



A medieval vessel at sea: a textural use of oils
Photos by Ron Schira

Coggins focused on the single work

The late Jack Coggins, honored with an exhibition of hundreds of his paintings hanging in the Institute of the Arts through the end of the year, understood the merits of a one-of-a-kind artistic experience.

By Ron Schira

Reading Eagle Correspondent

On Jan. 31 of this year, artist and educator Jack Coggins passed away at the age of 94. Surviving him is his wife, the artist and former fashion model Alma Woods, as well as a treasure trove of oil paintings, watercolors and magazine illustrations.

The Institute of the Arts in Wyomissing, where Coggins taught painting since 1961, is presenting “Remembering Jack: A Tribute to Jack Coggins” within the Institute's Yocum Gallery through Dec. 31.

The show began in September and was originally slated to end on Nov. 10, but the response to his work had been so strong that institute director Susan Rohn decided to extend the exhibit to the end of the year.

To add, a preceding article in the *Reading Eagle* focused on the artist and his accomplishments, which were many, with little said about the art itself. Now, as promised, we are back to do just that.

The organizers of the exhibit, Chris Miller, Ann Woodward and Bruce Becker, whose name was unfortunately not mentioned in the last article (my apologies), culled these many works, with Wood's permission, from the artist couple's residence and with the help of committee members Joelle Dennis, Lisa Ross, Marybeth Grimner and Phyllis Moser transported and installed them into the gallery, with the overflow held in a downstairs dance studio.

Coggins is most known for his numerous maritime paintings and magazine illustrations, of which he gained much notoriety and awarded recognition. His tight, linear style reflected his much studied knowledge of ocean vessels and military sea craft, both recent and historical.

One may well conjecture that he was greatly interested in their design and function and took extreme care in their depiction, as he did with any of his technical pieces. His elaborate paintings on illustration board of trains, for instance, recede into distance on lengthy bridges, every detail delineated and in perfect place, the surrounding landscapes given the same attention as the train itself, totally disciplined.

Not surprisingly, his illustrations for science fiction, fantasy and adventure tabloids had influenced an entire generation of artists willing to advance the art of sci-fi to the next level.

And although he did not consider himself an artist as such, he was nonetheless in the same ranks as Howard Pyle, Norman Rockwell and Maxfield Parrish by creating a number of fascinating magazine covers that stirred the imagination of many a reader.

Especially noticeable is an oil painting of a medieval, possibly Anglican warship making its way through roiling waves of foam and deep blue water against a dramatic backdrop of rocky reefs and puffy clouds. Different for this transitional piece is its textural use of oils instead of gouache. The painting is removed from the smooth, flat illustration technique and gently nudged into fine art.

In my opinion, it is here that the artist excels in his craft and shows his merit beyond his technical expertise. Instead of using his skills for something to be printed, he concentrates on the actual single painting as a completed art object.

Many landscape paintings and seascapes inhabit the show and each of them exhort that precise physical placement of pigment to an almost painful degree to create a one-of-a-kind artistic presence. There is a buttery creaminess to these varnished visions that just compels one to relish the sensual dance of his brushwork. He made these paintings for different reasons.

Similar to the impressionist forebears who inspired him, he utilized light and color to impart an image, but unlike them the brushstrokes openly ricochet into multiple directions and rarely march in cadence. A rock, for example, will have each of its facets as one clean stroke, or a tidal pool will have swirling eddies of paint as opposed to the water it represents. Crashing surf explodes into a chaos of overlapped shades of opalescent white giving the impression of mist and foam.

Coggins always painted what he saw and placed the viewer in the same spot, no odd or oblique points of view, even for his naval paintings. He also based what he painted on direct observation, and if he saw an orange tree trunk or a purple barn bathed in evening light, then that is what he painted and remarkably, it looked just right for a painting. He also loved strong and dramatic light sources: reddish afternoon glows, broken cloud shadows, overcast hazy days. He had an extraordinary knowledge of color; clean, clear and vibrant hues that pleasantly resonated on the back of one's retina.

Please keep in mind as well that these 300-plus artworks were kept in his home, which amounts to the fact that they were personal efforts he kept for himself and thereby precious. Of course all of the work is on sale and quite a few have already been sold, about 90 pieces thus far.

The majority of the proceeds will go to Wood's living expenses and medical costs with the remainder going to the institute and the inception of the Coggins Award, a grant designed to aid deserving local artists of advanced merit.

An artist, a persona, a teacher, a contributor to the culture of our area for almost a half-century, he or his work will not quickly be forgotten.