

Art Heritage: Celebrating Jay Miller MacMillan's stamp on Wilmington

by: *Alex Pompliano*

An Afternoon with Henry Jay MacMillan

10/2, 2 p.m. – 6 p.m.

Wrightsville Beach Museum

303 W. Salisbury Street

Free • www.wbmuseum.com



Henry Jay MacMillan (American, 1908-1991): Fort Belvoir (Study for mural depicting training exercises in improvised bridge construction at the Engineer Replacement Training Center, Fort Belvoir, Virginia), 1942. Gouache on paper. Courtesy of the Cape Fear Museum of History and Science.

The Wrightsville Beach Museum of History pays tribute to a legend in the Wilmington art community with “An Afternoon with Henry Jay MacMillan.” On October 2nd, the museum will host an intimate afternoon with an exhibit of seldom-seen works by the nationally known artist. All compiled from private collections, there will be personal anecdotes shared from art experts, family and friends of MacMillan as well.

Madeline Flagler, director of Wrightsville Beach Museum, finds it fitting that they are commemorating MacMillan's work, as he owned a house and studio on 5 Asheville Street on Wrightsville Beach.

"We aren't displaying anything that is from a public collection," Flagler says. "We contacted people from the community who we know had [MacMillan's art] and asked them to bring the work in. A lot of pieces that we have are from family members and other local friends and collectors."

The museum also collaborated with Cameron Art Museum (CAM) and Cape Fear Museum. To coincide with the event, CAM opened an exhibit "Henry Jay MacMillan: An Artist's Life," which will include pieces on loan from the Cape Fear Museum collection and will run until October 30th. Anne Brennan, director of CAM, will also speak at Wrightsville Beach Museum during the event.

It's no surprise so many local museums are getting involved; according to Flagler, MacMillan was instrumental in starting the first Museum School in Wilmington in the 1930s. This is just one of the few contributions he made to our area's art scene.

Born in 1908 in our fair port city, MacMillan began studying art in his early teenage years. When he was 18, he headed north to study at the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts (later renamed Parsons the New School of Design) to study architecture and interior design. He graduated from the school's Paris branch in 1929, and continued to study at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center and the Woodstock School of Art.

After working several years for interior design firms in Washington, D.C. and New York, MacMillan returned to Wilmington. In 1937, he founded the N.C. Professional Artists' Club, which organized shows and exhibits around the state. The following year he held his first major exhibit of watercolors at Wilmington's Cape Fear Hotel.

Along with his mother and his sister, Helen, he was among the organizers of the beloved yet short-lived Wilmington Museum of Art, heading the museum's art school, organizing class schedules, recruiting teachers and teaching classes in art history. In 1941 MacMillan designed interior decorations for Thalian Hall and supervised its painting, which was done by his family, students and volunteers.

However, his best-known works come from a period in his life one wouldn't expect. During WWII in 1942, he was inducted into the Army in the European front against Germany. His talents must have been noticed, because he was later commissioned by the Army to paint scenes of the places he visited during his service, which included: North Africa, Sicily, Normandy, Belgium, Holland and Germany. He created a major body of watercolors and sketches documenting wartime destruction, battlefield landscapes and everyday military life. These works can now be seen at the Cape Fear Museum under the title "Behind the Lines."

MacMillan eventually returned to New York to instruct at Parsons but could not stay away from Wilmington for long. In 1956 he returned and settled back into his old home at 118 S. Fourth Street, now known as The Camellia Cottage which is operated as a bed-and-breakfast. He died in 1991 in the same house where, as a child, his passion for art blossomed.