

A Sculptor's Life

With his wife of 55 years by his side, Bucks County artist George Anthonisen is one of America's leading figurative sculptors of our time.



PHOTO BY LAURA BILLINGHAM

George and Ellen Anthonisen at home in Solebury with their son, Daniel, a painter.

BY PATTI ZIELINSKI

There is something about the way George Anthonisen looks at his wife, Ellen, which encapsulates the power behind his art. There is a certain wonder, awe and admiration that is likewise manifested in his bold sculptures. “Ellen knows everything,” he says. “She is my wife, business partner, mother of my children and model.”

Anthonisen, one of America's leading figurative sculptors, and Ellen—both in their eighties and together 55 years—have lived in Solebury since 1971 in a 1,600-square-foot home with a studio and outdoor

sculpture garden filled with Anthonisen's works. This is where they raised their children, Rachel and Daniel, who grew to become artists themselves: Rachel is a professional puppeteer and Daniel is an accomplished painter with works in private collections and at the James A. Michener Art Museum.

The couple discovered Bucks County while searching for an affordable alternative to Manhattan. The grounds were fertile territory for Anthonisen, who is as much giant in stature as he is in reputation.

His face radiates when speaking of his two loves: family and art. The bucolic environment allowed him to be devoted to the solitary act of creation while still serving as a nurturing head of his family.



“Alice in Wonderland” on display at the Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia.

Having grown up dyslexic, George found a voice in visual language, discovering sculpture at the University of Vermont 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, U.S. Capitol Building, Carnegie Hall and the new Jackie Robinson Museum.

Although he came from a love of the tradition of Western art, Anthonisen became exposed to art of different cultures that he saw at the Met, MoMA and the Whitney. He studied with intensity all the major modern artists, like Moore, Giacometti, Brancusi, Picasso. In the push-pull of modern vs. traditional art, he saw a space where both could coexist. He became adept at blending abstract and realism and gravitated toward themes of civil rights and social justice.

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

That idea starts with a drawing that Anthonisen transfers again and again with tracing paper until the concept

is ready for the next stage of creating a clay model and plaster mold for the final piece, which is then rendered in bronze, aluminum, stainless steel or hydrostone.

Over the decades, while her husband created his

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sculptures and frescoes, Ellen maintained a peaceful household. Behind the studio door, she knew there could be absolute silence or classical music—Anthonisen calls Beethoven “the greatest artist who ever lived”—as he focused on his work, drawing on a range of emotions that sometimes escalated to ferocity. “When George is in his studio, he is in his



“Creation,” one of six Anthonisen sculptures at the Beriman Museum of Art at Ursinus College.

head, and the subjects can be intense,” Ellen explains. “When he comes home, I understand it has to be as peaceful as possible.”

A creative soul in her own right who played piano, took formal dance lessons and studied theater after college, Ellen is this artistic family’s grounding force. “I gravitated to someone who had guts enough to be a sculptor,” she says. “I understood how an artist’s surroundings need to be stable and disciplined.” Savvy at public relations, the indefatigable, quick-to-smile Ellen promoted 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.

Recently, Anthonisen mastered the one thing that had eluded him until now: Creating Ellen’s portrait. “I tried for years. It drove me nuts that Rodin did three exquisite portraits of his wife. I wanted to measure up,” he says. “I’ve always had a perspective of what is great is something that you work towards. I don’t know where my story is going to take me. Even today.” □

Patti Zielinski is a regular contributor to River Towns Magazine.



PHOTO BY LAURA BILLINGHAM

George in his studio working on a bas-relief sculpture of his son, Daniel.