

Coal Region Artist

Frank

“Wyso”

Wysochansky

Art Exhibition

Featured at

Lehigh University

The worlds of art and coal mining don't usually intersect. They are very definitely two different worlds; one of light, color, and beauty, and one of darkness, danger, and sometimes brutality.

I first encountered the joining of these two worlds many years ago when I saw the famous depiction of a wife scrubbing her miner husband's back and his work shirt as he kneels at a tub of hot water, leaning on his arms, washing his face, his boots standing next to the coal stove in the basement kitchen. It was a scene I had seen almost daily in my young life growing up in Shamokin, PA in the Western Anthracite Middle Coal Field. I was stunned by the ability of the artist to bring such dignity to a life known mostly for hardship and disasters.

The artist of that work was Frank “Wyso” Wysochansky (1915-1994) of Blakely, PA. Wyso knew both worlds, and has left behind an incredible artistic account of what was once a miner's world. “Wyso,” as he preferred to be called, was a miner's son, one of twelve children of Ukrainian immigrants, Joseph and Anelia Wysochansky. During the Depression, Frank earned money by selling coal he picked from illegal “bootleg” mines, a common and dangerous job at the time. When the Civilian Conservation Corps came along, Wyso eagerly signed on and was sent to California to log trees.

On January 13, 1936, Wyso was at his CCC camp in California when his father was killed by a rock fall in a Wilson county mine. He was unable to get home in time for his father's funeral. His mother was pregnant with Walter, his youngest brother. To

Special recognition to Steve Lichak and The Morning Call newspaper for the use of artwork in this article.

by Jim Stevens

make ends meet in the now fatherless family, the three younger children were sent temporarily to a Ukrainian orphanage in Philadelphia. Eventually, four of the brothers became priests, including Walter, the youngest.

Wyso continued working at odd jobs wherever he could until World War II began. He enlisted in the Marines and was sent to the Pacific. It was while serving his country that Wyso decided he wanted to become a serious artist. He had always loved art, his brother Walter recalled.

"Frank ate, drank, and slept art his whole life. He was just infatuated with the life of a coal miner. He never married, although, yeah, he was handsome and funny enough to have plenty of girls going wild over him. He married art, and that was it."

As a youngster Frank drew on many surfaces, including sheepskin jackets. "He was so talented with pen and pencil, he worked for a high-school yearbook when he was in elementary school," said Father Walter.

The brothers sometimes speculate as to why Frank was so driven to draw. Some believe he was inspired by the dangerous drama of coal mining, having seen his father's legs covered by leeches, sucking bad blood from sores and bruises, or by watching his mother stiffen at the sound of mine emergency sirens or whistles: short signals for severe injuries, one eerily long note for fatal cave-ins. He also saw wives faint when their husbands bagged corpse was dropped off on the front porch, "as callously as a sack of potatoes."

There were memories of good times, too. Like many coal miners' children, Frank remembered the love and affection shared by the large families, and the simple pleasures of eating mushrooms picked by the miners on their way home from the mountain mines, and the joy of sharing a left-over treat from dads' lunch bucket at the end of a shift. Fond memories of summer days, when families had more time for singing, dancing, and story telling are scattered throughout his works. The miners lived a hard life, but they shared their homemade wine, made soups from their garden vegetables, and ate bread their wives baked over coal they mined and cracked. These happy times are a large part of the images of Wyso's art.

Wyso committed to art, studying water-coloring and cartooning at a school in Scranton, while living with his mother, his schooling funded by the G.I. Bill.

"He set up a studio in the basement of his mother's house where he lived until his death," said Steve Lichak, a trustee/curator for the Wyso trust, and the director of a Wyso documentary. "He enlivened the dingy space by appointing the dingy walls as a festive Mexican vista."

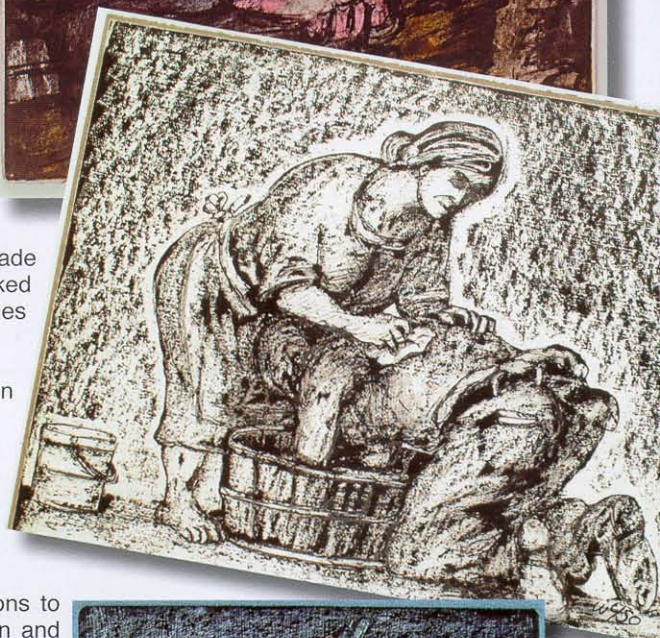
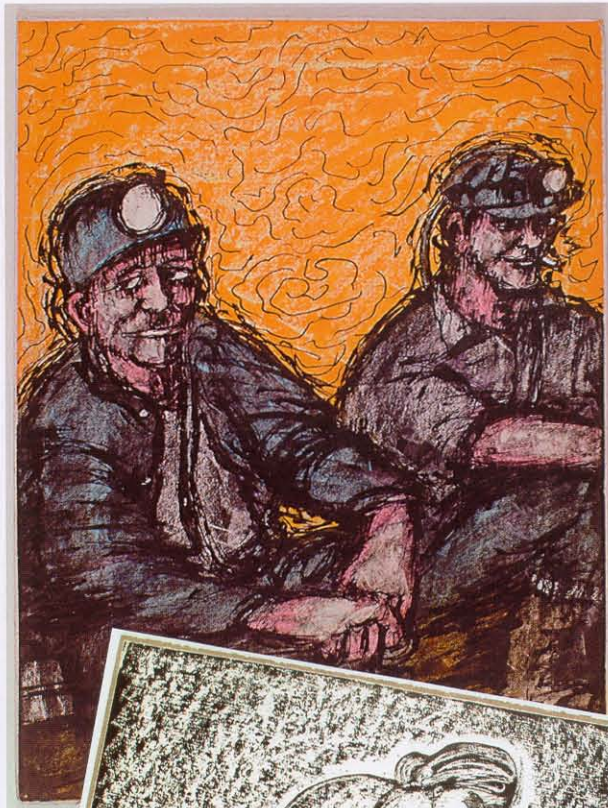
Surviving on his Marine pension and his mothers' generosity, he sold cartoons to journals for miners and dentists. For artistic satisfaction, he painted Ukrainian and Amish folk scenes. His brothers tried to guide him to a profitable career by encouraging him to focus on mining pictures.

"We pushed him into a unity of theme," said Father Walter. "We told him to paint what he knew best: his backyard."

And so he did, showing miners drilling in a cave, and smoking pipes in a cave-like tavern. They are shown huddled in coal cars, or "motors," descending into the mines, sharing lunch morsels with mine rats, a primitive gas warning system, and just staring off into their own private world. Their chiseled, dirt-streaked faces were immortalized by his drawings. Wyso's art also made political statements by showing miner's on crucifixes to call attention to their sacrifices and protest their terrible working conditions. On the spiritual side, Wyso used his sculptures to show the relationship of coal miners and religion.

Wyso lived an unusual life, working in his basement studio 12 hours a day, taking only Sunday off. He dressed in cowboy boots, a ten-gallon hat and a bolo tie, his artistic eccentricity. He never drove or owned a car, and could be abrasive when people didn't understand his art.

"He was a cantankerous son of a gun," said Father Walter. "He could never tolerate a phony. What you saw of Frank was what you got. He was as transparent as can be. He was a noble person."



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Coal Region Artist continued

Wyso's brothers became guardians of their brothers' art, knowing that he did not have the time or personality to manage an art career. They bought him supplies, sold his art at their parishes, and served as his agents and publicists.

Eventually, Wyso's art started receiving attention and critical acclaim as his works were shown at more than 50 shows, including the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio. A Wyso watercolor hung in a national exhibit curated by John Canaday, an influential art critic for the New York Times. A French publication listed Wyso as "a contemporary American visionary."

In the early 1990s, Wyso met with Steve Lichak, then a student of graphic design at nearby Lehigh University. Lichak grew up in Dunmore, the grandson of miners killed by black lung disease before he was born. Wyso's images of the miners' life triggered Lichak's memories of listening to mine stories huddled around a basement coal stove, or playing in abandoned breakers. Lichak began making a documentary of Wyso's life and art for the PBS station in Pittston, videotaping Wyso's uncommon creations using common materials. Wyso introduced Lichak to his entire collection, guiding him through a maze of paintings stacked along walls, 15 to 20 paintings deep. When wall space ran out, paintings were arranged in a maze in the living room. The house was bursting with art.

Lichak finished his documentary in 1994, two weeks before Wyso died from cardiac failure. It has never been aired.

Two years ago, Lichak, now a senior producer in Lehigh's Digital Media Studio, urged on by Father Walter and his brothers, decided to revive his interest in Wyso and his art by cataloging 3,000 of his estimated 5,000 works. He has built shelves, updated a website, and organized art shows. Backed by the Lackawanna Historical Society, he's assisting a \$40,000 campaign to cast an eight-foot bronze statue of a miner based on Wyso's designs. It will be dedicated to Wyso's father, and is destined for a levee in Olyphant, across the river from Blakely.



In February, a major exhibition of art created by Wyso was on exhibit at the Lehigh University Art Galleries in Lehigh, PA. The show, a collaboration between the Frank Wyso Charitable Foundation and the Lehigh University Art Galleries, featured Wyso's humane views of a sometimes inhumane industry. It was coordinated by Steven Lichak.

Future plans call for the Lehigh Art Show to travel to other Pennsylvania locations for the next two years before traveling to West Virginia locations and other nearby mining states.

Lichak is pleased to be shepherding dead and living visionaries.

"It's a way of giving back to the world that I wouldn't ordinarily have. Frankly, I don't have a choice. It's the power of prayer, and the love of pure art," said Lichak. For more information, please visit www.frankwyso.org.