its footing as the center of fashion which, similar to the European fine arts, also had shifted to American shores.

Numerous photographs of her were shown in popular magazines such as Harpers Bazaar, Vogue, Mademoiselle and Bride. She worked for the Conover Agency and modeled dresses, jewelry and hats.

As an artist, Wood was a consummate pastelist and oil painter who produced about 50 works a year. They consisted mostly of genteel landscapes and portraiture. She met her future husband when he was teaching art at Hunter College in New York, married him and moved together to the much calmer environs of Berks County.



Alma Wood Coggins painted this portrait of Elain Bertolet, former director of the Institute of the Arts.

About that same time, she also raised and trained professional show dogs. Shortly thereafter she found her true calling in art.

Attending her husband's classes at the Institute of the Arts, she learned how to paint and use pastels.

"When people ask me where I studied," she once quipped, "I tell them I married the professor, you save a lot of college fees that way."

Many of her landscape pastels carry a signature slanted motion that slightly tilts to the right as she dashes her chalk stroke in a quick downward motion. Her colors are extravagantly luminous with an attention to chromatic combinations of complementary color that entreats an uncanny understanding of light.

Her first exhibit was held at the Institute of the Arts in 1973. She since then exhibited widely throughout Pennsylvania, New York and Kentucky. Her painting "Evening Shadows" was reproduced in *Painting the Weather*, published by Quarto Press for the North Light Book Club, and she had won several awards for her work.



Wood's oil painting, "Spring Abundance."

When asked why she kept her maiden name, she said: "It's traditional. Professional women artists always worked with maiden names. Many are married to artists and there might be confusion if they didn't."

It was a kind way of saying that a woman artist prefers to use her own name to be recognized on her own merit, not her spouse's, regardless of their love for each other.

As far as couples go, they say there is a lid for every pot and the two of them were such a pair. Pipe-smoking, bereted Jack and elegantly attired Alma were known as the quintessential dashing duet: arriving in style at an exhibit, portraying pride, not pretense as cultural icons of the Berks area, a privileged position for anyone to attain.

They often worked side by side and were supportive of each other, always pointing out the other's achievements.

Her artworks, as well as her husband's work, are at this moment being distributed into prestigious collections. Truly a class act and impossible to replace, she and her husband will be remembered through their accomplishments and influences as time goes on.

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