



PHOTO BY LAURA BILLINGHAM

# The Artful Anthonisens

For this family of artists, creativity is their common ground  
and a force that inspires their lives.

By PATTI ZIELINSKI

To understand the dynamics of the family raised by George Anthonisen, one of America's leading figurative sculptors, and his wife Ellen, look no further than *Heading Home*, a painting by their son, Daniel, in which he invites the viewer to take a seat in a boat, he in the stern and his father in the bow, as they return from fishing.

"My father always trusted me to run the motor in a spirit of empowerment while we shared quality time on the beautiful Delaware River," Daniel says. When they arrived home to his mother and sister, they would find a beautiful table setting with candles lit and a wonderful home-cooked meal. "Dinner conversations were like confessionals and explorations as free-flowing as the river itself—never censored—and with intense attention to the emotions at hand. Our religion was creativity. Our common ground was art. We absorbed it by osmosis."

Though George and Ellen had no expectations of Daniel and his older sister, Rachel, becoming artists, they created a home immersed in art and ideas. Ellen ensured that there were art supplies on hand, and George would encourage the children to join him while he was drawing or to find creatures when looking at clouds.

The environment was fertile territory for growing minds. "Dad would call me over and lay a ginormous Michelangelo or da Vinci book over my entire body to see what I would respond to," Rachel says. "He always played classical music, especially Beethoven, but there also was a lot of quiet, contemplative time."

Captivated by Sesame Street and Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, Rachel began taking puppeteering classes as a youth. "The classes were a game-changer," she said. "I felt a connection with the sculpture and the theater." Eventually she moved to Takoma Park, MD, where she runs Puppet Lab at Rhizome DC, a community space in Washington, DC where she teaches puppetry. She also creates puppets and writes and directs shows.

*George and Ellen at home in Solebury  
with their son, Daniel.*





Creation by George Anthonisen, at Philip and Muriel Berman Museum of Art at Ursinus College, Collegeville, PA.

Daniel graduated from Carnegie Mellon University's College of Fine Arts and eventually planted roots a few miles away in a rustic carriage house/studio in Point Pleasant, PA, just walking distance from his beloved river. In the early days, George delighted in young Daniel's fascination with the river and bought a boat, setting into motion the visual romance Daniel has today with the river environment.

Daniel, who paints *en plein air* and in-studio, likens his painting on-site to fishing: "You dress in layers like a deep-

sea diver set to explore." His oeuvre is an eclectic mix of river paintings, portraits, still life, interiors, figurative and abstract work in oil paint, casein paint, and India ink, as well as wood engravings, mixed-media, and collage. Daniel's works are in private collections and at the James A. Michener Art Museum.

Many of his pieces are an homage to the area. "The river's energy is intoxicating. You never set foot in the same river twice. It's ever-changing—like a human lifespan," he says. "There is a simultaneous existence of past, present, and future that makes



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*George in his studio working on a bas-relief sculpture of his son, Daniel. (Below) Caryatid, by George, is on permanent display at the James A. Michener Art Museum.*



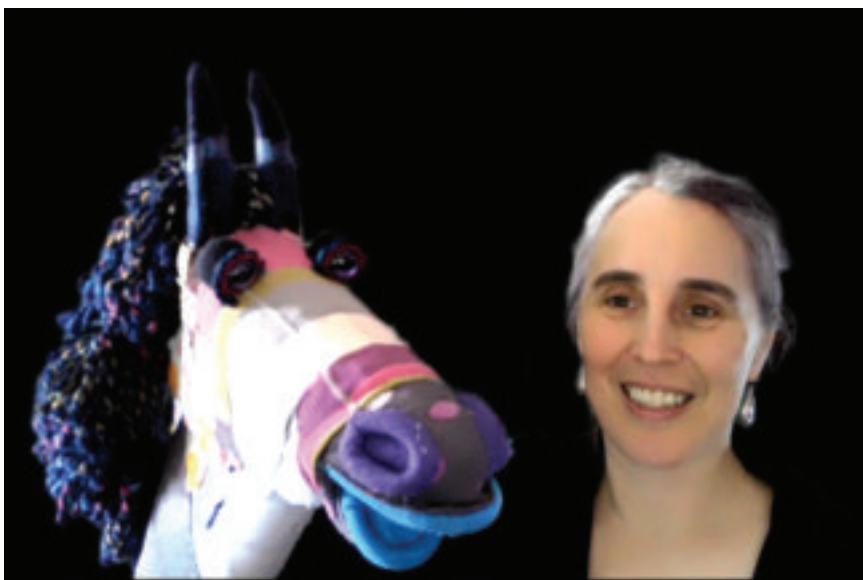
you accept the reality that now is the only time.”

Ellen—a creative soul in her own right who played piano, took formal dance lessons, and studied theater after college—is the family’s grounding force. “I understood how an artist’s surroundings need to be stable and disciplined,” she says. Savvy at public relations, Ellen promotes her family’s work and helped facilitate the creative process, whether it was by writing artist statements, taking progress photos, or being a sounding board.

“Ellen is a partner in the progress of all of our careers,” George says.

The couple, both in their eighties and together fifty-five years, has lived in Solebury, PA, since 1971 in a 1,600-square-foot home with a studio and outdoor sculpture garden filled with George’s works. They discovered Bucks County while searching for a more affordable alternative to Manhattan. A neighbor suggested the New Hope, PA area, and they fell in love. “It reminded me of the work of Andrew Wyeth,” George says. “Plus, it was a creative, accepting community that supported artists.”

Having grown up dyslexic, George found a voice in visual language, discovering sculpture at the University of Vermont



*Rachel Anthonisen Gates with Dippity, one of her many whimsical puppets.*

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*George and Ellen created a*

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where he marveled at how he could translate his thoughts through his hands into clay. He honed his skill at the National Academy of Design, the Art Students League, and Dartmouth College Medical School, where he studied human anatomy. Today his work is represented in major collections worldwide, including the World Health Organization, the U.S. Capitol, Carnegie Hall, and the new Jackie Robinson Museum.

Although his artistic sensibilities were shaped by the Western art tradition, George became exposed to the art of different cultures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, and the Whitney in New York City. He studied with intensity all the major modern artists—Henry Moore, Alberto Giacometti, Constantin Brancusi, Pablo Picasso. In the push-pull of modern versus traditional art, he saw a space where both could coexist and became a master at blending abstract and realism—like *Murder* and *Creation*—and gravitated toward themes of civil rights and social justice.

Keenly aware of the spectrum of human proclivities, “We have



*Mom, oil on linen by Daniel.*



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*home immersed in art and ideas.*

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*Daniel putting the finishing touches on his painting Ritual at Diamond Head Rock.*

capacity to love, hate, be envious, giving, compassionate,” he says. George’s work bears witness to his subjects with unflinching honesty, centering on the family or the family of man. To set up reality, “You have to create negative works like *Nightmare* or *Game Over* as well as those that are positive,” he says.

A master of the female nude, George takes a contemporary approach to classical forms, evoking the femininity, athleticism, resilience, and life-giving power inherent in women.

Before working with craftsmen at the foundry to realize the vision in bronze, his pieces are progressively refined from clay models to plaster molds. “I start with an idea, but over time, it

changes as I dig deeper and understand more,” he says. “When I come out at the other end, the sculpture may relate to the initial idea, but it has infinitely more dimension.”

For George and Ellen, being great in art and life is a work in progress, and they are proud to have raised children who are risk-takers. “Daniel and Rachel have the tools and are intelligent,” George says. “And they don’t know where their story is going to take them — just like I don’t know where my story is going to take me.”

*Patti Zielinski wrote about illustrator Joe Ciardiello in the Winter issue of River Towns.*



*Rachel, George, Daniel and Ellen at home in 1993.*