

COMPLIMENTARY
A bimonthly publication from
Times & News Publishing Company

PART 2 OF OUR TOWN, USA

Vol. 3/No. 2 APRIL/MAY 2006

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Companion Personality Profile – Sheila Waters



Master of her craft

by Ashley Andyshak
Photos by Bill Schwartz

Most wouldn't ordinarily expect to find an artist commissioned by the Queen of England to be living in Adams County.

But world-reknoned artist Sheila Waters, who now resides in Fairfield, is anything but ordinary.

For starters, Waters graduated with a four-year degree in three years from Medway College of Art in Kent, won a scholarship to the Royal College of Art in London, and has had her calligraphy and other works of art commissioned by the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh.

Mrs. Waters was also part of a group of 10 hired to transcribe the Royal Air Force Roll of Honour, listing the names of the thousands who died in World War II.

Still going strong at 77 years of age, Waters has been working out of her home art studio in Fairfield since she and her husband, Peter, retired there in 1995.

Retirement for Sheila Waters hasn't meant slowing down. Waters' home, decorated with various works of calligraphy done by herself and others, houses in its lower level an archival printing press, as well as a graphics computer and copier, where Sheila reproduces her works for sale. Waters sells her prints out of her home, as well as through Gallery 30 on York Street in downtown Gettysburg.

"I try to capture the message of the words in the style of the calligraphy," Waters said, showing a print of a poem she stylized using different forms of text for the various moods of the written words.

Waters has undertaken many world-class commissions in her career. In addition to those works commissioned by royalty, she spent 18 years illuminating an 80-page manuscript of Dylan Thomas' "Under Milk Wood." She also founded the Washington Calligraphers Guild and taught the Smithsonian Institute's first calligraphy classes.

Waters takes on more localized commissions as well, including signs, notecards, and other prints, all originally crafted using her calligraphy and illustration skills.

In addition to her own art, Waters is now working on preserving her husband's life through a book about

his work in Florence. She is co-authoring the book with Randy Silverman, chief of the library conservation department at Utah State University.

Peter Waters, a book binder and a pioneer in the field of library conservation, was commissioned in 1966 to restore and repair a number of books affected by a flood that damaged much of Italy's national library's collection of Renaissance-era books, including the Magliabecchi and Palatine collections of early books printed on handmade paper.

After Peter Waters set up the restoration process in Florence, the U.S. Library of Congress invited him to come to the States to develop the library's conservation office.

Ultimately, had Florence not flooded, Sheila said, she and her family may never have come to the United States.

"The flood brought us to the U.S.," she said. "We might have still been in London otherwise."

Peter Waters died in June 2003 of mesothelioma, which was brought on by his use of asbestos bookbinding tools in the mid-1900s before the dangers of asbestos were known.

Waters displays the many stages her works of art go through from start to finish on a table in the lower level of her home in Fairfield.



Sheila Waters holds one of the many works of calligraphy she has been commissioned for by both national and international organizations. Waters' resumé also includes calligraphy for the Queen of England and the Duke of Edlnburgh, among others.

"Back then, they changed the wooden handles on all the bookbinding tools to asbestos to keep them from charring," said Sheila. "He was rounding off the ends of the asbestos handles without wearing a mask...no one knew about the dangers of it."

The importance of such a work goes beyond biographical preservation. "Without Peter's archives, young people (in library conservation) would not know where their field came from," Waters said.

Peter's roomful of files includes blueprints and plans for his book restoration and preservation process, as well as a collection of letters written between him and Sheila during his time in Florence.


"I try to capture the message of the words in the style of the calligraphy."

Sheila Waters

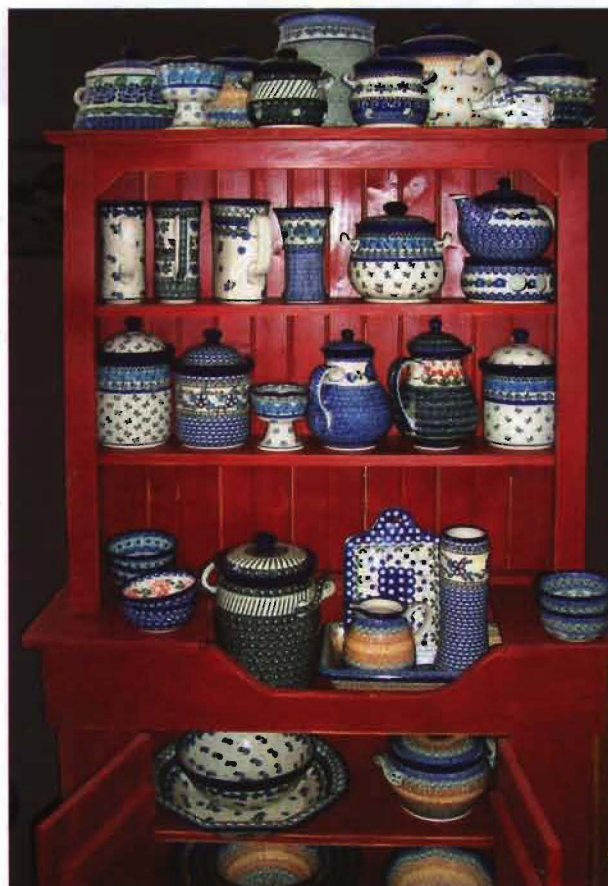
After completion of the book, all of Waters' papers and files will be donated to the University of Texas at Austin, the only university in the nation with a Ph.D. program in library conservation.

Sorting through the collection of her husband's work is "incredible ... it's like I'm reliving it all," Sheila said.

Waters plans to continue her busy schedule of traveling, teaching, speaking, and of course, creating masterpieces, "as long as I can stand the airports," she says.

Silverman and Waters will travel to Florence in November to present the history of Peter Waters' work at a conference commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Florence flood. 

The art studio in the lower level of Waters' home is the starting point for her many projects. Her studio is complete with an archival printing press, computer, and copier equipment, allowing Waters to reproduce her unique works for sale.



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