



## Michael A Gibbons

December 18, 1943 - July 2, 2020

Michael A. Gibbons, 1943-2020

"Somehow the artist is the mercurial figure, the messenger, the alchemist, sent to add to the benediction of human history. I pray my offerings will, in some way, contribute to the collective blessings evident in this region."

Michael Gibbons (2007)

\*\*\*\*\*

Michael A. Gibbons, a self-described "poet with a paintbrush" whose art evoked the beauty, wonder and mystery of nature, passed away on July 2, 2020, at home in Toledo, Oregon, as a result of complications from a stroke he suffered in 2016. He was 76.

"All of us in Michael's hometown are deeply saddened by his passing," said Toledo Mayor Rod Cross. "We will forever cherish the rich artistic and cultural legacy he left behind."

Michael was born in Portland, Oregon, on Dec. 18, 1943, the son of Millard and Virginia Gibbons. He was proud to be a native-born Oregonian whose ancestry was deeply rooted in the state. Family records indicate that his

mother's descendants arrived in Oregon by covered wagon in 1865 and his father's family arrived later in the nineteenth century.

Experimenting with art as soon as he could hold a crayon, Michael began painting with oils while still in elementary school. He attended Benson Polytechnic Institute (later high school) in Portland, where he attracted the attention of the Oregon Society of Artists. At 16, he was the youngest person invited to join the society.

According to a 2014 newspaper article in which he reminisced about his education, Michael as a young student was especially inspired by the work of the French landscape painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875).

"I had to paint things that struck people like that," Michael was quoted as saying. "I saw dawn, that silvery morning light and soft colors. They weren't garish. It was like looking at a prayer."

After graduation from Benson and a three-year tour in the U.S. Air Force, he worked as a designer of specialty automotive parts, reflecting a born instinct for working with his hands. Though he was mechanically inclined, he sensed that his destiny was as an artist. At age 25, he left his job in Portland and relocated to the Oregon Coast to pursue painting full-time.

Michael's oil paintings of the coast and surrounding areas established his reputation for depicting the natural world with deep sensitivity and reverence. He became intimately familiar with the hills, meadows, estuaries and wildlife of the Yaquina River region, with a penchant for the interplay of light and colors.

Portable field equipment, solitude and focusing on a limited geographical area helped him create deeply personal portrayals of the land he called home for more than four decades. "My most powerful work comes from where I live,"

Michael said.

While Michael's most meaningful art was created in and around the community he called home, he visited many other locations to gain additional inspiration. He painted scenes in Washington, California, Arizona, Florida, Pennsylvania and Connecticut, as well as in England, Scotland, Ireland, France and Mexico.

The ocean was a constant source of inspiration for Michael and his seascapes are among his most vital works. His painting re-creating the moment when the submersible "Alvin" discovered the hydrothermal vents off the Galapagos Islands in 1977 was given to Dr. Robert Ballard, who was a diver on that expedition. (Ballard gained worldwide fame for his discovery of the wreck of the "Titanic" in 1985.)

Michael's work was featured in dozens of exhibitions in the U.S. and Europe. "The Yaquina Traveling Exhibition: A Painted Voice for a Sacred Landscape" was featured at the LaSells Stewart Center at Oregon State University in the summer of 2019. The same exhibition is currently on display through July 31 at the Chehalem Cultural Center in Newberg.

Michael married Judith "Judy" Mortenson in 1988 and their partnership transcended life, love and art to become a true union of soul and spirit. As longtime Toledo residents and civic leaders, Michael and Judy found constant inspiration in the town's history and setting amid the naturally beautiful Yaquina River region.

"Life is an endless series of opportunities brilliantly disguised as hard work," was one of Michael's favorite maxims. In that spirit, he saw potential in Toledo as a place where art could flourish.

Michael's and Judy's tireless promotion of Toledo as a creative hub led to the creation of the Labor Day Art Walk, which in 2018 celebrated 25 years of showcasing the work of artists who depict the area's natural beauty.

With his own hands, Michael restored the neglected complex of structures on Northeast Alder Street that became the focal point of his and Judy's personal and professional lives, as well as that of Toledo's unique artistic community.

"The Vicarage," next door to St. John's Episcopal Church, was their home and gallery, which Michael saved from dereliction in the 1980s. He also maintained a separate gallery in Tubac, Arizona, for nine years.

Michael's studio in Toledo, where he painted, perfected and framed hundreds of his works, was built in 1887 as a Methodist church and later was used as a funeral home before he acquired it in 1992.

The two-story building that now houses the Yaquina River Museum of Art, which Michael and Judy founded in 2002, also dates from 1887.

With his fondness for machinery, Michael was proficient at painting industrial scenes, especially factories and ports. He was commissioned by Gunderson Marine in Portland to depict the company's barges and railcar facilities.

He also painted the Georgia-Pacific containerboard mill on the Yaquina River in Toledo. His 1985 painting of the mill proved so popular that a framed print of it is given to retiring mill employees.

"Michael was fascinated by the relationship between manmade structures and nature," said C.J. Drake, a friend of the Gibbons family who works at Georgia-Pacific. "His art depicting the works of industry pays homage to the natural

environment in which they exist."

Mayor Cross agreed. "Michael enshrined Toledo's blue-collar culture in art," he said.

Two of Michael's original oil paintings, "Arnold Creek Estuary" and "Don Gray Country," are on display in the Oregon governor's official residence in Salem. Governor Kate Brown and First Gentleman Dan Little have been guests at the Gibbons home in Toledo.

The late Mark Hatfield, who represented Oregon in the U.S. Senate for 30 years, was among Michael's many admirers. "This man has taken a land we all know and love and given it back to us in a form we can understand," Senator Hatfield once said.

Michael was a signature member of the Oil Painters of America and the Laguna Plein Air Painters Association. He also was a member of the Allied Artists of America, the Copley Society and Christians in the Visual Arts. He was a member of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Newport and the Knights of Columbus.

Michael is survived by his beloved wife, Judy; four stepchildren, Vicky Ross, Michael Ross, Randy Ross and Stephen Ross; a sister, Laurie Gibbons; a niece, nephew, seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. He has gone before hundreds of friends, admirers and collectors of his art from throughout the world.

There was a Requiem Mass, Fr. Todd Molinari, Celebrant, held September 26 at Sacred Heart, Newport where he was a parishioner. Michael was interred at the Toledo Historical Pioneer Cemetery on September 21. TAPS & Flag ceremony were presented by the US Air Force followed by the Committal

Service, Fr. William Palmer, Officiant. In lieu of flowers, Michael's family encourages those wishing to honor his memory to consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the Yaquina River Museum of Art (YRMA), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to the art of the region. The museum's address is 151 NE Alder Street, Toledo, OR 97391. [www.YaquinaRiverMuseumofArt.org](http://www.YaquinaRiverMuseumofArt.org).

# Tribute Wall



“ *Michael A Gibbons*

---

July 13, 2020 at 12:00 AM