

NORTHWEST PASSAGES

THE PEOPLE AND PLACES OF NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

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Art in the heart of D.C.

By **JENNIFER GIRDISH**
Current Correspondent

When Lou Stovall first met his future wife Di Bagley, he couldn't have known that, one day, their art would be hanging next to each other in D.C.'s city hall. In fact, when the two met at a cocktail party in the mid-1960s, Washington didn't even have a mayor.

Now, Lou Stovall's two silkscreen prints "Blue Magic" and "Magenta" hang next to Di Bagley Stovall's hyper-realist portraits "Exotic Flower #12" and "Exotic Flower #9," on the bottom floor of the John A. Wilson Building — home to the mayor's office and D.C. Council. They are one of three married couples whose art adorns the Wilson Building's walls.

In 2006, the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities established "HeART of D.C. — the City Hall Art Collection," under the curatorial direction of Sondra Arkin. The collection is a celebration of the city, its art and, most important, its citizens, Arkin said.

Twenty percent of the collection's artists were born in the District, and 100 percent of them live in the metropolitan area. Arkin called the collection a rotating lending library of original artwork that D.C. employees can enjoy at their workplace.

And now those employees have

a few more pieces to enjoy. On Sept. 23, the already sizable collection grew to 203 with the acquisition of 28 new works by 17 artists. The new pieces — a mixture of photographs, prints and paintings — represent some well-established artists, including a few who recently died.

Among them is the late Kevin McDonald, who lost a battle with cancer in 2006. "Little House on the Tract," a watercolor print infused with tea and coffee, depicts a suburban house from his childhood. It now hangs on the Wilson Building's third floor.

"He would be really proud and happy to be included in this most important collection in this of all towns," said his wife Robin. "While Kevin hated to be pigeonholed as a regional artist, he reveled in this city."

For some of the artists, meanwhile, being included in the Wilson Building collection marks a new step in their evolving careers. Kevin Kepple recreates impressions of his southwestern Pennsylvania childhood in his D.C. studio. His painting "Little Conemaugh," a mixture of glue, ink and birch panel, hangs on the Wilson Building's first floor. "They are great artists; to be in the same collection, it's an honor," Kepple said.

All told, the exhibit is worth more than \$750,000, according to



Bill Petros/The Current

Sondra Arkin is curator of "HeART of D.C. — the City Hall Art Collection," which has 28 new works.

Arkin, but she stressed that she got a lot of good deals and didn't pay nearly the full value. The art is bought directly from the artist at a discount.

The collection fills a great need in the city, Arkin said. "There's a group of artists in Washington who for years have tried to establish a city museum of Washington art," she said. "We have all these museums in town, but no one really focuses on the artists in Washington."

Stovall agreed. "This is one of the best ideas ever in the city administration," he said. "Instead of giving artists money in terms of grants, to buy their art and put it up makes much more sense. The city ends up with the art, and the artists get money."

It's good for D.C. officials and their staff members, too, Arkin said. Before the city hall exhibit opened in 2006, the walls were completely bare. "It was pretty dismal," she said. "I went to photo-

graph the building and I couldn't distinguish one hallway from the other." She told a story about a woman who worked on the first floor of the Wilson Building for years and didn't have a reason to go to the third floor — until now.

And you don't have to work there to enjoy the art. The John A. Wilson Building, at 1350 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, is open to the public from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and offers exhibition tours every other month.

Giant squid returns to the Smithsonian

By **LINDA LOMBARDI**
Current Correspondent

Giant squids have returned to the Smithsonian — and Clyde Roper is one of many glad to see them.

The previous specimen, deteriorating and lacking tentacles, was removed in 2005 before construction began on the National Museum of Natural History's new Sant Oceans Hall, which opened on Sept. 27. The squid's absence caused a bit of a commotion for Roper.

"People were really upset — I got calls, e-mails. The guards would come and say, 'I brought my kid here to see it,'" said Roper, zoologist emeritus at the museum. "The exhibits people said that it was the most-visited object in the museum, second only to the Hope Diamond."

Roper had nothing to do with the squid's removal, but the popularity of the giant animal can be traced right back to him. It was his quest to film the creatures in their natural



Photo by Charlie Gruet

For details on the two new giant squids on display in the Smithsonian, The Current turned to expert Clyde Roper.

habitat that made them maybe not exactly a household word, but at least not just a mythical monster anymore.

Roper didn't always want to be a world-
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FAVORITE PLACES

A side benefit to Nationals games: watching your other favorite team

By **AVIVA KEMPNER**
Current Correspondent

Oh, the joy of the September pennant race in Washington!

Washingtonians can feel the rush of potential victory — even when the Nationals, our local team, is not in the race. Many people sitting in the stadium are loyal fans of nearby teams battling it out for one of the top slots in the East Division. The fellowship between fans adds an extra layer of electricity to the games, and the teams also feel the love.

If you happen to attend one of those crazy games, you can't help but notice the



Bill Petros/The Current

Aviva Kempner

"enemy" fans sporting Phillies or Mets shirts in the stands. As a great many locals are from nearby cities, it's no surprise to see a lot of enthusiasts cheering for the opposing

teams. The camaraderie is infectious, and people are actually polite.

Instead of lamenting the fact that our home team didn't make it to the postseason, it's fun to attend those crucial games that decide who will be in the playoffs and reap the benefits. It is especially joyful when you have another favorite team playing in

your hometown.

Unless it's the Mets. During the past two seasons, the Nationals have been the spoiler

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STADIUM

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in the Mets' pennant hopes. Last year I saw one of the last Nats-Mets games when the Nats dashed the hope of local fans in Shea Stadium. This year, I didn't have to travel as far. When we had four games against the Mets in September, it was easy to spot the team's anxious fans on the subway as they made their way to Nationals Park.

David Curtin, a musician, wore his Mets shirt and arrived early, as I did, to see the teams practice. He had adjusted his musical performances to attend three out of the four games, and he pointed out that it's "not as bad being a Mets fan in D.C. [as] being one in Philly."

Because of baseball's version of musical

chairs, one can also take the opportunity to observe how our former players — now on the Mets — and our newer players — from the Mets — try to impress their erstwhile owners.

Ryan Church, who used to play for the Nats, commented on how great it feels when there are "Mets fans everywhere" rooting for them. He admitted part of him still wants his old friends, like Ryan Zimmerman, to hit well. "Even in a pennant race!" I remarked with surprise.

There are always journalists at the Washington games, and a hot pennant race only enhances this fourth-estate phenomena. I recently saw Joe Klein, the author and Time magazine columnist, on the practice field, beaming with joy about his favorite team being so close to the playoffs. He proudly claimed Mets general manager

Omar Minaya as a friend and appeared highly optimistic. Recalling the Mets' demise at the end of the season last year, Klein confidently boasted that this year the Mets had a "different team and would make the playoffs."

"Got to be hopeful about something," he added after we discussed politics.

Minaya, meanwhile, was well aware of the Mets' fan base beyond Shea Stadium. He claimed that the Mets had the second-highest-fan base in the country, beyond even the Red Sox. "They come out in droves in Florida, where there is a large displaced New York population," he said.

When I professed that I would be conflicted if the Red Sox (my favorite American League team) went up against the Mets, Minaya replied, "Just hope that you have that conflict."

I also spotted Nationals owner Mark Lerner, who noted the huge presence of Mets and Phillies fans late in the season. "Our fans will travel well, too," Lerner said.

At these games, Phillies fans, wishing for the Mets to lose to the Nats, often chime in. Sometimes my Phillies-fan friends e-mail me just to say thanks for the Nationals doing so well — as if I have anything to do with it, especially as a Mets fan. Melissa Maxman, a local Phillies fan, claims she prefers being a Phillies fan in D.C. because it has a superior atmosphere to other cities. Chock up some more points to D.C. stadium politeness.

Now I am comforting my friends who are Mets fans and congratulating my friends who are Phillies fans. But, in the end, dreams of being able to visit other stadiums with the Nationals in a heated pennant race allow me to sleep peacefully.

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SQUID

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renowned expert on giant squid. Living on the coast in Rye, N.H., he always loved the sea, and beginning at age 14 he put himself through school as a lobster fisherman. But in college, he was a philosophy major — until one summer day when he was out on the lobster boat with his brother.

"In the lobster traps, all kinds of other things came in," said Roper. "[My brother] would get so annoyed when I would stop and look through them. Finally he said, 'You know there is such a thing as marine biology?'"

He hadn't, but he changed his major that fall. Despite having taken "zero science" classes up to that point, he managed to graduate on time. His master's and doctoral squid research didn't focus on the giants, because there were no real collections to study — just scattered, poor specimens here and there.

"It was not the sort of thing you build a career on," he said.

Roper came to the Smithsonian for his first job in 1966, and the first giant-squid specimen didn't arrive there until 1980. When a colleague at Harvard called to say that one had washed ashore in Plum Island, Mass., Roper rushed up to see it. Later, when the Harvard museum couldn't keep the specimen — they were afraid the large case needed to house it would be too heavy for the floors of the historic building — he drove it back to Washington in a coffin, the only box he could find that was big enough to house it.

His first expedition, from 1996 to 1997, involved attaching National Geographic's Crittercam with giant suction cups to sperm whales — the main predators of giant squid, and, Roper said, the

only ones who know for sure where to find them. The second expedition, in 1999, filmed by Discovery, used a one-person submersible vehicle.

In both cases, Roper said, they got "unbelievably spectacular video footage. New Zealand colleagues were blown away by what was off their shores that they'd never seen before."

There was one small problem, however: The fabulous footage did not include any giant squid.

"I was disappointed, sure, but was it totally unexpected? No," said Roper. "It's a big ocean out there."

In fact, said Roper, the ocean contains perhaps 95 percent of the total living space on the planet, and much of it remains a mystery. But it's one that the two new giant-squid specimens in Oceans Hall bring a little bit closer to home. The 24-foot-long female is the largest on display in the United States. Beauty might never have been more in the eye of the beholder, but to Roper they're "beautiful specimens, with the full tentacles, which is rare."

Recently, Japanese scientists, adopting Roper's idea of using sperm whales to lead them to squids, captured the first still photos, as well as the first film, of a live giant squid lured up to the surface. But to this day, no human has ever seen one in its natural habitat, as was Roper's goal.

"We don't know," said Roper. "Are they luminescent? Can you imagine if you could see a giant squid catching its prey, trying to escape from a sperm whale, its mating behavior ... ?"

There's much left to learn. Would he try again? "I sort of promised my family I'm not doing that again. That's for younger people," Roper said. "But if someone came along with a check, I'd be out there tomorrow."



Photo by Charlie Gruet

Squid expert Clyde Roper

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