

Margaret Wharton, artist, 1943-2014

B 1943 Virginia, USA - d 20 May 2014 Chicago, USA

Artist known for transforming everyday objects helped found a gallery for female artists



Artist Margaret Wharton deconstructed, reconstructed and reimagined everyday objects to make works of art that could be whimsical, witty or simply thought-provoking in reflecting her vision of the world.

"Margaret was a consummate artist who envisioned everyday items — frequently wooden kitchen chairs — as having another life," Mary Jane Jacob, of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, said in an email. "She worked with phenomenal skill and imagination, enabling things we know well to be magically reborn."

Lynne Warren, a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, which collected some of Ms. Wharton's work, said the artist "was just a magician."

"She sliced them apart — she must have been a whiz with a band saw — and she would find within the chair so many other things," Warren said.

Ms. Wharton, 70, died Monday, Jan. 20, in her Riverside home, apparently of complications related to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, her son Gregory Harper said. She lived in Glenview for many years before moving to Riverside about six years ago.

She was born Margaret Wharton in Virginia. Her mother died when she was about 10, and she spent time as a child in North Carolina and later in Columbus, Ohio.

She received a degree from the University of Maryland in College Park and worked briefly in advertising before marrying and moving with her husband to Bethlehem, Penn., where he worked for Bethlehem Steel.

It was seeing materials being melted and made into steel that ignited her interest in making art, her son said.

"She began her artistic career in metal after taking a welding course," he said.

The family moved to Chicago about 1970. In 1972, she helped start Artemisia Cooperative Gallery, which was exclusively for female artists.

About the same time, she began studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and received a master of fine arts from there in 1975, her family said.

Ms. Wharton's works are included in collections at a number of U.S. museums, among them the Art Institute of Chicago, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Yale Art Museum in New Haven, Conn.

"Around 1981, we did (an exhibit and) a traveling show of her work," said Warren, of Chicago's MCA. The show made stops at museums and galleries in Texas, Florida and South Carolina.

She worked with a variety of materials but mostly wood, shaping figures, birds and animals from objects that included wooden shoes, baseball bats, rolling pins and trademark kitchen chairs — often recognizable in the finished art but always in new shapes and forms. Ms. Wharton is also survived by a daughter, Darby Harper; a sister Jane Farrell; a brother, George Wharton; and five grandchildren