

William Dole: A history of talent and luck

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Teachers of young children have an awesome responsibility — not only to nurture youthful aspirations, but to be on the lookout for budding talent in case it happens to be there.

One becomes keenly aware of this fact in considering the career of master artist William Dole, who talked earlier this week about his fledgling steps in the world of the paint and brush. The evening before, he had given a lecture ("Sources of an Artist's Inspiration") at UCSB — as part of the prestigious faculty research lectureship award which was bestowed on him this year.

Dole said that his artistic sense had been encouraged quite simply by a first grade teacher who brought in flowers for her students to paint, and further encouragement came later on, from a high school teacher who was instrumental in getting him accepted into an art school. He said that were it not for those encouragements he "might have been working for a highway department."

He also stressed that his career resulted from "being in the right place at the right time," thereby lending credence to the age-old concept that talent combined with the smallest amount of good fortune can result in successful endeavor.

In this case the talent and fate combination has resulted in an extraordinary contribution to the art world. Dole is considered by many art critics to be the greatest living master of the collage, although that is not his only medium. He also excels in oil painting, watercolor and drawing. While there are many adjectival descriptions of his work, including simplicity, uncomplicated use of color and Byzantine subtlety, the most characteristic aspect of Dole's collages is his use of ancient paper and old scraps of calligraphy and typography.

His works have appeared in more than 65 one-man exhibitions all over the world and his awards are numerous. From the nation's highest honor society in the arts — the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters — he won, in 1978, their Academy Award. Today, some 30 public collections contain at least one work by William Dole.

Dole, whose manner is as gentle and uncomplicated as his art, also has a large sense of humor and joyous outlook on life. He enjoyed recalling his first artistic attempts — starting with his first grade teacher:

"She brought in flowers and set up one bloom for each row of students," Dole said. "The first one in each row would have the best view. The others had to strain to see. Can you imagine a tulip from 30-40 feet away?"

Later on, in high school, another encouraging teacher helped him get a scholarship to the John Heron Art School in Indianapolis, Ind.

However, Dole chose not to go there, but went instead to Olivet College in Michigan. Here, he studied more prose and poetry than art, and he met literature greats such as Carl Sandburg (intriguing, very paternal, used to come over to the college, bring his guitar and recite from "The People



News-Press photo by Rafael Maldonado

WILLIAM DOLE was awarded this year's Faculty Research Lectureship Award at UCSB.

Yes' which had just been published") Gertrude Stein ("marvelous"), and Sherwood Anderson ("the best of all, he lived there, we'd drink beer, sit around in a coffee shop downtown called The College Inn, and talk in small groups").

As it turned out, Olivet was, in Dole's mind, an example of being in the right place at the right time.

"I think that if I had gone to art school," said Dole, "I almost certainly would have become a commercial artist."

Instead, he became a painter, and in his UCSB lecture Dole often referred to art as poetry.

Dole went on to UC Berkeley, where he received his master's degree, and during this time he experienced what he considers his first big artistic success. He was accepted into a national (juried) exhibition of painting at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor.

"I felt pretty good. There were some pretty important artists there," he remembered.

The painting he entered was one of an old house in San Francisco, which he described as "a moody kind of painting, dark," a work which he still has in his own collection today.

After he finished his two-year lectureship at Berkeley, Dole began to look around for a job. In 1949 he came to teach at the Santa Barbara College. The university system had just taken over and the art department had just started to expand. It was, Dole said, another case of being in the right place at the right time.

"I also happened to be here when Donald Bear was alive and still the director of the museum," said Dole. "He was an inspiration."

During the previous night's lecture Dole had talked about Bear. While showing a slide of one his own paintings entitled "Palms," Dole said the work was unfinished when he showed it to the former museum director.

He said, "Don't do anything more to

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it, don't do another thing'," Dole recalled. "Ordinarily that approach drives me crazy."

That approach, however, was perhaps a preamble to Dole's gift of understatement, and it stayed with him.

The first collage Dole ever did was during a mid-50s sabbatical to Italy. It was during this time that he happened upon the idea of using ancient letters and words in his work.

"I discovered in a market place a couple of old books," he said. "I realized that here were materials to work with. The printed word, even in an unknown language...even parts of words, are concrete poetry."

In talking about his average work day, Dole joked that his normal day was "terrible," implying lack of time. However, frustration is not a part of Dole's life and with characteristic humor he joked that even if there was any frustration around he would try to hide it.

Five days out of each week Dole rises early in order to get to work. His studio is at UCSB, where he teaches painting and drawing, but it is not in the art department and is so well hidden that even when he gives out directions people can't find it.

He shuts the door, turns on music, and then goes to work.

Asked what kind of music he listens to while he works, Dole replied that he liked Bach, Vivaldi ("but I'm awfully tired of 'The Four Seasons'"), Stravinsky, and rock.

Rock?

"I'm the world's greatest authority on rock — in my age group," Dole said with a laugh.

He said he was also an "avid follower" of jazz, and that he took piano lessons until his grandmother sold the piano because she felt he wasn't practicing enough.

"She bought me a funeral plaque instead," said Dole, laughing again. "She said, 'I thought you should have something practical.'"

In summarizing the various sources of his inspiration, Dole told his audience at UCSB that the list included his students ("presentation and response being a necessary part of art"), the university ("a sympathetic environment for life as an artist"), the paintings of the masters (especially Michelangelo, Da Vinci and Botticelli, as well as Byzantine and Chinese art). He also gave tribute to photographs ("I find resources here that inspire, enlarge my sense of the understanding of the visual world") and cited Henri Cartier Brisson in particular ("he had a concept of the 'precise moment'"). Dole said that he also went to nature for inspiration and that with a pencil he "refreshed (his) experience." In speaking about the use of color in art, he described the "impossible colors" of sunset over the Goleta Valley and of abalone shells, as well as the hues of man-made objects such as a beach towel from I. Magnin or a brick wall with a tobacco-brown door.

"Some people are voracious readers," said Dole. "I am a voracious looker."

Finally, Dole said during his interview that a very basic source of inspiration to him was his wife, Kate, whom he married in 1941 and who had given him seven children (every child's birthday he remembers). Kate helped him in a lot of ways, said Dole, and his meeting her was another example of how he had managed to be in the right place at the right time.