

The Wright StuffThe Life and Work of Donald B. Wright, An American Original

I didn't know who Donald Wright was when we first met. I didn't know of his reputation as a critically acclaimed sculptor, jeweler and designer. I only knew that he was a fascinating, irreverent, supremely confident, well-dressed gentleman with a heretic's twinkle in his intelligent blue eyes ... a highly individualized person with a very particular way of viewing ... and being ... in the world. I'd never met anyone quite like him before, and do not imagine I shall ever again. He is a brilliant one-of-a-kind talent, and over the almost decade of our friendship, I have learned to love and appreciate this rare human conundrum known as Donald Wright. Leafing through the stories written about him and looking at scores of photographs of his exceptional adventures, it occurred to me that speaking with others who had known him throughout the different stages of his life might help paint a deeper portrait of this still-vital-at-80-years-of-age artist who has dared to be completely himself. Before we begin to explore the singular life of Donald B. Wright, a couple of quotes to ponder ...

"He should have been much more famous than he was, and I think in the future he will be. What his mind conceives and executes is unique to him. There is no jewelry like his ... he is the only one ... he is a master of designing in space." Santa Fe Gallery Owner Tresa Vorenberg

"An object made by Donald Wright presents itself, sui generis, odd and beautiful, like a basilisk egg at the entrance to a cave. "Donald Wright, The Sculpture and Jewelry" by author Dennis Jarrett

Donald Wright has consistently followed the Sufi poet Rumi's admonition to "move from within". Wright is that rare person who has turned life dreams into adventuresome reality, without hesitation, without fear, and without a well-heeled benefactor. He has what the Finns call "sisu", or "intestinal fortitude". When times were tough, this man melted down his silver flatware, fashioned it into jewelry, and then hitchhiked to San Francisco where he sold his designs and earned enough money to purchase a building in Cerrillos, New Mexico, which became a successful gallery and studio ... even before his famed "Selective Eye" Gallery in Santa Fe. Reinventing himself is a central theme of Wright's life.

The art of Donald Wright has been shown in major museums, galleries, and universities in both the United States, Japan and Europe and is represented in many permanent collections, public and private. Holding a Master of Fine Arts Degree from Cranbrook Academy of Art, Wright has served on the faculties of Pennsylvania State University, Central Washington State University and Utah State University. A Donald Wright designed and built home remains cutting edge 50 years after its completion.

Approaching 81 years of age, this tall slender elegant man with a signature gold earring and a historically hipp philosophical mien continues to do new things, one of which has been to get his book "Making For The Light: How to Understand Your Consciousness and Develop Its Full Potential" up on his website (donaldwright.net) so that people can download it for free. "There's nothing more important right now than learning about our consciousness, and of course climate

upset and global heating. If we could all just realize the oneness of all things, we could live in a different world where peace, respect and compassion are the touchstones of our existence”, says Wright.

A self-described iconoclast, scientific realist and an atheist, Donald Wright is tender toward animals and has a weakness for lovely females. He is unrelentingly skeptical of all things which are not based on science ... although one of his favorite books is “The Teachings of the Mystics” published in 1960 by Walter T. Stace.

Diagnosed with “End Stage Congestive Heart Failure” (a term Wright argues with – he says his heart hasn’t failed yet!) in December of 2010, Wright spends time hanging out in his “pad” overlooking Youngs Bay in Astoria, Oregon. “I have no fear of death”, Wright says calmly. The active, independent “loner” who lived a glamorous life piloting biplanes, riding motorcycles and sailing his yacht throughout the Caribbean, chafes at not being able to do the things which once came so easily ... even as he appreciates observing dramatic coastal weather with wind blowing trees into contorted shapes while Northwest rain pelt his windows. Wright spends most of his days reading and thinking. He looks forward to his scotch and soda at night, always in the company of a pretty woman. He still has a keen unerring eye for design and can always envision details to improve everything from a salt shaker to a book cover. His long slender hands no longer fashion the groundbreaking three-dimensional sculpture and gold jewelry designs he was known for, but his website offers a peek into the mind of this extraordinary artist ... and some pieces still remain available. Wright’s collectors, fans, and his respected gallery representative think he should have been ... and will someday still become “internationally famous”, even after his death.

Perhaps this under-appreciated genius became a risk-taker because his Mother was overprotective – she’d lost her firstborn son and so Donald was the precious only child. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri on June 17th, 1930, and in a portent of things to come, was kicked out of kindergarten band because he played the triangle in ways the teacher did not appreciate. After finishing high school Wright studied engineering in college and after that proved too uninteresting, he went to a trade school to learn autobody work. Wright then joined the air force (he had his uniform custom tailored – one must have style in any situation!) and worked in France for two years as an air traffic controller. While in France he learned to love the French language – he was a “crooner” of tunes in French and English in French nightclubs, and it was there he learned to like his Filet Mignon very rare. After France he lived in Casablanca where he took photographs and met one of the first significant women in his life. At one point he recalls sitting with his pistol in his lap contemplating whether or not to carry on living after his paramour had to leave Casablanca. Morocco opened Wright’s mind to a new culture and showed him the likeness of all humans, which could have planted the seed for his future book.

After the Air Force, Wright went back to Springfield, Missouri to study art and then was admitted to Cranbrook. That prestigious institution encourages emerging artists by giving students the tools they need, the space to experiment in, and a Professor on hand if one has questions. For Wright, that is the essence of creativity; he rails against coloring books for children among other things. Following graduation from Cranbrook, Wright headed to teach at University of Utah in

Logan, then Ellensburg, Washington, and finally Penn State. Along the way he met his first wife, the mother of his son Regan, as well as university student Charlie Mullen, who became a long-time friend. Mullen joined Wright in a Wright-designed-converted school bus on a cross-country trip to New Mexico, where Wright decided to settle. "Penn State had fired me when I encouraged my students to create "Kill a Commie for Christ" posters in response to ROTC doing their marching exercises outside my classroom window. I guess free thinking was not really a University mission at that time -- the students were very upset -- but I just jumped in the bus with a woman I loved and my student Charlie and made for the mountains of Cerrillos, New Mexico to begin again."

It was in Cerrillos that Wright began to create the jewelry and sculptures that he became known for in Santa Fe, although he had operated a gallery in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and he'd been doing auto body work and welded sculpture for some time. It was also in a small cabin in the mountains of New Mexico that Wright started his book on human consciousness "Making For The Light On The Road To Compassion". "It's nice that people appreciate my jewelry and sculptures, that these objects give people pleasure, but I think this small book is my real legacy and I hope people read it after I'm out of here. The website will still be up when I'm not around, strange isn't it?"

Don's women speak:

Donald's first wife, Louise Wright, reflects on Wright's nature and talents, "He was an original; he never copied someone else's stuff. He's extremely visual, a truly talented artist. He also had the temperament of an artist; he liked shocking people, by word and deed. He wanted to try everything! We had a son, Regan, who died at 50 years of age. Don is an excellent teacher. He created gorgeous things and he did things other people only fantasized about – such as when he refurbished a schoolbus and took a family to New Mexico on a cross-country trip when people just didn't do that kind of thing."

Although Susanna Vance Buchanan, Don's second and former wife of over 30 years, says Wright can be "frustratingly self-contained, she feels she knows him well.

"Donald Wright is a one-of-a-kind. He is fearless and he is definitely an iconoclast, and a self-avowed curmudgeon. He talks often of how we humans have become stuck in concepts today rather than being open to experiential learning, using sensory experience as teacher. Don has mentored legions of students and artists in his life ... he's a natural educator. Practically everything he says is quote worthy."

"Don was always big and strong without having to do anything – any kind of exercise. He just did things. He's always had really good women in his life. He's a rebel a very reactionary person, a fighter. Some have said that his art is too cerebral but he believes in the scientific method above all things. He has often said "the purpose of life is not to be bored."

"There is an exoticness, a wildness about Don that is irresistible to women. He's the smartest person I've ever known. He has an immense intellect and ability to think straight. I've loved animals all my life and I always thought I could tame him. There is a part of him that's

unreachable. He's a solitary person. He's very charismatic when you first meet him. He's a very pure person, very ethical. He's a powerful person and he can synthesize thoughts with his eye and his ear. He could have been and should have been more famous than he was. I think in the future he will be. There's something that is one-of-a-kind about him. He is the real McCoy, the genuine article. There is something original about him which people all over this country who knew him recognize. He'll never age, he'll never be an old person. He's the same as a boy – that's how he's pure. He's not that influenced by the world. He always dressed up. Don is an original like Henry Miller – he was part of the “beat” generation – he was “hip” before people knew what that was. He's a force in this world. He's experienced a lot of extreme things in his life. He's had a very extreme life. People who know him recognize his greatness, his genius – he is uncompromisingly himself, 100% Donald Wright. It was amazing to watch someone be so completely themselves – to be so completely yourself is a rare thing in the world. He relates to life, he doesn't let life dictate to him. He's always been supremely confident! Donald Wright is a storm! A perfect storm!”

“Don is an archetype. We were together almost 30 years. His goal was always to try as many things as he could. He was very influential in my life because he taught me that you don't have to answer to anyone.”

“Don always talks about “making for the light” and I hope that's what he's doing now. That's what he's been trying to do all his life”.

Elizabeth Anstey, his girlfriend of eight years and Manager of his Selective Eye Gallery in Santa Fe says “There is nothing to equal his jewelry. There is no one else doing something so original. He deserved to be more famous. Too bad he didn't get to do his sculptures on a larger scale – he just didn't have the resources to do that at the time. There are great things about him. Even today no one is doing what he did with jewelry.”

In the mid 1960's , Don designed and built a contemporary home in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania for still-practicing Attorney and now renowned art collector, Robert L. Pfannebecker. “Don designed a lot of things. I met him in 1961 in Lancaster Pennsylvania when he opened an art gallery there. I was just out of law school and knew nothing about art and had no art background. It was a snowy night and hardly anyone was there at his opening, so he and I just hit it off. He's a very charismatic individual with the great credentials of being a Cranbrook graduate. He was a person with strong opinions on art and craft , perception, sculpture. I was a blank slate on which he was able to write and he influenced me greatly about books, music, perception, philosophy, art, etc. When he was a client of mine I learned about entrepreneurial things. His influence in my life was paramount. He came back from Seattle to build my house from June of 1964 to February of 1965. I've lived in the Donald Wright house for 45 years now, and loved every moment I spend here. Don's father was a builder and somehow Don could visualize things in three dimensions. He has a general genius and a pragmatic practical background. Don was hands on about how to make everything work in the house. He has an innate ability to learn – he's a very unusual person. He interested me in a lot of things. I think we were kindred spirits of a sort because in my practice I litigated civil rights cases in the 60's and opening up the swimming pools in Lancaster County.”

“Don designed two other building on my property and I house art in these buildings now. He did the interior design and he had a fascinating sense of color. He did a sculpture for the house, it's Pennsylvania Farm Equipment painted in bright colors – he calls it an “Eye Toy”. He was doing some art with autobody parts and found objects at that time. He also made gold and silver jewelry. He is an unrecognized genius. He did not suffer fools gladly, he knew what he was about – he was very outspoken. The Detroit Art Museum has a piece of his art, his jewelry. He has an incredible eye. Don thought anyone could create an eye, but I disagree with him about that. Don has an innate ability and how he designed the house is vitally important to me.”

“Don knew how to live! He had incredible taste and he was able to live with it and do it. No one was doing contemporary architecture at the time he created my house. He always had an analysis for everything – “there are more people who want this kind of house than there are houses which exist like this”. He always went against the grain.”

“The spaces in the house are incredible, there are 40-42 foot beams and the house is on 5 levels, it's an engineering feat! He figured out how to make the lighting indirect. Nobody was doing anything like what he was doing and he just figured it out as he went along. The house is a joy to live in, it's living in an art piece or an ark of sorts. He even designed the living room chandelier. The house is all of one piece like a Frank Lloyd Wright home. The house is like being in a Norse Ship, it seems timeless and a recent visitor here from the Institute of Contemporary Art said it was a pleasure dome like Xanadu.”

“I still have the Alan Watts books he gave me as well as a host of other books ... Joyous Cosmology, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance – my library has Donald Wright influences! He was always interested in art and perception. He's a one of a kind. He's been a really influential person in my life and in the lives of others. Even his boat was a Don Wright kind of thing with a black hull and red sails and the name Chaos! He started me on the path to collecting art and I go to Cranbrook to look at their shows every year. Although Don can be an intimidating person, he's never really intimidated me. We have great respect for each other.”

Wright's friend and Gallery representative for over thirty years, Tresa Vorenberg of Santa Fe, New Mexico, recalls how she first heard about him. “Don was one of the first goldsmiths in Santa Fe. He created designer jewelry when most jewelers were stone setters or repair people. Don was an artist who made jewelry. In the 60's he opened a gallery on Canyon Road and made a name for himself right away. My first exposure to him was in high school when a classmate's parents wanted to get her a designer ring instead of a class ring for her graduation. Don creates ergonomic rings that fit the hand like a glove, he is a master of designing in space. His jewelry has dimension you don't find in any other jewelry. He is a master of form, his things fit the body with total comfort. I've traveled the world looking at jewelry and there is no jewelry like his. He is the only one. What his mind conceives and executes is unique to him. People try but they are not successful. His form in space that fits the body is unsurpassed. It takes some presence, groundedness to wear a Donald Wright ring. He was THE goldsmith in Santa Fe, the epitome of where art and jewelry meet – always has been and always will be. I asked him to have a show at a gallery I had at Crown Center in Kansas City in the 1970's and after that show we established a relationship. His sculpture evolved from his jewelry. One of his maquettes

could be made into a large piece of sculpture one day. The simplicity of his maquettes is outrageous and I could see a Donald Wright sculpture in a prominent public place someday.”

“Don did not want to gladhand and show up at openings and fussy receptions and events to meet potential collectors and patrons so he had a large photograph taken of himself wearing his jewelry and he had it hung near his work in his gallery. “You can buy my art but you can’t buy me” he used to say.

“It’s been an honor to work with this incredibly talented man and I feel fortunate to have the few remaining pieces of his jewelry and sculptures for sale now. The other day a woman came into my gallery and told me she had walked into Tiffany in New York and the salesperson looked at her and said, “Oh, I see you are wearing a Donald Wright ring.”

Wright has remained close to his cousin and her family, who live in North Carolina. His influence on their family is explained by his cousin once removed, young Eric Geers.

“The theme of Don’s life has always been to reinvent himself. I have never met anyone who has been able to imagine a new life and then always act on those visions. Don never gave up on his dreams, never gave up on the adventure of life, and had the confidence to never let others make him think he couldn’t accomplish anything. Don sets his own path and allows it to inspire individuality in others. In the Caribbean he lived on savings, photography and sheer wonder. He reinvents himself constantly. When he lived in a rural part of Tennessee, he made the property his Bonsai, the made the landscape his art. Don demonstrated to me that you never have to settle, that dreams are only “precious” if you try to make them a reality.” Friends, enemies, lovers, and loved ones would all agree that Don is never afraid to be true to himself. He wisely never allows society or religion to dictate who he is supposed to be. He boldly defines himself as an individual in a compliant world. He is a link to a past full of realized dreams. I experienced only a small portion of his incredible life, and I feel that it has led me to follow my own arduous, but very fulfilling life path. Don has given me both my individuality and my compassion for others and the environment. Although he may seem less than hopeful about the future of our planet, he has always encouraged me to be on the front lines of social change, helping those who need it, and fighting for the diversity of life on this planet.”

Wright’s closest relative, his first cousin, Dr. Ann Geers, offers a unique perspective on the man she came to love and respect over the years. “Don’s mother was both enamored and perplexed by her only son. He was a rebel at an early age. Don is an enigma. From Don I learned much about altering my consciousness and how to view the world from my own perspective rather than allowing others to dictate my vision. Don is an artist/philosopher. My family saw his meteoric success as an artist in Santa Fe. We learned from Don’s example that satisfaction does not reside in the things you own or the place you live or even the people you love, but in the self that you create as you travel through life. You must remain true to that self, even at the expense of those you have loved along the way.”

Artist Lulu Quinn credits Wright with inspiring her to do the art she is most passionate about and enjoys the most without regard for what others may think. “Don really reinforced the idea that I could be myself and do the art I truly wanted to do even if someone else might not approve of or like it. There is pressure in the artworld, and in life, to conform and to follow some sort of structure. Don gave me the courage to create my own visions. Don Wright is a reality check; he makes you look at what is important ... and that’s what you yourself think, not what everyone else thinks. He is so himself that it encourages you to be yourself, and I love him for that and for creating all the amazing art he has crafted throughout his life – you can tell it comes from an authentic place.”

Long-time friend and former Penn State University student, Charlie Mullen says “Don was a mentor and in a thousand small, wonderful ways, he showed me how to *be* in this world with all the gentlemanly pride, dignity and independence that radiates from those who have consistently lived life on their own terms without quarter or complaint. Don was, without doubt, the first “high-bandwidth” individual I met growing up in central Pennsylvania. What he showed me was “other-worldly” and perhaps even somehow subversive. Don showed me many of the things I would find unbelievably valuable in later life. Don was a voracious reader and a deep thinker and aside from introducing me to leading-edge visionaries and writers, he showed me countless times how petty obstacles magically dissolve with slight changes in orientation. Don carries himself with an almost regal bearing, and people unconsciously stand up taller in his presence, as if he is lifting them himself. I am proud and honored to call him my friend for over forty-two years now.”

Irreverent, heretical, visionary and unbowed, Donald Wright continues to be a forcefield in a world of weak signals – a luminous presence lighting the way for those who aspire to be truly alive. Don’s life is a reflection of his integrated and highly individualized personality, and just as he imagines his art “is never to be finally or totally experienced but always interesting and provocative”, so indeed is the man himself.

The journey continues.....

To learn more about Donald B. Wright, visit www.donaldwright.net. To experience Donald Wright jewelry or sculpture in person, visit Tresa Vorenberg Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico or view online at www.tvgoldsmiths.com.