

## A Family of Painters Is Having Its Moment



Guy Arthur Wiggins, a third-generation painter, in his studio on West Fourth Street. The Salmagundi Club is exhibiting work by Mr. Wiggins and his father and grandfather. Photo by Charles Higgins Jr./New York.

By ANN FARMER

Wearing paint-specked khakis over his lean, stooped frame, Guy Arthur Wiggins, 90, a painter who approximates Fred Astaire in voice and visage, made his way up 40 steps to the top floor of his West Fourth Street brownstone, where he keeps his studio.

“That one took me eight two-hour trips to the park,” said Mr. Wiggins, pointing to a vibrant painting of Central Park. Nearby sat an unfinished canvas of St. Patrick’s Cathedral and one of Wall Street.

In a city whose art scene tilts toward the abstract, Mr. Wiggins is a 21st-century link to the 19th, which in a way is fitting: he is the third generation of Wiggins men to make his name with a brush.

They may not be as well known as the Wyeths, who populated Pennsylvania, or the earlier Peale artistic dynasty that originated in Maryland, but the Wigginses of New York are having a moment. More than 40 works by Mr. Wiggins; his father, the renowned cityscape painter Guy Carleton Wiggins; and his grandfather, John Carleton Wiggins, a landscape artist, will be on display beginning Monday at the Salmagundi Club in Greenwich Village, one of the oldest art clubs in the nation.

Claudia Seymour, the club’s president, said that art aficionados were somewhat accustomed to gifted sons following in the footsteps of creative fathers, “but to go on to a third generation is really remarkable.”

All three Wigginses were members of the club, and shared a passion for painting en plein air, French for “in the open air.” In other words, they routinely tromped outside, often enduring frigid winds or searing heat, to paint near their subjects.

Mr. Wiggins has few memories of his grandfather, who was born in 1848 and died in 1932. J. Carleton, as he was known, was born in Harriman and moved to Brooklyn at age 11, where his father opened a tailor shop on Dean Street. Later, while J. Carleton worked as a clerk in a law firm, a client, Joseph Grafton, spied him drawing a romantic Civil War scene and bought it for \$1. According to Mr. Wiggins, the next time Mr. Grafton caught the young man sketching, he supposedly said, “You don’t belong here, son,” and sponsored him at the National Academy of Design, where J. Carleton exhibited and later was an academy member.

J. Carleton was described in the 1915 edition of *Biographical Sketches of American Artists* as “the most distinguished painter of sheep and cattle in the United States.” His

pieces, acquired by many collectors, fetched a good price for the time, as much as \$10,000, according to the Salmagundi exhibit catalog, which relied on research by the exhibit curator, the art dealer Joan Whalen, and Anne Cohen DePietro, director of American paintings at the Doyle New York auction house.

He pressed a palette and paints into his young son’s hands. By age 4, Guy Carleton Wiggins (1883-1962) was churning out watercolors that foreshadowed a talent greater than his father’s.

Although Guy Carleton initially studied architecture at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, he left to pursue art at the National Academy of Design. New York City’s landscape became his muse, which he rendered in an impressionistic style. His snowy scenes of landmarks like City Hall and Washington Square Park, where he later kept a studio, became signature works. “If you want to sell paintings,” Mr. Wiggins said, “it helps if it’s recognizable to many people.”

In 1912, not yet 30, Guy Carleton became one of the youngest artists to have a work purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which bought his “Metropolitan Tower.” A painting of the Executive Mansion that he executed on the White House lawn hung in President Dwight Eisenhower’s office for a time.

“Before the Depression, every maître d’ in town knew him,” his son said. Once the Great Depression hit, though, “Dad couldn’t sell a painting.”

Guy Carleton moved his family to a farmhouse in Lyme, Conn., not far from where his own father had helped found the Old Lyme Art Colony, and opened the Guy Wiggins Art School.

And he urged his son to paint. At age 9, Guy Arthur Wiggins won first prize against thousands of other New York school art contestants. “Dad would give me tips,” said Mr. Wiggins, adding, “Later he gave me his secret formula for creating atmospheric effects.” Which is? “My goodness, no,” he chuckled. “It’s a secret.”

But the elder Guy Wiggins also counseled his son to not expect to pay the bills this way. “He said, ‘Painting is a damn fine hobby, but a damn difficult way to make a living,’” said Mr. Wiggins, who took the advice and pursued a career in the Foreign Service. When he retired at 55, he began devoting himself full time to painting. His cityscapes and still lifes (often arranged by his wife, Dorothy, whose mother was a patron of his father) are included in the New Jersey State Museum, the Florence Griswold Museum and other notable collections.

“He drags this terribly heavy thing up to Central Park every day,” said Mrs. Wiggins, referring to the collapsible easel and paint box which he lugs up subway staircases. “I like to participate in the life of the city,” Mr. Wiggins said.

Mrs. Wiggins pointed to a charming still life of marigolds that their son Noel created at age 16, along with several deft caricatures and other pieces that indicate Noel inherited the Wiggins’ painting gene.

“He’s very talented,” she said. “I don’t know why he doesn’t paint.”

Noel, now 46, said he was too busy running his business, Areaware, which manufactures a range of nouveau-design products like clock radios, lights and jewelry. “My mind is too restless,” he said. The company’s Web site, however, identifies him as a “fourth-generation painter.”

“I assume when I calm down a little bit,” he said, “I’ll go back to painting.”