

Retired art professor blends love of art, nature



Artist, philosopher and retired professor mixes art and nature in Eagan park B4

The Caponi Art Park, set on 60 rolling acres in Eagan, is a testament to professor's love of nature and art.

By [Kevin Duchscher](#), Star Tribune

The Caponi Art Park in Eagan is nearing the end of another successful season, but its founder and leading light, sculptor Anthony Caponi, is looking ahead, not back.

On a recent sun-dappled morning in the park, Caponi raced his golf cart through groves of changing oaks and maples, pointing out various sculptures and pausing at the Theater in the Woods, an outdoor amphitheater that he unveiled in 2000.

"When people come home from work, instead of going for a beer, they can take a walk here and restore themselves," he said.

Since the late 1980s, the Caponi Art Park has been a unique sort of refuge for the public -- 60 acres of wooded, rolling hills that offer a seamless blend of nature and Caponi's bold, provocative and sometimes whimsical work.

It's a unique amenity for Eagan: an independent nonprofit park, run by its own board, staffed largely by volunteers and guided by Caponi and his wife, Cheryl. This summer at least 5,000 visited the park for a wide variety of family programs, dramatic performances, a music festival and a medieval fair.

The park is largely funded through several corporate and foundation grants. While Eagan doesn't provide funding, the city received two Department of Natural Resources grants totaling \$500,000 to preserve part of the park.

"They do a wonderful job on the cultural side of things, not only the art exhibits but the performances and the other things they offer," said Juli Seydell Johnson, Eagan's parks and recreation director. "It's a terrific

complement to the community, as well as a great open space for residents."

Behind it all is the vigorous Caponi, an Italian native and retired Macalester College art professor who, at 86, is an artist, philosopher and construction crew all rolled into one.

He bought the acreage that makes up the park nearly 60 years ago when it was farmland, and shortly after designed and built a modern, angular house of concrete block and redwood where he and Cheryl still live.

The home looks like one of Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian houses, but Caponi said he had never heard of Wright and wasn't familiar with his work. He later had the chance to meet Wright but declined; Caponi lost interest when told that the architect sat in a chair a bit higher than the others.

Too bad. The imperious Wright might have met his match.

Feisty and gentle

Some people in his remote Italian village thought the young Caponi should be a boxer, and his own parents wanted him to work as a mechanic. After arriving in the United States at the age of 15, Caponi instead gravitated toward sculpture and studied at the University of Minnesota.

He joined the Macalester faculty in 1949. He played music in his classes, brought his students home to enjoy the pastoral setting and went tooth and nail with administrators over department funding and the design of the college's Janet Wallace Fine Arts Center, where he insisted on several innovative changes.

"He's honest and straightforward, and he doesn't hold back," said Don Betts, a pianist and composer and former chairman of Macalester's music department. "But with all his feistiness, he's very gentle as well."

Caponi "left behind an arts department that was really outstanding. At the same time, he encouraged different forms of art. Tony's whole approach was to let every flower bloom," said Roger Mosvick, another retired Macalester professor who was chairman of the speech and dramatic arts department.

After retiring from Macalester in 1991, Caponi turned his full attention to the art park. He shaved and sculpted the hills with his Bobcat, creating winding paths to foster both contemplation and discovery in his visitors.

The biggest surprises come in finding his metal and stone sculptures, sprinkled throughout the woods and worked into the landscape.

On the hillside below the studio headquarters he calls his "treehouse," a giant (and well-fed) snake twists through the grass. Nearby, Pompeian figures writhe in bronze agony in the aftermath of Vesuvius.

"It's very organic, my environmental education and my arts education. It all comes together for me," Caponi said.

He wants "to create an environment where people feel comfortable in nature," said Cheryl Caponi, who has known her husband for 30 years. "If they feel comfortable and you expose them to the arts available, they have a better chance of appreciating it at whatever level they get it."