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Artist's roots extend deep in state history

By **Steven K. Wagner**
Special Correspondent, *The Oklahoman*

CLAREMONT, Calif. - Like the pile of binoculars heaped just inside his front door, Milford Zornes dismisses the small stump that once was a finger on his talented brush hand.

"It was getting in the way, so I had it removed," the acclaimed artist said of his gnarled pinkie, a nagging impediment to everyday tasks—including unencumbered brush strokes.



Photo by Steven K. Wagner

Zornes, a 97-year-old Camargo, OK, native who is legally blind, is a nationally renowned watercolorist whose paintings hang in the White House, the Library of Congress and numerous universities. Both the missing finger and the pile of travel-worn binoculars, which help him

visualize scenes that frustrate his dimming vision, are merely part of the aging art icon's lore.

Zornes was born in Oklahoma in 1908, the son of a cowboy and a schoolteacher. To keep their young boy occupied, Zornes' parents introduced him to art.

"My mother set me to drawing to keep me out of mischief," he said. "I always looked forward to Christmas, when I got watercolor boxes and pads of paper."

Zornes spent his first 14 years in Camargo in Western Oklahoma, learning to use those paints. His skill grew so that by early in the Depression he was earning a fair living sketching people for small change.

"I found to my advantage that I could draw pictures of people's kids, dogs or houses and get a little money for my work," he said. "I could always talk people into buying something from me. It became a survival device, and I've kept on surviving throughout my life."

Zornes, who studied at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles and nearby Pomona College, chose to concentrate on watercolor. Success came quickly for the young watercolorist, who sold his first painting in the early 1930s.

Today, he paints despite the near-complete numbness in his brush hand, waning vision and a gait that requires he spend more time than he wishes shuffling back and forth between palette and canvas in his Claremont, Calif., studio.

"He paints every day," said his wife of 62 years, Patricia, a former art student of his.

In the 1930s President Roosevelt hand-picked one of Zornes' paintings to hang in the White House, transforming Zornes from a regional artist to one of national stature. He hasn't looked back.

"You get a few kudos like that and you begin to get a reputation," Zornes said. "I've had the good fortune, through persistent work, to gradually get the kudos that are necessary to identify you, and eventually after long practice you develop a following and your work becomes collectible."

During the ensuing years he also served as one of 42 artists chosen by the War Department to chronicle World War II through their paintings; Zornes covered the China-India-Burma theater.

Nearly four decades later, Zornes painted what he believes is one of the largest works ever created on a single sheet of watercolor paper, a 35-foot-long landscape now owned by nearby Harvey Mudd College. These days, Zornes is working on a 40-by-60-foot composite of the Grand Canyon, rife with reds, greens, blues and yellows.

"I have to paint in sharper contrast in order to see what I'm doing at all," he said. "And, I must have a greater definition of line in order to see the lines. I am influenced by my failure to see."

In earlier days he traveled the globe—painting, teaching and lecturing. More recently, his travels have taken him to doctors across the country in search of a way to curb his vision loss. Nothing has worked. He confronts that reality with candor. In four or five years he may not be able to paint at all.

"Wrestling with binoculars, painting on location, coming back here and having to get the lighting right—it seems to take an awful lot of energy," he said. "Painting was easy when I was young and strong. Now, it's hard work."

Despite the constraints, Zornes insists he's as good an artist as ever. "Oh, I'm a better painter. I find it harder to execute my skills, but as far as creativity and the ability to design go, I'm a better painter than I've ever been."