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Internationally known artist's works cover the map

Chas Fagan has made a career out of bringing historical figures to life in sculpture and painting.

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By Michael J. Solender
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Chas Fagan works on a statue of Ronald Reagan. COURTESY CHARLES JOHNSON

More Information

- [Chas Fagan's work online](#)

To see his art work, go to www.chasfagan.com/main.html

The closest thing to formal art instruction that internationally acclaimed artist and Myers Park resident Chas Fagan ever received was the encouragement he got as a young boy from a family friend and portraitist.

Fagan spent much of his youth in Brussels, Belgium, as the son of a diplomat and had never considered pursuing art as a career.

But after looking at some of 10-year-old's drawings, the friend gave Chad a stick of charcoal and opened him up to a whole new world of drawing, approaches and techniques.

She made him promise her that he would never stop drawing, a commitment he's honored to this day.

Fagan might be better known to Charlotte residents as the sculptor of the "Spirit of Mecklenburg," the recently installed sculpture of Captain James Jack dedicated to the city last year by the May 20th Society in recognition of the historic Mecklenburg Declaration.

The sculpture is along Little Sugar Creek, adjacent to Central Piedmont Community College, just south of uptown.

Creating art that captures historically significant individuals and events is familiar territory for Fagan. Working in a variety of media, Fagan has created a body of commissioned portraits and sculptures.

A life-size oil portrait of Barbara Bush for the White House.

An 8-foot bronze of President George H. W. Bush and two accompanying eagles, as the centerpiece of a monument to the former president, in Sesquicentennial Park in Houston, Texas.

A bronze sculpture of Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon, created for Purdue University, where Armstrong attended college.

A bronze statue of President Ronald Reagan, donated by the state of California to the National Statuary Hall Collection, where the sculpture stands in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda.

"My entrée into this arena sprang really from chance and serendipity," said Fagan, 45, who moved to Charlotte eight years ago from Philadelphia to be close to his wife's father, who lives in the area. "My educational background is in Soviet Studies. While at school, I did political cartooning for the school paper. When I graduated, political cartoons became a reliable source of income for me, and I was fortunate enough to get some great exposure, which led to more work."

That exposure included political cartoons featured in the Washington Post, New York Times, National Review and Newsweek. Soon, Fagan was doing still-lives, landscapes and portraiture.

"After school, I moved to Washington, D.C., figuring there would be a market for political cartoons and artwork," he said.

"Ironically much of the work I did there was for New York-based magazines."

In the late 1990s, after his portrait of Reagan was featured on the cover of the conservative political magazine, The Weekly Standard, Fagan received two phone calls: One from former Reagan chief-of-staff Michael Deaver and another was from former Reagan staffer E. Pendleton "Pen" James and former Attorney General Edwin Meese.

"The calls came the same day the magazine cover came out, and each of them asked me if I was interested in doing a portrait of Ronald Reagan in New York City," said Fagan.

"Of course, I immediately recognized the significance and prestige of the opportunity and welcomed the project."

That led to other commissions, and Fagan's artistic talents have been in demand ever since.

He so impressed the producers of C-SPAN with one of his works on a smaller project that they commissioned him to paint the portraits of every U.S. President from George Washington to Bill Clinton for use in their year-long television series, "American Presidents."

Fagan recently returned from Simi Valley, Calif., where he was installing his latest statues of Ronald and Nancy Reagan in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. The works were commissioned by the library in honor of the Reagan Centennial Celebration on Feb. 6.

Fagan said he often does his best work under tremendous time constraints.

"I was given only 90 days to complete the 40 or so portraits I did for the C-Span American Presidents project," he said.

Fagan said that to best capture the essence of his portrait subjects, he really has to get to know them.

He typically spends considerable time researching his subjects, reviewing photo libraries of them when available and getting to know what makes them tick.

Fagan said he tries not to worry about the responsibility he bears in capturing likenesses of important people for display in such prominent places.

Rather, he tries to keep focused on the task at hand and doesn't let himself get distracted when performing his work or even when meeting some of his subjects.

"I had the chance to meet and talk with (astronaut) Neil Armstrong," Fagan said.

"It was a bit rushed, and there were some specific details about the project I had to nail down.

"As he spoke with me, he went off on his experience of flying the craft that landed on the moon. He described the moment right before landing as they were almost running out of fuel on the way in.

"I was absolutely fascinated with the visual he painted about the moon dust undulating before him like a carpet. I couldn't help but be a bit distracted then."

History will forgive Fagan for that.

Michael J. Solender is a freelance writer.

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