

“Portrait of Artist Steve Wagner” for *VIE* Magazine
By Sallie W. Boyles

With a charming smile and ready humor, Artist Steve Wagner exudes the easygoing warmth of his Southern upbringing. He has reason to smile. Now that his children are grown and the pressures of his Atlanta graphic design business are history, Wagner is living his dream in the good company of his wife, two dogs, and many friends. Indulging his passion to paint and sculpt, Wagner fully appreciates the idyllic setting of his home and studio, which are close to the happenings of 30-A yet peacefully secluded. Even so, it would be wrong to assume that serious thought escapes such a man.

Scratch the surface to uncover a fascinating blend of passion and purpose, instinct and knowledge. Being an artist is part of Wagner’s genetic makeup, but his technique is a result of lifelong study. “It’s in my bones,” he says. In fact, Wagner takes after his artistically gifted mother, grandfather (who designed the original Mars Bar label), and great grandfather. Pure desire compelled him draw as a child. “I believe any artist has to love drawing to continue creating,” says Wagner. From the start, he also understood the value of study plus practice to refine his innate gift.

Since art classes did not exist in the schools of Newnan, Georgia, where he grew up, Wagner took private lessons as boy. “I was fortunate to have teachers in Newnan like Tommy Powers, Tony Dikes and Lavonne Gault” says Wagner, who believes that children face a disadvantage when they are not exposed to the fine arts. Pointing to research that shows a correlation between creating and critical thinking, Wagner soundly advocates instilling art curricula that cultivate problem-solving skills.

He also regrets that relatively few budding artists have the opportunity to develop their talents early on. Just as certain math and science requirements must be met in high school to prepare for college, a proper foundation is necessary for young artists to compete for spots in the fine arts colleges. “With the exception of cities like New York,” he says, “not many high schools around the country focus on the arts.”

Wagner’s other concern is that art students today are not learning the fundamentals. “Instructors are saying, ‘Paint what you like,’ to the point that their students never learn essential techniques,” he says. “They don’t how to paint a grey scale.” It’s inexcusable to Wagner that a number of today’s artists by trade don’t know how to prep a canvass or properly use a medium. As an example, he mentions a painting with a \$4000 price tag he saw in a Napa gallery. “It was a beautiful work, but the artist had painted it directly on raw linen. Anyone who understands the first thing about art would know that the painting will rot.”

Always cognizant of the need for preparation, Wagner went to college with the intention of pursuing a career in graphic design. He spent his first two years taking basic art courses at the University of Georgia before transferring to the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY for more serious study. At Pratt, art permeated the culture; it flowed from the classroom to the social scene, fostering an environment of enrichment—an atmosphere Wagner wholeheartedly endorses. He completed his final year of coursework in visual design through the School of Architecture at Auburn University, and graduated with his BFA degree in 1970.

Before entering the world of commercial art, Wagner played the bohemian backpacker, taking nine months to tour Europe—Spain, France, England, Greece. This was his opportunity to experience firsthand the Old World art and culture that he emulates in his work. He traveled solo, which Wagner says was ideal for meeting people. Getting from place to place, he generally hitchhiked. When he needed money, he got a job. “I worked as a deckhand on a boat in Cannes for eight weeks,” he says with satisfaction. He also lived in a cave off Crete. Visually and emotionally, the trip left a profound impression. “With the Viet Nam War just over and the Paris Peace Accords being negotiated, it was an intense time to be abroad.”

The “eye-opener” for Wagner, however, was to be in the presence of the paintings and sculptures of the Old Masters. Above all, Amadeo Modigliani, well-known for his goddess portraits and sculptures, captivated Wagner. “I’ve always loved the work of Modigliani,” says Wagner. “He has been my muse from the beginning.” That influence is most apparent in Wagner’s stone sculptures but also in his nude paintings.

While Wagner categorizes his work as realistic, many of his paintings follow the French Impressionists’ technique. The foaming waves in his seascapes are an example. “If you want realism, you should take a photograph of the ocean,” he offers. He prefers an impressionistic interpretation to convey the emotion.

Another important influence on Wagner’s art is Pointillism, a technique initiated by Georges Seurat, who was a leader among the 19th-century French Neo-Impressionists. The process plays one color off another with applications of tiny brushstrokes. In *Roman Road*, an impressive 48"H x 60"W oil on canvass hanging in his studio, Wagner utilizes the method to portray an Italian country road in vivid but calming blues and greens. He fondly refers to the work-in-progress (he has put 200-to-300 hours in it so far) as his “Obama painting because it has trillions of dots.”

While Wagner works with models, his preference, and photographs, he is beginning to paint from memory as well. “After you paint the human form enough, you can pull it from your head; it’s just much harder.” He views this approach as a challenge, one that will give his art a freshness he is aiming to achieve.

Similarly, he loves the spontaneity (although Wagner is quick to say “planned spontaneity”) that can be reached in completing a painting in a day. Meanwhile, the ultimate for Wagner is to attain a sense of “virtuosity” in which every element almost effortlessly comes together as he stands before a canvass. “All of a sudden, an angel is on your shoulder,” Wagner explains. “Then you have to appreciate where you’re going, be grateful, and say ‘thank you’.”

Like many who love the creative process, Wagner can get lost in his work and lose track of time. “A day will be a second. But they say, the time you spend doing that will be added to the end of your life.” Wagner says that simply painting to canvass is fulfilling. “The true joy for me is just being in front of the canvass and applying the paint,” he says. “If I’m doing lemons or a landscape or a pig, it’s all fun.”

Fortunately, Wagner does not get tired of painting Napa pigs, his most popularly commissioned work. Besides, each one he creates is unique. “If you say, ‘I want one just like that,’ I’ll tell you that yours will be different in subtle ways.” Wagner also reveals

that he enjoys his commissioned projects because the vision and process are always straightforward. “They are planned to the nth degree,” he explains.

In Wagner’s eyes, planning is essential to producing fine art. Just as the exquisite color and shape of an orchid are not random, Wagner’s serenely beautiful oils and sculptures come to life through planned geometric composition. He meticulously determines that composition before starting; straying off course usually leads to disappointment. “If I have a plan and then get into a mode in which the painting thinks it wants to go a different way, I stop and let it sit for a couple of days.”

Unlike many of his contemporaries, who gave up graphic design because they could not get accustomed to the new technological applications, Wagner welcomed computerized graphic design. “The Macintosh provided instant gratification,” says Wagner. “Before the Macintosh came along, the laborious process of preparing camera-ready art turned me against graphic design work,” says Wagner. Frustrated, he gravitated to sales and marketing. Better technology not only led him back to graphic design, but computer graphics also became the primary tool for laying out ideas before translating them either to canvas or to stone. For sculpture, Wagner finds that a graphic rendition is essential, and he compares the computer drawing to his stonework at various checkpoints to make certain he is on the right track. In many ways Wagner has orchestrated a perfect harmony between technology and fine art.

All the same, Wagner’s identity as an artist remained prominent. Long before leaving graphic design to be an artist fulltime, Wagner painted and sculpted. “I taught myself to sculpt in my driveway twenty years ago,” he says. “I always had an art studio in a converted spare bedroom at home.”

Abundantly thankful to his wife Karen for her career that affords him the opportunity to focus on his art, Wagner knows that a successful artist has to do more than paint. Marketing their work is essential, but that aspect of the business is a challenge for most. Ideally, he says, an artist will connect with a gallery that believes in the individual’s work and, therefore, provides the necessary marketing support. “I am fortunate to have Paige O’Connor in Destin, who has sold several of my works.”

Nevertheless, Wagner says, “I am not a vacation artist. People will not pick up my paintings because they had a good time at Seaside.” He concedes that an ongoing predicament for artists is achieving balance between what one loves to paint and what will sell. He feels that once his technique evolves and becomes “good enough”, an urban environment—Atlanta, New Orleans, New York, San Francisco—would best suit his style. “I’m getting there, but I’m not there yet.”

One of his ongoing objectives is to master the abstract. By this he means keeping the brushstrokes fresh so that the paint goes on the canvass just as it should. He names Andrew Wyeth as an example of one who could apply paint without overworking it.

In striving to improve upon his technique and even cultivate a more definitive style, Wagner claims that he has made more progress over the past two years than he accomplished all the time up to that point. He attributes his growth to the esoteric knowledge he has acquired through an online artists’ forum ([www. studioproducts.com](http://www.studioproducts.com)) sponsored by Cennini—a company that produces the handmade paints, mediums, and

other supplies that he loyally uses. "It's the only forum of its kind worldwide that attracts likeminded artists," explains Wagner. "After all of these years, I feel like I am finally learning to paint."

The mention of Cennini prompts a discussion of today's most popularly used products versus the lead paints and triple-distilled turpentine made the old-fashioned way. "Now they have art schools that don't even use turpentine," says Wagner. "That's the most insane thing I have ever heard!" He is also adamant about using lead paint. "I don't eat it!" Taking time to wash his hands is not an inconvenience to Wagner, who finds that lead white, in particular, offers a facility that cannot be reached with a titanium-based white. From studying the Old Masters and their techniques, Wagner contends that to achieve what they did, it simply makes sense to utilize the same materials. He goes on to explain that the widely marketed pigments are not created for fine art—they are developed for industry purposes—and artists who use those paints are missing out. Again, he prefers the hues of Cennini, which are more naturally intense and, above all, made specifically for oil painting.

Colors and textures equally come into play in choosing media for sculpture. With the exception of one torso, Wagner's pieces so far are all women's heads, strongly inspired by Modigliani's paintings. His favorite medium is marble, which not only presents a clear, consistent color throughout, but also sings or rings when it is tapped. He enjoys working with limestone as well, though it can have blemishes that must be addressed. The boutique jewelry store Bijoux de la Mer in St. Barts shows several of Wagner's pieces, which are made of coral. To work with coral, Wagner is cautious about wearing a mask. "Unlike marble, which is calcium-based, coral is highly poisonous," he says, "even more dangerous than asbestos." His least favorite stone is soapstone because the sound it makes is a thud rather than a pleasant ring.

What rings true about Steve Wagner is his admiration for the beauty he finds in nature and his passion to interpret what he sees onto canvass or into stone. By studying the context of nature, Wagner has learned that neither nature nor art need to be perfect to be admired, yet he clearly sets the highest standards. "There are a lot of artists who are good, but very few who are great" he says. "In my lifetime, if I can have one great painting that would be wonderful."