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THE COMMEMORATOR

Over the past few decades, Jack Scharr has quietly been building a niche fine-art empire in Chesterfield Valley. This month, his influence reaches as far away as Beijing

By Dawn Reiss | Photographs by Katherine Bish

It was once known as the Gumbo Flats. Rich with silt from the spoils of the Missouri River flood plain, the prized fertile land turned into a muddy gumbo when it rained or the water overflowed the river's banks. Mixed into a gravel-like substance, the earth here helped pave the streets of Forest Park for the 1904 World's Fair and Olympic Games in St. Louis. Farm fields and the former "Gumbo Jail" have given way to the longest outdoor strip mall in America and Spirit of St. Louis Airport.

Tucked next to the runways are a white farmhouse and barn that have been converted into an art gallery and a working foundry where bronzes are cast alongside other artistic endeavors. It is as easy to miss as it is to find. A few modern art pieces are scattered

on the lawn, remnants left by the previous tenants. Adorning a trellis, a tunnel of green honeysuckle blossoms leads into a sculpture garden. The art gallery is a treasure trove of works by Picasso, Chihuly, Frederick Hart, Roy Lichtenstein, Georg Baselitz, Robert Rauschenberg and many others.

It is here, in Chesterfield Valley, that 64-year-old Jack Scharr has built a niche empire with Fine Art Limited. The business has become one of the world's largest publishers of fine art commemorating special events and the sole fine-art licensee for the United States Olympic Committee, making Scharr well-known to the likes of Maya Angelou, the marine-life artist known as Wyland and even former President Ronald Reagan.

It is a hot early summer day in St. Charles, Ill. Crowds of people stream in and out of an art street fair that features Fine Art Limited as its premier tent. Two Wyland dolphin statues glisten in the sunlight. One, called "Faster, Higher, Stronger," is encased in an acrylic pyramid.

"If you look at it straight on, it looks like there are six dolphins," Scharr says to a passerby. "It just becomes magical. See how it becomes multiples of the dolphins?"

Scharr moves through the growing crowd inside the tent. He is slender and sun-kissed with white-blond hair, his face etched with character lines. Just a day earlier, Scharr, who is the president of Fine Art Limited, was in Maya Angelou's home in Harlem, where she was being filmed reading her poem

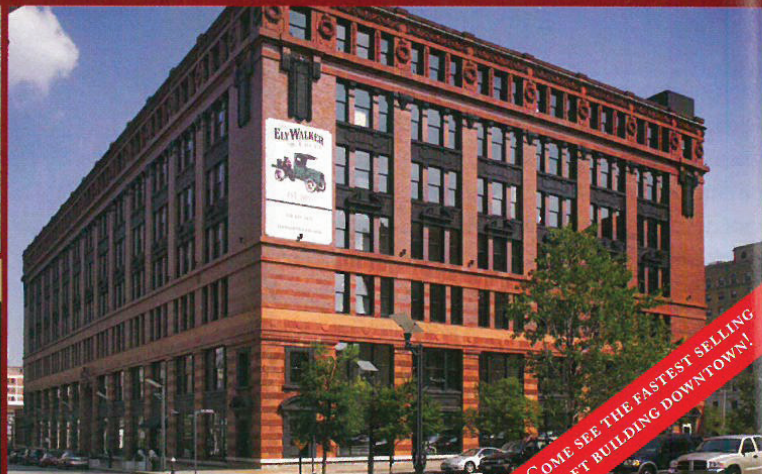
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"Amazement Awaits" for NBC's broadcast of the 2008 Summer Olympics, which open August 8 in Beijing. Scharr was already working on a project with Angelou that will combine art, poetry and jewelry when he heard about the U.S. Olympic Committee's mission for the summer games: to reach the American kids and renew their interest in the Olympics. Thinking that Angelou might be the perfect person to inspire them, Scharr traveled to her home in Winston-Salem, N.C., to make a presentation and convince her that writing a poem for the Olympics was worth her time.

"I started telling her that the Olympic Committee is trying to reach out to the youth of America and the youth of the world," Scharr says. "The idea is to inspire children to want to compete in the games and get involved in sports. That maybe they will have the amazement of qualifying for the Olympic team. And maybe win a medal, even a gold medal, and step up on the platform to hear the national anthem play."

With that, Angelou waved her left hand to silence him and started writing on a yellow legal notepad that is always by her side.

"I didn't know if this was good or bad," Scharr recalls with a laugh. Minutes later, they began to talk again.

"Remember a few years ago when a young man ran the marathon and entered the stadium," Scharr implored. The marathon had already finished. The gold medal winner had been announced. "The runner, representing his country, was from one of the African countries, and he falls," Scharr told her. "His father is in the stands. His father comes onto the field to help him cross the finish line, and when he was asked later on, 'Why did you try so hard—the race was over?' he said, 'I came here to compete—and I'm representing my country—and I'm going to cross that finish line.'"

The story convinced Angelou to write the poem.

"He's a charming man," she says of Scharr. "He really has a broad view of the world, so he sees us all on this planet working together. I also like the fact that he has a sense of humor. I never choose people who don't have a sense of humor. He likes to laugh, and that is a good thing. It is dangerous not to laugh, because being a cheerful spirit is good medicine."

Months later, the poem was complete. "Amazement Awaits" will be presented at the

Olympics along with a work of visual art by Cristóbal Gabarrón. Although Angelou says the verses could mean a thousand different things to different people, her central mission was to highlight the hope that the Olympics bring to the world.

"The Olympic Games are very important all the time," she says. "But this year it is more important than ever. We need the aspect of men and women from different cultures coming together, competing in an amicable, amiable atmosphere, not trying to see who can take whose life faster."

"I wanted to write about the sameness," Angelou continues. "Although we are different, like snowflakes, we are more alike than unlike. If we would ever understand that, we would stop fearing each other and hating each other and being so darn standoffish."



Being perceived as unapproachable has never been a problem for Scharr. The son of an accountant and secretary, Scharr grew up near the Missouri-Illinois border, attending Riverview Gardens High School. Unlike his older sister, Peggy, a quiet, studious schoolteacher, he aspired to have fun.

"I was a pretty wild and crazy kid," he says. "My mom never knew what to do with me, because I'd just do what I wanted. I did almost every crazy thing you can imagine."

A swimmer, lifeguard and defensive back, Scharr played freshman football until a diving

accident nearly left him paralyzed at the age of 15. Scharr was rushed to the hospital, where doctors drilled holes into his skull, inserting metal screws that were attached to weights to keep his head from moving. For 30 days Scharr rotated on a metal striker, a rotisserie-like device, to prevent bedsores and stabilize his head.

He eventually left the hospital and wore a neck brace for several weeks. But the injury didn't stop Scharr. He continued diving, climbing telephone poles that lined nearby canal bridges and scaling limestone quarries.

After graduating from high school, Scharr started working on a General Motors assembly line caulking the roofs of trucks. "It was a terrible job," he says—so he told his father he wanted to go to college. The response: There's no way you'll make it through, but if you're determined to try, then pay for it yourself. Six years later, in 1968, Scharr graduated from the University of Missouri—St. Louis, which he accomplished by going to night school while working as a traveling salesman. Scharr was working as a marketing director for the Pennsylvania Glass Sand Corporation when he met his wife, Debbie, a flight attendant for Ozark Air Lines.

"She was the love of his life," remembers artist and longtime friend Don Wiegand, "and I don't think he's ever gotten over her."

Jack proposed to Debbie with a Savage 22-gauge shotgun. He tied the ring around the trigger guard.

"I knew she wouldn't want it, but I thought it would be fun. She refused to open the box. I kept saying, 'Just open the box, just open the box.' Finally she did."

They were married for 12 years, until a snowy night on January 9, 1987. The couple, who a year earlier had adopted a son, Christopher, had just purchased an Oldsmobile Toronado.

"She had an accident earlier that day," Scharr recalls. "Not a bad accident, but the car had spun out and hit something. She had come back shaken up, so I drove the Toronado home for her."

They were coming down Highway 109, less than a mile from their home, when the car spun out of control.

"It just hydroplaned around," Scharr recalls, his voice beginning to quaver. "And an oncoming car hit us. It happened so quickly, and that was it. The car kind of caved in on me, and I had a collapsed lung." He struggled to breathe as the

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paramedics arrived.

"It seemed like the ambulance was there almost immediately," he says.

"We are going to get you out," the paramedics told him.

"No," he said. "Get her out of here now."

And they did.

They rushed Scharr and his wife away in two different ambulances, taking her first. When Scharr's ambulance arrived at the hospital, he learned his wife was dead. The funeral was held a few days later. Determined to go, Scharr hired a private ambulance to transport him from the hospital to bid her farewell one last time.

"Your whole life just turns upside down because what you did, what you enjoyed, is now different," Scharr says, tears streaming down his face. "It's hard. You have to adjust. You have to open up new avenues and go in other directions. I just engrossed myself in my work for quite a while, to just not think about anything."

Scharr had already started collecting bronze sculptures when a friend introduced him to Wiegand in 1981.

"Don was this struggling young artist trying to get by," Scharr recalls.

He gave Wiegand \$2,000 in seed money, commissioning him to sculpt bronze busts of Charles Lindbergh. They agreed to sell the busts for \$400 each, hoping to net \$200 in profit per sculpture. The pair hosted a party at Wiegand's studio, where they took orders for 13 casts.

Three weeks later Wiegand called Scharr to tell him that the busts actually cost \$2,000 each to make.

"Don didn't know any better," Scharr says, "because he'd never done a limited edition before and thought if he did a whole bunch of these at one time, he could do them really inexpensively. If I had forced him to deliver them to me, he couldn't have done it. He didn't have any money."

Instead they formed a partnership, Wiegand Studios Limited Edition. Scharr paid for the materials and commissioned a few more busts to be sold at a starting price of \$4,000 to pay off their loss. One still stands in the Lambert-St. Louis International Airport.

"In life and in business, you have to figure out how to make it work," Scharr says. "You have to figure out a way to get through it."

In 1985 Scharr was introduced to Andrew Nelson, a former J. Walter Thompson advertising executive, who was working on a creative project for the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation. It was an encounter that changed Scharr's life forever.

They met in New York, where Nelson asked Scharr to assist him in putting together and presenting to the foundation a commemorative art proposal for the Statue of Liberty's 100th anniversary, then upcoming in 1986. They scored the deal, and Nelson handed Scharr a gold mine.

"Andy tells me, 'I don't want to do this. I want you to do this. I'm retiring soon, but I'll help you,'" Scharr recalls. "He said, 'What do you want to call your company?'"

Over lunch, Scharr came up with a company name: Fine Art Limited. Nelson drew the logo on a napkin. (That logo is still used today.) After lunch, Scharr signed a contract granting him the only official license to market Ellis Island commemorative art.

Almost immediately, Scharr began searching for artists of various nationalities who could sculpt the 14 individual bronze bas-reliefs—one depicting each of the major ethnic immigrant groups that entered the United States through Ellis Island. The completed reliefs were each imprinted with the word "Liberty" in the native language of the country they represented.

Scharr continued juggling his full-time job at Pennsylvania Glass Sand with his work on the Ellis Island project. Soon, his work there caught the attention of the U.S. Olympic Committee. As a result, Scharr became its sole fine-art licensee, giving him rights to publish all Olympic posters, paintings and sculptures beginning with the 1998 Olympic Games in Seoul, South Korea. Scharr's concept since has been consistent and succinct: Go after the best and most recognizable artists in the world to promote the Olympics with their art.

As his work with the Olympic Committee has grown, so has Fine Art Limited's reputation. The company has produced fine art for many national events, including the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery of the New World, the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Constitution and the fall of the Berlin Wall. For the last of these, Scharr commissioned Hiro Yamagata to design a painting of the Statue of Liberty, which was presented at the Berlin Wall in Germany and to President Reagan. More recently, in addition to working on his Olympic projects,

Scharr is representing "The American," a 21-story bronze monument depicting an American Indian brave that's currently being built in Tulsa, Okla. The monument will be 50 feet taller than the Statue of Liberty.

Yet even his success hasn't come without heartache. Scharr lost the majority of his artwork during the flood of 1993 when the Monarch Levee broke and more than 12 feet of water ruined several million dollars' worth of artwork. Floating in a bass boat, Scharr tried to collect the most valuable pieces; after a legal battle with his insurance company, he started over again.

Scharr's ability to sell artwork has helped him gain national and international recognition—he won the prestigious international ARCALE 2000 award in Salamanca, Spain, for instance, for his promotion of contemporary artists—even though he is relatively unknown in St. Louis. He's helped many recognizable artists gain success, including the muralist Wyland.

"A lot of my success has been due to Jack," says Wyland, who is the first official Olympic artist for the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver. "I love the guy. He's a real visionary who has so much passion for the Olympics. He always puts the light on other people. It's never been about him."

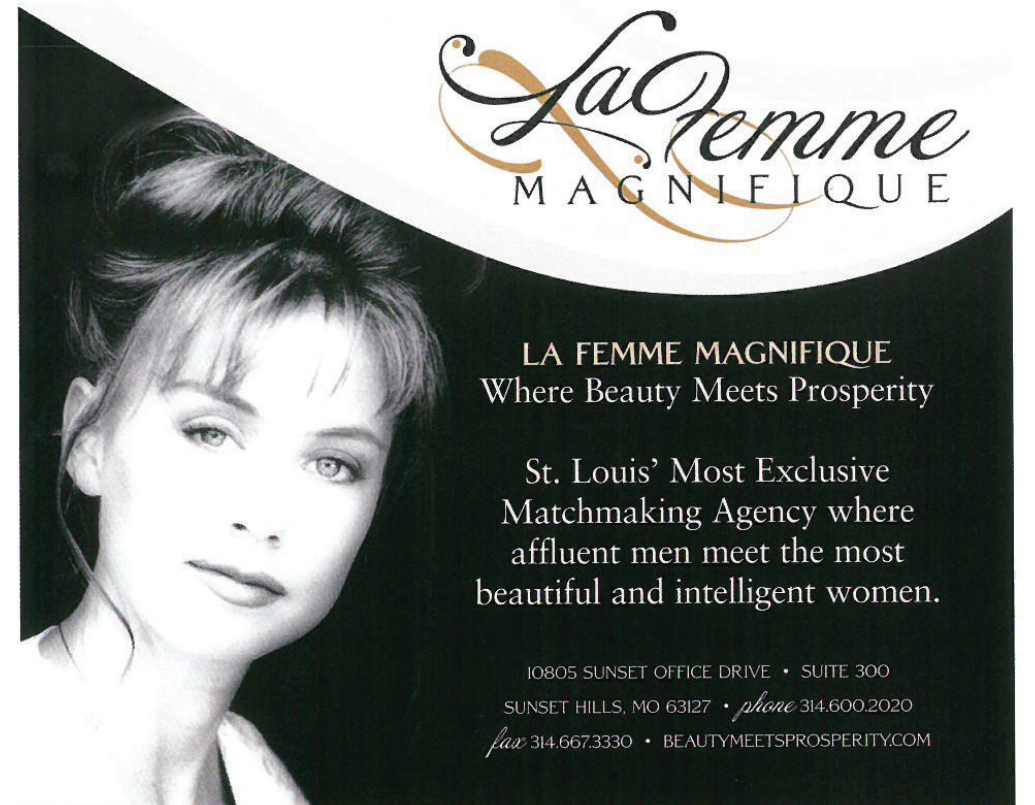
To Scharr, the artwork he produces helps commemorate a moment in time. By preserving the artwork, he is helping preserve history.

"Historically it is the artwork that is done that goes on to document an event," Scharr says. "You look at most Olympic books, and whatever the year, you'll see the poster that was chosen to commemorate that Olympics first. It's fun for the artists, but really it's about the athletes they represent. The athletes are totally unpaid people who participate in the Olympics for the sheer joy of it."

To give the children of St. Louis a chance to experience a "mini Olympics," Scharr is hosting several athletic events August 15 through 17 on Fine Art Limited's 5-acre property. Children will have a chance to paint an Olympic-themed mural with artist Rip Kastaris and participate in several sporting events, including gymnastics and track-and-field activities.

"Like Maya Angelou's poem, we are trying to inspire the youth of the world to let them know what the Olympics stand for," Scharr says. "We are trying to show them how they can be involved." ●

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