

Mary Craig McLane; her art recycled pieces, reopened past



In the Waltham and Acton art studios of Mary Craig McLane, dozens of artists found the platform - and courage - to create.

"The message to all of us who came to her studio, in one way or another, was to make time and space for your artist. Everybody has an artist within them," said Amy McGregor-Radin of Newton, who attended Ms. McLane's workshops for 10 years.

Ms. McLane, who began a career as a sculptor and painter at age 55 after teaching French for 30 years, died Oct. 11 at Spear Memorial Hospital in Plymouth, N.H., following a stroke. The Acton resident was 80.

Swan Anderson of Boxborough called Ms. McLane an inspiring art coach.

"I remember feeling I couldn't draw, I couldn't paint. What did I think I was doing there? She just created this wonderful place in which you could be free to express yourself in whatever form that took," Anderson said. "She just had a

remarkable vision about what art can be."

Ms. McLane became known for her larger-than-life sculptures inspired by her Scottish ancestry and made entirely of found objects.

One of her sculptures, "The Storyteller," stands on the upper level of Acton Memorial Library. Friends of the library raised money to purchase the figure in 2001, after Ms. McLane exhibited a series of seven archetypal figures called "The Standing Women of Callanish" in 1999.

She made "The Storyteller" from a beam salvaged from a 19th-century Vermont factory. An old logging tool serves as the figure's "scroll carrier," and her hat came from the Acton town dump.

Ms. McLane made the sculptures following a visit to Scotland in the summer of 1990. She was deeply moved by viewing the Standing Stones of Callanish, an ancient circle of towering stones, and was inspired to research her ancestors.

"I wanted to create tall images of women-survivors, reminiscent of the strength and variety I had felt in the Standing Stones and in the associations with the women of the Hebrides, as well as with my great-grandmother Mary Haye," Ms. McLane said in the brochure. "I wanted to convey qualities in women which enable them to survive the fierce, bitter struggles of life."

A native of Manchester, N.H., she was the daughter of John R. "Judge" McLane, a founder of a law firm and a former trustee of Dartmouth College, and Elisabeth "Ibus" McLane. She had four siblings, including three brothers who have died.

Ms. McLane graduated from Smith College in Northampton in 1949 and the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston the following year. She earned her master's degree in art history from Radcliffe College in Cambridge in 1953. She never married.

For more than two decades, she taught French and Spanish at Newton South High School. She also taught French at St. Paul's School in Concord, N.H., Simmons College in Boston, and Beaver Country Day School in Brookline, and music at College Cevenol in Chambon-sur-Lignon, France.

She retired at age 55 and devoted herself to her work as an artist and teacher of art.

During most of her life, she lived in Cambridge. In 1996, she moved to Acton, where she helped found the New View cohousing community, a village of 24 households.

"Her creativity was wonderful," said a neighbor, Dana Snyder-Grant, who recalled Ms. McLane helping children explore art. "She also had a lot of insight into her own life and explored it until her death."

According to her family, Ms. McLane was a follower of the Indian mystic Meher Baba, who kept a vow of silence from 1925 until his death in 1969.

She created her own haven for contemplation in Hebron, N.H., where she built a cabin with a labyrinth in the forest. She named her place Montanara.

Ms. McLane was a passionate and adventurous traveler, her family said. In her college days, she lived in France and later visited the Soviet Union, West Africa, and South America. Several months before her death, she hiked once again in the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Ms. McLane leaves her sister, Elisabeth McLane Bradley of Hanover, N.H., and 25 nieces and nephews.

A celebration of her life will be held at 2 p.m. on Nov. 2 in the New View common room in Acton.

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