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From Pilot to Palette



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THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Henry Wingate blends the pigments on his palette, ready to resume work on a portrait of his longtime friend, the Rev. John Filipovich.

Like the portrait, the Madison County studio in which Wingate paints is a work in progress. It's a studio that reflects his admiration for fellow artist Gari Melchers. Wingate may have been born a century later than Melchers, but they share an appreciation for what is called academic art, a style produced under the influence of European academies and universities. After several visits to Belmont, Melchers' late-in-life studio and homestead near Fredericksburg, Wingate decided he had found the design of his future studio. He would build a reproduction of Melchers' facility.

Belmont Director David Berreth says the organization was happy to cooperate, lending Wingate a copy of Melchers' 1923 architectural plans. So for the past two years and four months, Wingate has been the general contractor for his new studio.

It sits amid the lush rolling hills on Madison County's northern edge. On a portion of his parents' property, Wingate found the ideal site.

"Artists always want a north light because there will never be direct light," Wingate said. "It's a nice, soft light; a subtle light."

Like Melchers' studio, Wingate's studio has a giant, north-facing window. He has created a curtain system that provides as much or as little light as he needs or wants. The large window, and most others in the studio, are rounded at the top and fashioned from windows discovered at Virginia salvage shops.

Nearly all the materials Wingate has used for the studio have been salvaged from old buildings or specially milled for his use. That takes more time, he said, but lends an authenticity that otherwise would be lost.

This is especially important to an artist. Wingate respects how things evolve, whether it's construction materials and practices or how his style of art has arrived where it is today. On a recent Monday, Wingate welcomed the gathering clouds that softened the midday light. Filipovich is seated in an elevated chair, his countenance gently lit in contrast to a black fabric background. His stole spills from the table that supports his left arm. He looks as comfortable as anyone sitting perfectly still for an extended period could expect to be.

Enhancing the setting further is the

music coming from the boom box on the studio floor. It is the "Flower Duet" from the opera "Lakme," by Leo Delibes. Filipovich brought it with him for the occasion.

The studio is chilly. The heating and air-conditioning system has not been installed. Wingate knows he'll need to remedy that situation before he resumes work soon on a commissioned nude portrait.

But today, Wingate is applying his skills to the portrait of his friend. The Russian Orthodox priest has traveled from Houston to have this portrait done, something Wingate has been asking him to do for years. Filipovich will sit for the portrait for three hours a day, five days a week, for two weeks.

At each sitting, a model's hair will be slightly different, as will the way his clothing folds, Wingate noted. Facial expressions will change somewhat. "to convey someone's personality in a portrait," he said.

He stands about 10 feet from his subject, recalling that Leonardo da Vinci determined in the late 1400s that the ideal viewing distance is three times your subject's greatest dimension. Seated, Filipovich's upper body is a little more than 3 feet tall.

"I was taught to paint a subject as if it's coming out of a fog," Wingate said. The

effect of the painting is determined by how far out of the fog -- how loose or tight -- his finished work comes.

Wingate didn't pursue his art career seriously until 1994, when he enrolled in the Paul Ingbertson School near Boston. He studied there for five years, followed by two more years under Charles Cecil in Florence, Italy. Wingate traces his teachers and their teachers back through generations to Jean-Leon Gerome of Paris in the mid- to late- 19th century. From this tradition came Melchers' form of naturalism that Wingate admires.

"My art is a mix of all of these influences," Wingate said. Like other artists, he adds his own flavor to his knowledge of those who have come and gone before.

In addition to portraits, Wingate does landscapes and still lifes. Examples of his work are scattered around the studio, from initial sketches to finished works.

Hanging prominently is a portrait of Wingate's wife, Mary. It was a finalist in the 2003 International Salon Competition, one of more than 15 prestigious awards Wingate's work has claimed in recent years.

This is a particularly notable time in Wingate's life, both as an artist and a family man. A few days shy of 40, Wingate became a father for the second time this year, in the midst of giving birth to his new studio.

"It will be good to have the studio completed so I can focus on my art," said

Wingate, though that might not be until early next year.

The studio serves its purpose for now. While the dimensions match the Belmont studio, with a large front and smaller rear room, Wingate took certain liberties in the interest of cost and efficiency.

Rather than brick, the new studio's exterior is of vertical hemlock boards, which, like cedar, will weather handsomely over time. The roof is standing seam metal, rather than the costly slate Melchers used. The metal needs to age for a year before it is painted. The studio's foyer will become a gallery for his work.

This is a relatively down-to-earth second career for Wingate. A native of Washington who grew up in Charlottesville, he never lost his childhood love for drawing and knew it would be part of his future. Coming out of high school in the early 1980s, he had already found his preferred, representational style. But art schools were immersed in modern art at the time -- not to his liking.

So he accepted an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy in 1984 and, after graduation, trained to become an F-14 fighter pilot. He was based at Oceana Naval Air Station in Virginia Beach, attached to the aircraft carrier USS John F. Kennedy.

He left the Navy in 1993, knowing he would pursue a new career in art. By November 2002, he was the lead story in American Artist magazine, with the portrait of Mary on the cover.

