

Caponi Creates Durable Art

Profile

By JOAN WALDOCK
Staff Writer

EAGAN -- It's the type of setting every artist probably dreams of: nestled in a secluded meadow, surrounded by rolling hills and remarkably unspoiled woods. One could imagine the house situated on a Mediterranean hillside. A stone driveway leads from the road to the house, and sculptures in various sizes stand in the yard.

It is the home of Anthony Caponi, sculptor, artist and chairman of the art department at Macalester College, St. Paul. The home is not new, it was built in 1949 (he admits he was a little ahead of his time) by Caponi himself. He and his late wife raised four children there.

Born in Italy, 58-year-old Caponi has lived in the United States since 1936, although he served with the U.S. Army in Italy for three years. It was during the Army years, he says, that his serious art education began, because his responsibilities included protecting works of art. Until he went into the Army, he painted more than he sculpted. Seeing Michelangelo's works in Florence changed his preference.

"I lean more toward durable rather than fragile materials," Caponi remarked, his Italian ancestry evident in his speech. "They tell me nothing is permanent, and that is precisely why I try to make things as permanent as possible."

Last year, Caponi was commissioned to do a sculpture for the exterior wall of Normandale Lutheran Church in Edina that faces Hwy. 100. The Christ-figure sculpture was completed in

September and installed in October. Made of hammered copper and welded steel, it measures 23 by 14 feet. It is composed of three elements, to portray the figure of Christ while suggesting the Holy Trinity. It was designed, Caponi said, to relate to the architectural structure, harmonize with the physical surroundings and communicate to the viewer.

Caponi began working on it in April and finished it in September, a "summer project" for him. He has many reasons for working fast.

"It gives a greater unity to the concept," he explained, "because it's like a crescendo to an eventual climax. If you take too many breaks, slow down or stop to think, you may lose that. You develop energy as you work."

The Normandale work is not the first public work Caponi has been commissioned to do. Others in the area include the portrait of Charles R. Brett for Electric Union in St. Paul; a bronze portrait of the founder of Minneapolis School of Music; a 10-foot figure of Christ for St. Clair's convent in Minneapolis; a 12-foot sculpture in Columbia Heights; a portrait of Saul for the YMCA building, Red Wing; and a 32-ton granite sculpture in the public mall at St. Cloud, a work that helped St. Cloud win the All-American City award in 1974.

Besides other Minnesota works, he has works represented in museums, in private collections, in other states and in Italy. The wax models for all the bronze motifs in the Eisenhower Library, Abilene, TX, were made by Caponi. His works have been represented in three educational movies, and he published a book



ANTHONY CAPONI, sculptor and art department chairman at Macalester College, shows one of his works at his Eagan home. This one, entitled "Undertow," was done in the 1960s.

of poetry and sculptures entitled "Boulders," in 1972.

Caponi is soft-spoken, but enthusiastic. He admits that he is working all the time. "But not necessarily on sculpture," he says, smiling.

Everything he does, he explained, is approached the same way.

"In teaching, it's important to show that art is an extension of the things one does every day. Almost everything can be done with more intensity, more creativity by doing it more expressively."

This year, Caponi is taking the summer off to build fences around his 63 acres, property that is surrounded by rapid development. The land serves as pasture for the cows he buys in the summer, and maybe some goats some day. A vegetable garden is growing in the front yard. A cement mixer sitting near the hill by the driveway represents his latest project, the beginning of a new studio and sculpture garden. Until now, Caponi has worked in a studio at Macalester.

"I want to work here in this location, and use my grounds as an exhibit," he explained.

"Sculpture is suitable for outside, and working the ground is esthetic in itself." When his project is completed, he may bring some of his sculptures that are at the college and place them in the exhibit.

He isn't sure when it will be completed. "If I say a certain date, that means I'll have to have it done by then!" he said, laughing.

Caponi attended public school in Italy; high school in Akron, OH; Cleveland School of Art, the University of Florence; Walker Art Center and the University of Minnesota, where he received both bachelor's and master's degrees. As a professor and department chairman, Caponi is involved with both teaching and administration. Students today, he believes, are generally better.

"They're more sophisticated, exposed to more," he said, "consequently they have a higher aptitude and higher motivation. They're more open, more resilient. It's fun to teach in college."

Students who meet him for the first time aren't sure if they should like or dislike him. As he points to the back yard where his students sometimes bring their guitars and gather for campfires, he explains that art cannot be taught without some respect for human nature. Nor can it be taught without some involvement in the three dimensional and all types of art, he feels.

Caponi did all of the designing, building and landscaping at his home by himself, something he describes as "an extension of his creative involvement." During the Renaissance, he explained, there weren't such rigid distinctions between the arts.

"I talk about that. But I also practice it," he remarked.