

At Home with Leone McNeil

by Debbie L. Holmer

“I am an artist who is gifted with a passion for sharing beauty in one of its many forms.”

—Leone McNeil

Upon entering the Mendocino Presbyterian Church, one of the first things one notices is the beautifully carved wooden cross which hangs above the altar. Upon turning and looking toward the narthex, however, one’s eyes are immediately drawn to the gorgeous stained glass windows gracing the south end of the church’s sanctuary. Created by Leone McNeil, these lovely works of art – the towering center panel, side panels, the Ruth Carlson and the Chancel Memorial windows – have been in place for more than 20 years. Leone, through her amazing talent, has graced this church and many others throughout the country with stunning beauty, glorious color and matchless form.

Leone’s home, located across from the Mendocino Art Center, is filled with works of art and collections from her worldly travels. Her room and gardens look out toward the Mendocino Bay. Her adjacent studio is filled with large and small works in glass – it’s like a rainbow. At the ripe young age of 93 years,



Mendocino Presbyterian Church Triptich



Photo by Larry R. Wagner

Leone is currently working on a friend’s kitchen window in San Francisco. “It’s a big one, 3 feet by 4 feet. I just finished a small transom window for them, having done six others in the past.” Although Lead & Light Works is still her business, these days she has someone else do the “heavy” work. “I still do the designing, cartooning and glass selection.”

Born in National City, California (just bordering San Diego), Leone was raised in Los Angeles. Leone proudly told me of her three children, six grandchildren, four great-grandchildren and two great-great-grandchildren.

After divorcing her first husband in 1975, Leone found her way to Mendocino. Then, after being single for 18 years, a romance blossomed with artist Warren Zimmer, who had become a widower. “It was a wonderful romance, something I had never expected at my age,” Leone said. “We were married in 1991 for eight years before his death.”

When she was about 10 years old, Leone said she started drawing pictures of people. Her early training was as an art major at UCLA where she earned a B.E. degree in art. After raising her children, she attended a four-year program at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. There she received B.A. and M.F.A. degrees, her thesis project being in fused glass. Leone has been working with glass since 1965. “Otis was a great general art education.” Through the years she has been busy doing glasswork. However, a

few years ago she again took up painting.

What does Leone recommend for the young artist starting out? “I don’t know – freedom of expression is terribly important, especially in these days where people are trying to identify themselves. Formal training is definitely an asset, giving one a foundation as to what the principles of good craftsmanship are, and identifying painting in its many forms. I think that if you know some of the basics and the rules, it gives one some security and it makes your work come more easily. You then have the freedom to express yourself.”

Leone has continued her studies in glass through the years. In addition, she has been taking painting lessons for the past five years with Robert Burrige at the Mendocino Art Center. “He has had a real influence on my work.”

Leone says, “I am a Christian and so there’s always an expression of spirituality in my work.” When I asked her what her favorite medium was, Leone responded: “Oh, I don’t know. I’m a Gemini so



Epiphany



Jungle Time

I like everything! I started using pastels about three years ago, but I also work with acrylics with Bob Burrige and I’ve enjoyed watercolors, and of course there is always the glass. I have also done some sculpture, but not a lot.”

How does Leone begin a work? “With the glass, I want to make sure that I’m clear about what the people are like and what the use of it is to be – the ambiance of the setting. Then I just mull it over in my mind for awhile. After zeroing in on an idea, the process goes very quickly. I have colors established in my mind and I pull from the glass samples that I have on hand, stack them in a window, see how they relate and then draw a design. If the people like it, I draw a cartoon and start cutting the glass from the cartoon. Then I have a helper ‘lead’ it up for me. I used to cut

the glass, but it’s too heavy for me now.”

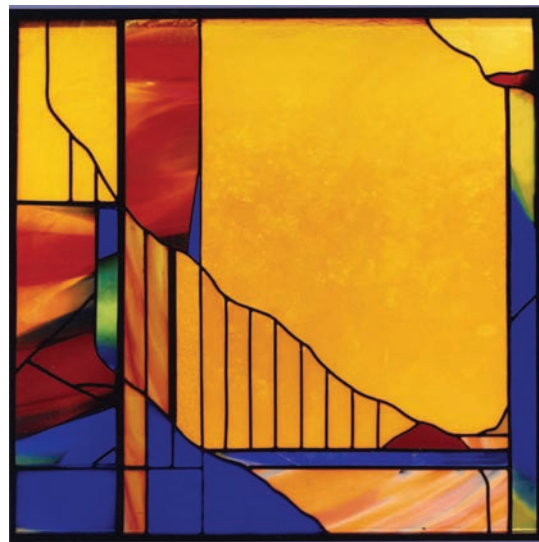
Where does she get her inspiration? “It depends on what I’m doing. If I’m doing a church, it certainly would be different from doing someone’s



Meditation



On to the Sea



Schaffrath

bar! In addition to churches, I've done a lot of secular work."

What other artists does Leone most admire? "Michelangelo! His work is so powerful, complete and beautiful. What's there not to like!"

I asked Leone what she wanted viewers to see when they look at her work. "I want them to see beauty of a spiritual nature, as well as a physical expression. It may be color, it may be design composition. It doesn't have to be a beautiful flower, although that's a wonderful thing. It may be a tree, a landscape. I'd like the work to say something, but it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes I'm trying to do a spatial thing, an abstract that doesn't say anything, just working with the spaces and color relations. But you know what? I think that eventually it does say something."

Our world is in such turmoil. What does art have to do with our changing world? Where does the artist fit in? "Art is important in all cultures. From the beginning of time there have been visual arts – look

at the cave paintings – an expression of human beings and their relationships with animals. Art is the deepest expression that a person can put forth for others to see. When you hang your picture up on a wall, it's like hanging yourself up on that wall – naked!"

Leone is a staunch advocate for the important role that the aesthetics of the arts play in the enhancement and power propagated by the visual arts. For more information, visit Leone's Website at www.leonemcneil.com.

"The painting seems to feed and fuel the stained glass work and vice versa. Life is good!" – Leone McNeil, Artists of the Mendocino Coast, Vol. 2, by Larry R. Wagner.