

Pillar of the Community

Artist *John Mlacak*: In His Element

By Shelagh Needham

Photo by Jacqueline Turpin

Not many people have had three successful careers. But at 67, after 35 years with Bell-Northern Research (now Nortel Networks), and 11 years in local municipal and regional politics in Ottawa-Carleton, John Mlacak is totally immersed in his third venture as an artist.

At 1 a.m., when most of the city's residents are sleeping, he is often still painting in his studio at his home in the old part of Kanata.

He works in oils on 20 canvases at a time using bold, dramatic colours. The paintings, of landscapes in Canada and Europe, are set neatly around the walls of the basement in various stages of completion. As he finds inspiration, Mlacak chooses one to work on.

"Half my paintings I do outside and the other half I paint from photographic material or creations based on memorable impressions," he said. "When I paint outside I usually get the bulk of my painting, maybe 80 percent, done in two to three hours at one sitting. But the last 20 percent takes 80 percent of the time."

He never planned on becoming an artist, but took up painting after a heart attack in 1978 as a way to pass time while recovering. Over the years he continued taking classes, but it wasn't until his retirement from BNR in 1994 that he began painting full-time.

He looks at it as an extension of his design work with the company.

"I spent my whole professional career in engineering and design. Painting is another form of design. A different medium, but basically I'm still designing," he said.

Mlacak participates in numerous shows annually, including the Ottawa Art Festival, the Elmwood Art and Home Show and the ever-popular Exposition in Chelsea, adjacent to Gatineau Park, where artists display their paintings on easels in a magnificent garden setting. He has won many awards for his art in juried exhibitions and donates several paintings each year to a number of charities.

His wife, Beth, is the business manager.

The couple met when she was a nurse at a Montreal hospital and they married in 1961. They moved to Kingston while Mlacak took an M.Sc. in electrical engineering at Queen's University, then to Ottawa. Beth had read an article in *Time* magazine which talked about Bill Teron and his vision for a new town.

"We started to look for Kanata," said Mlacak. "We drove into this area twice because they'd mentioned South March and we couldn't find Kanata."

They eventually found the homes Teron was building and left requirements for their first house. Shortly after that, they received a call that a suitable home was available and they have lived there ever since.

They became part of a group that met with Teron to discuss his plans for the new town.

"His vision of a town, not a subdivision, attracted me," said Mlacak. "He convinced us that he would follow through on his unique vision and values. And it was designing a complete new town which also interested me, because I was involved in telecommunications system design at the time."

Through a chance meeting, Mlacak was asked to sit on the Court of Revision - the committee that reviewed property assessment appeals. Soon after that he ran for and was elected a councillor of March Township (which later became part of the City of Kanata, now included in the City of Ottawa) and became involved in many aspects of the development of the new community.

In 1968, he was elected reeve of March Township, a position he held until 1976. The last two years as reeve, from 1975 to 1976, were with a leave of absence from BNR to concentrate full-time on planning the new town in the context of local and regional municipal official plans.

He was in his element as he started work on a plan that originally envisaged a new town in March Township, then



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later included Glen Cairn in Goulbourn Township, Bridlewood in Nepean and Kanata in March Township. In particular he enjoyed designing the Beaverbrook and Chimo communities with their sensitivities to the environment and community architecture.

The Council adopted Teron's vision of clusters and pathways throughout the area. Trees and rocks were retained as part of the landscape, though Mlacak is saddened by some of the new developments where these values have not been maintained.


But he still enjoys walking and cycling in the community, particularly the wooded areas between Kanata Lakes and Morgan's Grant, though he finds the rural roads too busy these days and sticks to the pathways. He especially likes the Beaverbrook pathways that he was part of creating.

Mlacak spent five years with the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton as a councillor and a further three years as a commissioner on the National Capital Commission. He later participated in a design committee that recommended the logo and flag designs for the new City of Ottawa.

Last year he had his second heart bypass surgery and tires more easily. He finds he needs a nap most afternoons and doesn't start painting until later in the day, but goes on well into the night. He's had to cut back on exhibiting at some of the shows.

As business manager, Beth attends gallery meetings, sets up and attends





shows, escorts prospective artwork buyers round their home gallery and generally makes sure things run smoothly, leaving her husband free to paint. She'd like him to lose weight too, and that is a priority this year with good progress to date.

"If anyone wants to know about any diet programmes, he's done them all. And I don't think there's anything he doesn't like to eat," she said.

Like most artists, Mlacak's work has gone through different phases. A few years ago he included miniatures and larger canvases. This year he bought a large studio easel, to work on even larger canvases, so large he has to work downtown in an Ottawa studio.

At the Koyman Galleries in Ottawa's Rideau Centre, his work is selling

steadily. They also do some of the framing that, until recently, Mlacak did himself, leaving him more time for his artwork.

Any spare time is spent with the family. Their son Bill, 40, is a freelance computer programmer and lives in New Hampshire with his wife, Joanna, and their two children, Sophia, 7 and Helena, 4. Daughter Kirsten, 39, works at the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) in Ottawa and Siobhan, 36, lives in Paris, where she teaches English as a Foreign Language and is also a successful black-and-white photographer.

But as spring comes around there are paintings to be worked on and shows to set up.