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## "Brilliant and strange" artist mined inspiration in coal region

*"Frank Wyso: Coal Miners of Northeast Pennsylvania," will be on exhibit in the Siegel Gallery on Lehigh's Mountaintop Campus through Feb. 19.*

Frank "Wyso" Wysochansky was a man driven to tell the story of Pennsylvania coal miners.

Wyso's intimate knowledge of miners and their families influenced his art throughout his life. His paintings and sculptures document the tools and working conditions of the anthracite coal mines of northeastern Pennsylvania.

Working furiously, Wyso churned out an estimated 5,000 pieces of art created through pen, ink, watercolor, oil, crayon and sculptural forms. He spread melted crayons across canvases and carved out images, creating figural sculptures from Bondo, an inexpensive automotive body repair product that he worked around armatures such as chicken bones, light bulbs, bags of sand, and wire coat hangers.

He had little formal training, but a passion for depicting the modest lives and working conditions of fellow miners, says Steve Lichak, senior producer in Lehigh's Library and Technology Services new Digital Media Studio, who is also an artist and is credited with bringing Wyso's work to wide audiences.

"The intensity, the pure, unadulterated intensity is what strikes me," Lichak says. "When you look at it, you see every stroke, laid out almost like a dance on paper. You can envision how he had to move his body to create that stroke."

### "It was literally a maze"

Beyond the technique was the subject matter: the hardscrabble lives of miners who worked in the cold mines through the winter months, then scratched out a modest existence the rest of the year, when the demand for coal dropped.

"He portrayed a real honesty," Lichak says. "These were gritty, dirty jobs, and the families were poor. They wore old, patched-together clothing, sat in dark barrooms, and carried lunchpails. He portrayed the way they really lived."

Wyso also poured his convictions into a series of more than 2,000 cartoon sketches, which appeared in humor magazines and most predominantly, in the *United Mine Workers Journal*. Wyso was only paid a few dollars for the cartoons that offered political and social commentary on the lives of the mine workers and the conditions under which they were forced to toil.

"That's a whole project unto itself," Lichak says. "The cartoons were initially created out of economic necessity as a way of helping to support his meager lifestyle, but they're still a valid form of folk art and provide a glimpse into the passion that drove his more evolved art."

After Wyso died in 1994 at the age of 79, the artist's family asked Lichak to help catalogue his work. Lichak had become acquainted with Wyso through a documentary he made on the outsider artist's work shortly before his death, but he initially resisted the monumental task of chronicling a lifetime of the artist's work.

Several years later, he relented and began to wade through stacks of paintings, drawings, and pieces of sculpture left in Wyso's Blakeslee homestead.

"He would finish a piece of art, frame it, and put it against the wall," Lichak says. "These pieces were 10 and 20 paintings deep all around the house. Then, when he couldn't fit one more thing along the walls, he started piling them in the basement and attic and making pathways to walk through. It was literally a maze."

Lichak set up a high-tech studio in the homestead, and spent the next two and a half years beginning to digitally record and catalogue each piece, working his way through more than 3,000 works.

"And there is no end in sight," he says. "The family still maintains hundreds and hundreds of art works around the country, there are thousands of paintings and sculptures now stored in floor to ceiling racks I built."

### "Small men doing big jobs"

To raise funds to preserve the work and expose Wyso's art to a broader audience, Lichak helped organize—with the assistance of Lehigh art professor, artist and critic Berrisford Boothe—an earlier show at South Side's Monsoon Gallery. Gallery director Ranjeet Pawar still maintains a large survey of Wyso's work, which helps to fund the archival preservation process.

Boothe says of Wyso: "In his insatiable desire to make art everyday, all the time, and without regard for formal concerns beyond the internal impulse, he clearly fits the bill of a 'visionary.' His best work follows the wind in his mind ... very brilliant and strange."

Lichak also worked with Lehigh University Art Galleries curator Ricardo Viera, Religion Studies Professor Norman Girardot, and outsider artist expert George Viener of the Reading Goggle Works, Outsider Folk Art Gallery, to bring Wyso's work to Lehigh for a three-month exhibit.

"Steve was so passionate about this artist," says Girardot, who also serves as faculty co-director of Lehigh's new ArtsLehigh program. "He felt that this was a human being who deserved his due and he is the one who should be credited with bringing Wyso's art to people."

"It's important work," Lichak says. "These were small men doing big jobs, by hand, under the worst of conditions. And Wyso captured it all—the struggle, the history, the lifestyle. It's important that it's seen."

While he continues to catalogue Wyso's work and locate an appropriate space for safe storage, he is also hoping to work more with a new discovery: Wyso's 56-year-old autistic nephew, whom Lichak describes as "an unknown genius."

"Like his uncle, he's an obsessive drawer and the tiny apartment he shares with his mother is filled with his drawings," Lichak says. "He's an incredible artist."

*"Frank Wyso: Coal Miners of Northeast Pennsylvania," will be on exhibit in the Siegel Gallery of Iacocca Hall on Lehigh's Mountaintop Campus through Feb. 19. For more information, call (610) 758-3615, or visit the Web site of the [Lehigh University Art Galleries](#). The opening of the first traveling exhibition of Wyso's work will be held from 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 14 at the Siegel Gallery.*

Go [online](#) for more information about Wyso's work and the project to preserve it.

--Linda Harbrecht

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