

Spotlight On

Happy Mediums

Artist Explores Full Range of Expression

By Penny Mullinix

The story of how Adalin Wichman got started as a commercial artist is a telling mixture of the serendipity and can-do spirit that have characterized her productive and ongoing 50-year career. Wichman, a Bourbon County native and University of Kentucky honors graduate, was having lunch with a friend in the drugstore of the elegant Lafayette Hotel in 1952. According to Wichman, the proprietor said to her friend, "We need a fashion illustrator — I've just lost mine." And her friend said, "I can't do it, I'm moving to Texas — but Adalin can."

"That was the beginning," Wichman remembered. "I was slow at first, but I got faster." Wichman, 82, whose expansive oeuvre will be celebrated in a major retrospective at the Headley-Whitney Museum in February 2005, went on to do fashion illustration for some of the most chic and established shops of old Lexington, including the elegant Loom and Needle, Fuller and Wilder, Wolf Wiles, The Four Seasons, Tots and Teens, Baymann's, Embry's, Lowenthal's, Graves Cox, Purcell's, Jerome's, and Meyers (now Carl Meyers). Her illustration work expanded to include window design and all phases of advertising production — from concept to image to copywriting.

Fashion illustration and advertising design led to a career creating and managing Keeneland's advertising from 1969 to 1989 — illustrations, graphics, print, and bill-

boards, all of which she found "great fun."

"I really enjoyed everyone at Keeneland," she said, remembering especially working with former Keeneland president and chairman James E. "Ted" Bassett to help new farm owners with their advertising. "It was all such a pleasure," she said. In 1971 Wichman



Matt Goins photos

Adalin Wichman

designed the coveted Eclipse Award trophy, which is given each year to divisional champions of Thoroughbred racing. She modeled her likeness of the 18th century legend on George Stubbs' 1770 painting. Wichman still

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Adalin Wichman got her start as a commercial artist by doing fashion illustrations.



finishes each Eclipse trophy by hand.

Since concluding her work with Keeneland, Wichman, who was married to the late architect William Wichman, has been “playing catch-up” to express other sides of her artistic sensibility. “For so many years I had my nose to the grindstone,” she said, noting that it was expensive to put two daughters through college and graduate school. “Now I can do some of the things I have been waiting to do all these years.”

And Wichman is doing them. Her two-sided cast-bronze bust of Thomas D. Clark, Kentucky’s Historian Laureate, was unveiled in September at the new Lexington History Museum to a standing room-only crowd of museum members and friends. Wichman came up with the idea easily, said Ed Houlihan, the museum’s executive director, when the two of them chatted about how to recognize permanently the University of Kentucky professor emeritus and beloved chairman of the museum’s board on his 100th birthday. Wichman, thinking along the lines of a cast bronze bust, was fond of a photograph she had seen of Clark in a straw hat, embodying his rugged explorer side. Houlihan felt that so many of Clark’s students think of him as he dressed in the classroom — wearing a coat and tie. Wichman sketched out a two-sided bust on the spot and began the project soon after, starting with the teacher side first.

She completed the clay model of the teacher side in time for the museum’s opening in October 2003. “The side with the hat ended up taking a long time; it was hell to cast because of the hat,” explained Houlihan. The completed bust, which now stands on a temporary wooden plinth in the museum’s entryway, will be mounted on pieces of Kentucky River limestone, the subject of one of Clark’s early publications. Wichman is a “founder member” of the museum, and good friends with Clark’s wife, Loretta, who shared the honor of unveiling the sculpture with her.

Community people and concerns are a central theme for Wichman. She painted the portrait of the late philanthropist Lucille

Caudill Little, which hangs in UK’s Fine Arts library. She participated in HorseMania, creating a second edition of the Keeneland-sponsored “Impressionist,” after the first was hit by a car. She has participated in Lexington’s HorseTails, a fundraiser for the Lexington Philharmonic. Wichman’s painting of sheep grazing on the White House lawn during World War I represented the state of Kentucky in a 2001 calendar that was part of a series commemorating White House history. Then, of course, there is that clock in the main atrium of the downtown Lexington Public Library. Wichman designed and built the combination clock, frieze, mosaic, and Foucault pendulum, which was unveiled on New Year’s Eve in 2001.

Wichman notes that the library clock project is ongoing. “It turns out that Foucault pendulums have minds of their own. They need to be played with,” she said, not elaborating. Earlier this year she took down all the horse drawings that make up the frieze, cleaned them, and reattached the labels. “You have to work,” said Wichman. “Work is good.”

“She really embodies creativity,” said Jennie Leavell, executive director of the Headley-Whitney Museum. “She’s so positive. The range of her work is so broad.”

Wichman’s retrospective, which opens to museum members Feb. 6 and runs through May 9, will include sketches from her early fashion illustrations, examples of her advertising work, the foot-tall Eclipse Award trophy, other equine sculpture, busts, portraits of family and community members, jewelry, furniture, and belt buckles.

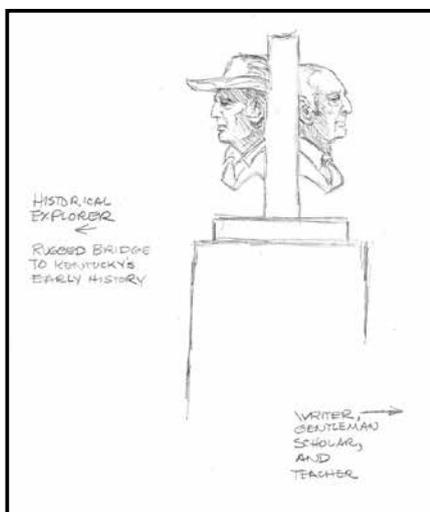
“I think she’s brilliant,” said Laura Gardner, curator at the Headley-Whitney. “Just to think out the pendulum idea alone. And her portraits and equine art really capture the personality of her subjects. That’s one of her many gifts.”

Wichman is looking forward to the retrospective, which is her first formal exhibition. She regrets having thrown away so many of her illustrations. Most of them, she said, are just gone. “At one point I was covered up in them,” she said. But she’s busy on a new

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Adalin Wichman and Thomas D. Clark (above) at the recent unveiling of Wichman's sculpture of the famed historian at the Lexington History Museum; (right) Wichman's working sketch of the two-sided bust, which recognizes Clark's many contributions to Kentucky.



project. The board of directors at Sayre School has commissioned her to produce a seven-foot sculpture of David Sayre, who founded the school 150 years ago. Wichman's daughters both attended Sayre, and she taught art to second and third graders

there for several years. "I've designed something I think will be fun," she said. "[The life-sized sculpture] will emerge through an outside wall of the main building. I don't know how, exactly," she laughed.

You can bet that she'll figure it out. "What is amazing about Adalin is her flexibility... she can do anything, literally," said Ed Houlihan. "If you ask her to help with a project, you'd better be serious about it. She'll make it happen."

Wichman commits some of her time to Hospice of the Bluegrass, and sits on the board of the W.T. Young Library. "Things are picking up here in Lexington," she said. "It is such an interesting community, and there's a new momentum. There are so many capable people here with such talent that never make a fuss about themselves," she said.

Not that anyone hasn't set an example. 🐾