

# Weatherly artist flouted reality for effects and fun

By Geoff Gehman | Of The Morning Call  
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The massive Justin McCarthy retrospective at the GoggleWorks in Reading is a Noah's Ark bursting at the beams. The self-taught, media-crazy art shepherd from Weatherly, Carbon County, jams twos and threes and sevens of every conceivable creature into his jaunty, jarring cosmic boat. Biblical prophets. Chorus girls. Movie stars. Politicians. Hockey players. Ice Capades clowns. The Seven Dwarfs.

McCarthy (1891-1977) depicted life as a distorted Disneyland. He painted Noah's Ark as a squat old barn parked behind a beach fence like driftwood. He had a charming way of cutting to the chase, turning zebras into a camouflage jungle. He could also be an astute psychologist. His Adam and Eve are mute and mutant, cowering under diseased apples as if they're covering their castration.

Like many naive/visionary creators, McCarthy frequently defied reality, the rules of art and good taste. He turned circus elephants into gray mush, Queen Elizabeth II into a grotesquely grinning freak. Freud would have had a field day with his rear view of a green-gartered lady bending to pet a goose.

McCarthy's attitude toward women changed with the wind. His Pan Am stewardesses are modly glamorous. His fashion models are mere billboards for electrically colored, jelly-smearred stripes. In one picture he's less interested in Katharine Hepburn than her leopard co-star in "Bringing Up Baby." The actress is mannishly elegant; the animal is a sparkling mosaic.

A lifelong bachelor, McCarthy was mesmerized by females, said Sterling Strauser, the self-taught artist and folk-art collector from East Stroudsburg who in 1960 became McCarthy's first promoter. "People said: 'Oh, the poor man, he must have hated women,'" said Strauser in 1985, the year the Allentown Art Museum mounted the region's previously largest McCarthy show. "But just the opposite was true. He was timid about women, but his whole passion was boy meets girl. ... He painted women the way he thought they looked, not like some modern master."

The term "outsider artist" fit McCarthy as tightly as shrink wrap. Shy and clumsy, he was a resident alien to his father, John, a wealthy newspaper editor from Wales who favored his son, John Jr., who was older and surer. The sudden deaths of brother and father in 1907 and 1908, respectively, ruined the family fortune and, eventually, McCarthy's sanity. In 1915-1920 he lived at the Rittersville State Homeopathic Hospital for the Insane. It was here he began dabbling in art, channeling the murals his father painted in his room. Unaware of his identity, he signed works "Prince Dashing."

Released from Rittersville, McCarthy helped pay the bills by selling vegetables and fruits grown on the grounds of the family mansion in Weatherly. When his mother, Floretta, died in 1940, he became a rover. He worked at Allentown State Memorial Hospital, mixed chocolate at Just Born Candy in Bethlehem and served as a machinist's helper at Bethlehem Steel Corp., scene of his first oil.

McCarthy sold his paintings at summer fairs and the courthouse square in Stroudsburg.

In the '50s and '60s, he commonly charged \$100 per work, a fairly steep fee for a fairly messy canvas by a virtual unknown. To him, the art market resembled a game of Monopoly. "He didn't expect to get \$100, but it was more fun to get turned down at \$100 than at \$25," said Strauser, who bought his first two McCarthys for \$75 -- the sum needed to fix the artist's car.

Strauser and his wife, Dorothy, became McCarthy's friends and dealers. They helped raise his reputation through shows at the Museum of Modern Art and the American Folk Art Museum. They marveled at his casual manners (he sketched in church) and his anarchic housekeeping. The family manse in Weatherly had one water spigot; McCarthy showered at the local YMCA. Bathtubs were crammed with paintings. Sprinkled everywhere were his father's unpaid bills, loan refusals and autographs from literary figures -- painted over by Justin.

According to Strauser, art to McCarthy wasn't as much therapy or physical release as an avenue leading to recognition -- from museums, collectors, even his dead parents. The promise of fame, and money, preserved him as an eternal optimist. His motto, "Time makes all things even," was inscribed on a sundial at the family home, which is now owned by the American Legion.

All things are vividly even at the GoggleWorks. McCarthy receives a robust, keen profile from curators Grey Carter, a McCarthy collector; George Viener, an authority on naive artists, and Diane LaBelle, the Reading center's executive director who is married to Lehigh University religion-studies professor Norman Girardot, an expert on visionary creators. There are rare works (a comic strip about a surprise gift of Christmas-saving cash), a strong sample of strong illustrations (his ink drawings have the bite of woodcuts and the pluck of peacock feathers) and fun, funky arrangements (Moses' bush burns near Santa's reindeer).

A place of honor is reserved for McCarthy's Mona Lisa, a hulking mountain with a 6 o'clock shadow the color of raspberry puree. According to Easton resident Bill Marley, a friend and collector, McCarthy painted Leonardo da Vinci's mystery woman as a favor to two favorite institutions. He wanted to save the Metropolitan Museum of Art millions in security by keeping the original at the Louvre, where he found a lifetime of security.

Works by Justin McCarthy, through Aug. 19, GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, 201 Washington St., Reading. Hours: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Mon.-Sat., 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sun. 610-374-4600, <http://www.goggleworks.org> .