THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Practicing, Painting, and Keeping Sane at 92

Practicing medicine since 1942, Dr. Robert R. Canas credits his painting and sculpture hobbies with "keeping him sane."

"I was a general surgeon for many years, and after the pressure in the operating room I would come home and be very tense," recalls Dr. Canas, who is 92 years old and now practices general medicine in Durand, Mich. "My wife used to tell me: 'You are so tense. What's the matter with you?' "

As a young surgeon in Panama, Dr. Canas transformed a room in his house into an art studio, where he went to unwind by creating works of art in various media, from acrylic paints and oils to watercolors, ink, charcoal, clay, and bronze. It became his refuge, and he created other studios when his career path led to stops in Birmingham, Ala., and Durand, where he's lived since 1966. "I've always had a studio in the house," he said.

His creations over the years have ranged widely in medium and in size, and have included a life-sized bronze statue of a railroad worker displayed in downtown Durand (an area rich in railroad history), a life-sized stone statue of Saint Patrick that stands on the grounds of a church in downtown Birmingham, and a large mural of religious scenes he painted on the sanctuary walls of another church in Birmingham. "I went to Birmingham about 3 years ago to see that mural," he said. "They keep it in very good shape."

He painted another mural of religious imagery for a church in Durand that was torn down a few years ago, but he salvaged the mural and hopes to find another home for it.

Dr. Canas also creates works of art on request from family members, friends, and patients. Recently one of his patients brought in a photo of her granddaughter

Courtesy Dr. Robert R. Canas

Dr. Robert R. Canas still paints 1-2 hours each day before going to work.

and asked Dr. Canas if he would paint a portrait of her on 24-inch by 18-inch canvas. "I'm going to do that; I'm going to get busy again," he said, estimating that the portrait will take him 2-3 weeks to complete. "I don't paint for money," he added. "It's absolutely a hobby."

Raised in El Salvador, Dr. Canas began painting and sculpting when he was about 10 years old. He recalls no specific personal influence in pursuing art, just inspiration.

"You have to have an inspiration for something to paint," he said. "Sometimes I get inspired by horses or other animals. I've also painted a lot of portraits. It depends [on] what mood I'm in."

He describes himself as a realist inspired by Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and Velázquez. "I don't like this modern stuff," he said. "All of my paintings are realistic; they're not something that you have to interpret, and say 'well, that looks like a horse or that looks like a parrot.' I want people to see that's what it is. It's realistic."

On most days Dr. Canas paints for 1-2 hours in the morning before heading to the medical clinic to see patients, where several of his paintings adorn the walls. "It's like a small museum there," he said.

The clinic also features a dedicated room where he can paint when it is a slow day or when there is a time gap in the schedule. "I think I'm a workaholic," he admitted.

Asked what it takes to be vital at age 92, he replied: "Find something to help you relax. If you cannot paint, go play golf. If you don't play golf, go hunting or fishing, or do something [else]." ■

By Doug Brunk