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A BRUSH WITH FINE ART: ARTISTS IN BOCA RATON'S HISTORY

By
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Boca Raton, a once agrarian community turned into one of South Florida's best-known cities, has attracted many fascinating visitors and drawn in captivating residents. With its picturesque beaches, inspiring landscapes, and unparalleled natural light for painting, Boca Raton has also been an artistic hub for exceptionally talented individuals. Renowned figures in the art world from various corners of the United States and across the globe have either made Boca Raton their home or frequented here during the winters. While Boca Raton has been a source of inspiration for many artists, this article explores the significant contributions they, in turn, have made in enhancing the town's beauty.

Leo Lentelli

Palm Beach sculptor Leo Lentelli was born in Italy and trained at the Scuola Professionale per le Arti Decorative and the R. Istituto di Belle Arti. He immigrated to the U.S. at 24 years old. There he established his reputation with numerous American commissions and became a member of the National Academy of Design. When architects Schultze & Weaver



*Close up of the statue. Head is to the left.
Photo by Maria Farah.*

designed the third version of The Breakers in Palm Beach in 1926, they hired Lentelli to design the entranceway fountain. After the bankruptcy of the Mizner Development Corporation in 1927, the new owner of the Cloister Inn, Clarence Geist, engaged the services of those same architects to design the "addition" to the hotel known as the Boca Raton Club. The architects once again turned to Lentelli to create the sculpture central to the courtyard fountain for the Club. Lentelli's bronze statue depicts Salome, the daughter of King Herod of Biblical fame. She

is posed for her exotic dance with the head of John the Baptist at her feet. Lentelli also created another sculpture, *The Faun*, a pipe playing a mythical half goat-half man, which once graced the fountain at the hotel's main gates.¹

Ettore Pellegatta



*Pellegatta's sculpture at the entrance of The Boca Raton.
Photo by Maria Farah.*

Ettore Pellegatta was an Italian sculptor who came from a family of artisans and came to the United States with his brother who was also a sculptor. Pellegatta made his way to Miami in 1916 to work on some restorations for Vizcaya, reconstructing partially damaged pieces from Europe. During his time in Miami, Pellegatta also dedicated his time in crafting sculptures that decorate various fountains and memorials in the city. He was commissioned to work on the figures

and fountain surrounding a bronze sculpture of Salome by artist Leo Lentelli which sits in the courtyard of the Boca Raton Club, the addition to Mizner's Cloister Inn, which opened in January 1930.²

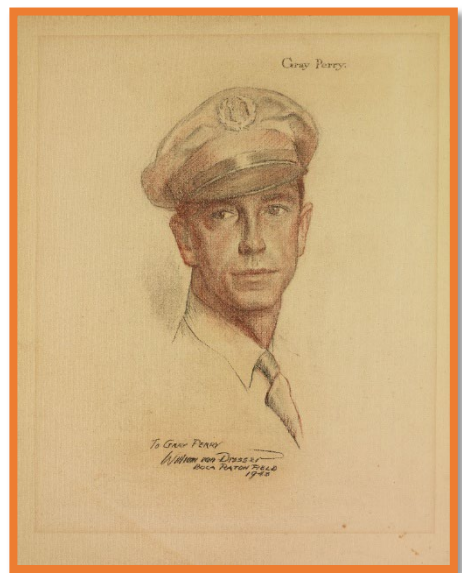


William Van Dresser holding his portrait of Albert Einstein. Photographed by Ash in "Former Memphis Baseball Player Climbs to Top of Art Profession," The Commercial Appeal, December 7, 1934.

William Van Dresser

William Van Dresser, a once baseball player turned artist, became one of the most prominent portrait painters of the 20th century.³ Van Dresser was born in Memphis, Tennessee, where he initially pursued his baseball career; however, after serendipitous encounters with Chicago art, he created his first artwork at twenty-six. With his newfound passion, Van Dresser attended the Chicago Art Institute and later moved to New York, where he distinguished himself as a magazine illustrator.⁴ Van Dresser's first break came when he painted portraits of his sons for a magazine illustration; however, his most remarkable

achievements are his portraits of prominent individuals such as Albert Einstein, President Calvin Coolidge, and both Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt.⁵ After years of spending his winters in Florida, Van Dresser officially settled in Boca Raton before WWII was declared at 745 West Palmetto Park Road, a house dubbed "Wildcat Bend" (after his passing in 1950, the house became a convent for St. Joan of Arc.)⁶ During the war, Van Dresser painted portraits of officers and their families at the Boca Raton Army Air field (BRAAF). Some of his works done



Portrait of Pvt. Gray Perry, a pianist for the BRAAF band, 1943. BRHS 2022.53.1

in various mediums can be found at the Boca Raton Historical Society.



Captain Valerian Yavorsky holding a tennis racket and paintbrushes—symbols of his life's work. By Larry Thompson, "White Russian Remembers," Fort Lauderdale News, March 26, 1972.



Captain Valerian Yavorsky. By Andrew Selsky, "A Russians Memoirs," Associated Press, 1992.

Captain Valerian Yavorsky

Lieutenant, tennis pro, soccer player, actor, artist, and prisoner, Captain Valerian Yavorsky was nothing short of a true Renaissance man. Born in 1893 in Odesa, Russia (modern-day Ukraine), Yavorsky lived a greatly adventured life and may be the Boca Raton pioneer you never heard of. In addition to his well-roundedness, Yavorsky had many addresses in countries such as Russia, Turkey, and various places in the United States, including New York, Connecticut, and Florida—particularly Boca Raton.

He studied medicine in his early years until his life took a different path as the First World War loomed.

He enlisted in the army and became a lieutenant in one of the Sharpshooters Division's until his position put his life at risk during the Russian Revolution. With Lenin's encouragement, proletariat workers rebelled against those sympathetic to czarist rule, and this rebellion also found its way into the military. Yavorsky narrowly escaped certain death twice, once fleeing in the dead of night under disguise to avoid his execution the following morning. After his first getaway, he managed to return home, where he studied law and drama before he found himself held prisoner again a year later—this

time by soldiers who were once under his command. After twenty-two tortuous days filled with interrogations and executions, Yavorsky used his acting skills to lie his way out of death for the second time. With his newly found freedom, Yavorsky decided to join the White Army until he had no choice but to flee with his wife to Turkey in 1920 as the Red Army took over.⁷

Yavorsky's love for tennis is rooted in his homeland, where he learned to play at the age of seven.⁸ His passion for sports would follow him throughout his life, in addition to the other talents and interests he picked up along the way. Before leaving home, Yavorsky won the Russian amateur championship in tennis for three consecutive years but made a name for himself in the United States as a tennis pro from 1934-1946, going against renowned players such as Bill Tilden and Don Budge.⁹ Before that, however, he lived in Turkey for two years working as a tennis instructor at the American-based YMCA but left to the United States in 1922. He continued working as a tennis instructor at many clubs along the east coast, starting off in New York City where he worked as an athletic director for the Nipnichsen Club. Then after seven



*Valerian Yavorsky (middle) teaching tennis at Boca Raton Club.
BRHS 11001.60*

years, he moved to West Virginia in 1929 as a tennis instructor at the Greenbrier Club in the summer and at the Boca Raton Club during the winters—becoming what we like to call a “snowbird.”¹⁰ In the 60s, Yavorsky moved back and forth between Glastonbury, Connecticut, and Boca Raton where he was a soccer coach at St. Andrews while

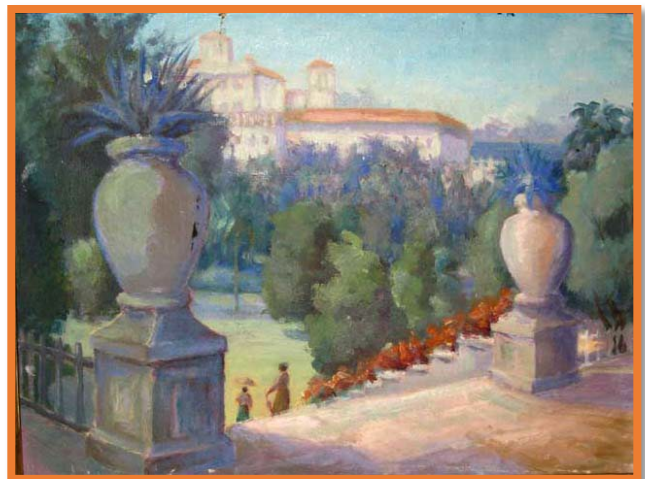
also teaching mechanical art, Russian, tennis, and directing several plays on the side.¹¹

Yavorsky's acting career can trace back to Russia, where he appeared in several theatrical shows and even in silent films such as "Stenka Razin" in 1908.¹² During his time in New York, he even ran his own Russian Chamber Theater and directed several plays both there and in West Virginia.¹³ Throughout the 20s, Yavorsky also appeared in some American silent films, including "The Silent Door," "Banana King," and "The Daughter Who Pays," where he played opposite Marguerite De La Motte.¹⁴ Before World War II, he moved to Glastonbury and worked as a spare parts job control analyst for Pratt & Whitney, all while continuing to direct other plays.¹⁵

Today, however, the people of Boca Raton know him as an artist. His art career took off in the 30s, especially in well-known places in South Florida such as the Boca Raton Club and the Norton Gallery.¹⁶ His painting "Rolling Hills of West Virginia" won first place at a Palm Beach Art League Exhibit, and his "Mexican Still Life" won top honors at the Four Arts Club.¹⁷ Yavorsky taught several art classes at the Art Guild of Boca Raton, known today as the Boca Museum of Art, and was even a judge at art shows.¹⁸ He did similar work as the president of the Glastonbury Art Guild



Old Inlet Bridge. BRHS 29007.1



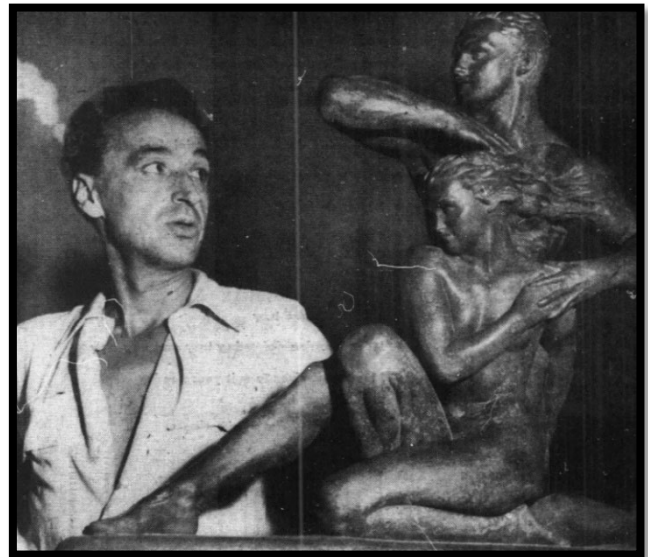
Boca Raton Club. BRHS 85004.2

during the time he moved back and forth between Connecticut and Florida.¹⁹ Today, you can find some of his artworks at the Boca Raton Historical Society, which houses a collection of his paintings such as “Boca Raton Hotel and Club,” “The Giles House,” and “Old Inlet Bridge.”

Valerian Yavorsky was a man who lived a multifaceted life and left various legacies behind—and his wife Eugenie was his partner through all of it. Although they had no children, Yavorsky’s nephew, Andrew Selsky, kept his memory alive after he inherited his memoirs. In 1992, he told Yavorsky’s story in an article for the Associated Press, published in many newspapers across the United States. Eugenie outlived her husband, who died in 1979, just a year short of their 60th anniversary together.²⁰ She passed away ten years later and is buried with her husband at Boca Raton’s municipal cemetery.

Leno Lazzari

Leno Lazzari, a renowned Italian sculptor, found his artistic talents sought after by First Lady Grace Coolidge and even by the Duke of Windsor.²¹ Artistry ran deep in Lazzari’s family, with a lineage that dates back to 1505. His ancestor, Bramante Lazzari, was sponsored by Pope Julius II to work on the edifice of St. Peter’s church, a project later carried on by Michelangelo after



Leno Lazzari with one of his sculptures. By Milt Sosin, “Slain Pairs Jeep Found,” November 15, 1948.

Bramante’s passing. Lazzari fled to the United States in 1927 after facing death threats as an anti-fascist. He moved to Florida in 1930 and officially settled in Boca Raton in the mid-1940s in a home on North Federal Highway.²² All around Florida, Lazzari completed several pieces such



***Rainbow Fountain**, a figure of a kneeling girl, sprayed by shells in her hands, enveloping her in a rainbow of water. By Gwen Harrison, "Two Statues by Lazzari Shown Here," *The Miami News*, August 29, 1943.*

as "The Rainbow Fountain" and other sculptures for famous art deco hotels in Miami Beach. His works were even displayed alongside William Van Dresser's at the Society of the Four Arts in 1943.²³ However, aside from his artistic legacy, Lazzari is also remembered as a victim in Boca Raton's oldest cold case.

Tragedy struck the then sleepy town of Boca Raton on November 15, 1948, with the shocking murders of Leno Lazzari and his wife, Louise. The couple were found lying in a pool of blood on their bedroom floor as victims of a brutal shooting. Circumstances suggest that the couple had been shot immediately upon their return home as scattered groceries littered the floor.²⁴ Lazzari's pockets were turned inside out, and his wife's purse was gone. Yet, her watch remained on her wrist—adding an air of mystery to the motive of the murders.²⁵ Various theories arose, ranging from the Lazzari's unwittingly walking into a robbery gone awry to the chilling notion of premeditated murder. Despite extensive investigations, the perpetrator was never caught, leaving Lazzari's sculptures as silent witnesses to the gruesome scene.²⁶ Clues were scarce, with one of the only leads being the Lazzari's stolen Jeep found abandoned with Louise's missing purse inside; yet it offered no further insight into the killings.²⁷ The case became even more puzzlingly

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*Leno and Louise. By Douglas T. Cohen, "Who Killed Leno and Louise Lazzari," *The Palm Beach Post*, January 19, 1992.*

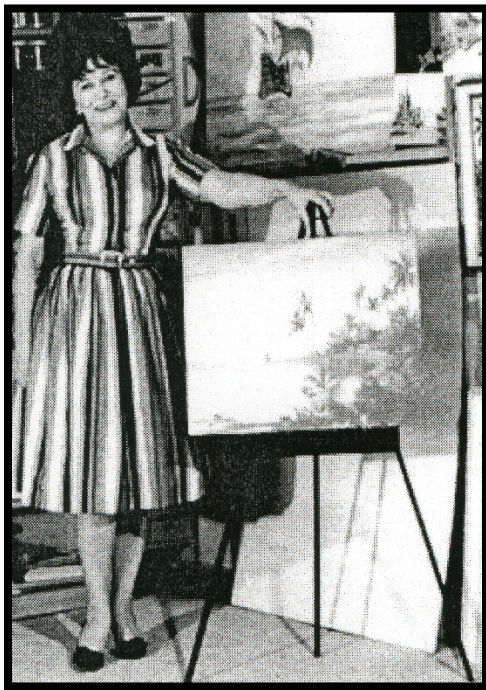
after the reported ransacking of Lazzari's studio in 1951. Pieces of various sizes were reported missing or destroyed, some large enough to require a truck and crew to move.²⁸

More recently, Lazzari's great-grandson, Danilo Lazzari, attempted to recover the stolen art after finding one of Lazzari's portraits for sale on eBay—leading him to search and reclaim his family's missing heritage.²⁹ However, one of his works that we know still exists today is the stone and plaque that accompanied the anchor that once adorned the entrance to the Palmetto Park Pavilion.



Leno and Louise Lazzari (left) next to Libby Warren and Carl Douglas standing with stone and plaque for the anchor at Palmetto Park Pavilion. BRHS 2010.120.1

Marie Mason



Marie Mason next to one of her paintings. Picture found at mariemason.com.

Marie Mason was born in Englewood, New Jersey in 1907. She began her artistic career as a portrait painter in New York. Like many artists at the time, Mason moved to Florida after WWII. She first lived in the vibrant city of Miami working as a mural artist, but later became an interior designer for nightclubs. Now painting in a new setting, Mason had to modify her murals to come to life in the dark. She began to incorporate black light and fluorescent paints to create works that were anything but ordinary—truly captivating pieces that transcended the need for light.³⁰

Mason later relocated to Deerfield Beach where she completed many ordinary works and ones in black light. In the 60s, the Gold Coast Shrine Club commissioned Mason to complete a series of historical paintings that depict Florida's Intercoastal bridges, the Hillsboro Lighthouse, and the Boca Raton Hotel. The artworks then were



Old Inlet Bridge, 1960s. BRHS 2017.160.1

transferred to the Deerfield Beach Historical Society; one of them is now in the possession of the BRHS.³¹ Mason was a prolific artist whose work can also be found in many private collections.³²

Dong Kingman



Dong Kingman Painting Mural at the Kingman Lounge in the Boca Raton Hotel. Photographed by Jack Hutton in "Encouragement was all Kingman Needed," Boca Raton News, March 29, 1970.

Watercolor master Dong Kingman, made a significant splash in the artistic world and Boca Raton alike. Kingman was of Chinese descent and was born in Oakland, California, in 1911. Still, his early education was based in Hong Kong. He studied calligraphy, watercolor, and oil painting, with an emphasis on French impressionist techniques and classical Chinese styles.³³ Though Kingman initially focused on oil painting, he decided that watercolors were his medium and perfected his technique throughout his career.³⁴

Kingman returned to the United States in 1930 and commenced his career as a distinguished watercolor artist. One of his commissions included a series of Boca Raton landscapes for the Boca Raton Hotel. In the 70s, prints of his captivating paintings adorned the walls of the hotel's guest rooms. Additionally, he painted a mural of the Boca Raton Tower for the hotel in the Kingman Lounge, but it has unfortunately been painted over. Kingman lived until he was 89 years old with fond thoughts of Boca Raton, wishing he had spent more time sketching and painting the town, stating: "There are some fascinating



Entrance to the Boca Raton Hotel. BRHS 2011.11.2

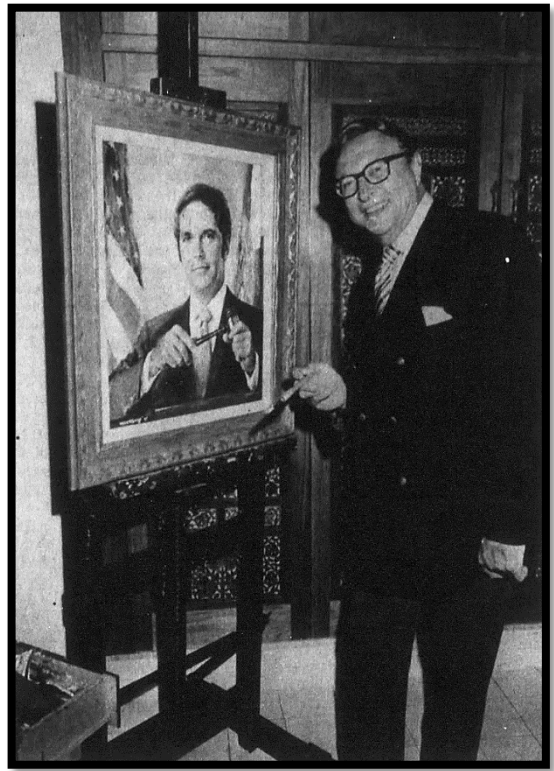


Cabana Club. BRHS 59003.1

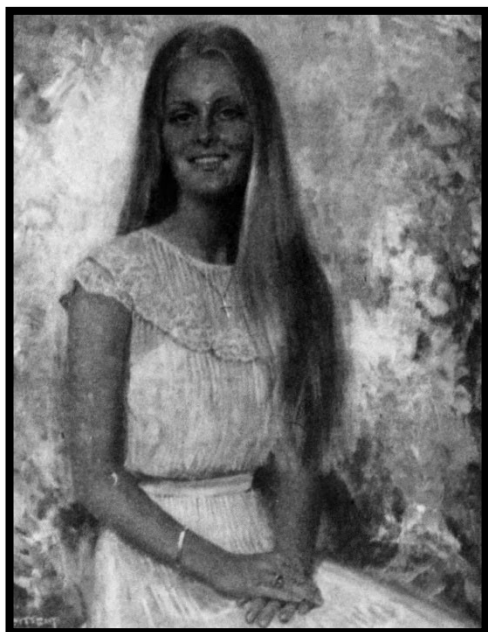
things here.”³⁵

Jack Wittrup

At only 11 years old, Jack Wittrup began to seriously pursue an artistic career by selling his editorial cartoons for local newspapers. He attended several art schools to further his education, including the Chicago Art Institute and the University of Wisconsin. While studying at the University of Wisconsin, Wittrup was called in to serve in the Air Force and was based in New York; there, he established his Advertising Art Studio, illustrating for famous companies such as Pepsi, Jell-O, Ford, Schlitz, and many other well-known beer and automobile companies. Wittrup’s illustrations are known worldwide, his most



Jack Wittrup alongside portrait commissioned by Florida Senate President Jerry Thomas. By Michael Couture, “Local Artist’s Work Hanging in State Senate.” Boca Raton News.



Portrait of Boca Raton local, Rhiannon Cassady. Photographed by Terry Townsend in “Shoreline Art,” Fort Lauderdale News, June 29, 1980.

recognizable being the iconic Santa Claus holding a Coca-Cola bottle which has become ingrained in popular culture.³⁶

Wittrup had a Florida home since the 50s but officially took up residence in Boca Raton around 1965, living on South Ocean Boulevard.³⁷ Wittrup decided to pivot his career toward the fine arts and shifted his focus to portrait painting. Now living in the sunshine state,

Wittrup claimed, “Florida probably has the greatest light for painting in the world.”³⁸ In addition to Florida’s unparalleled light, Wittrup found inspiration in Florida’s nature and frequently painted at the Everglades and the Morikami Museum’s Japanese gardens.³⁹ Many distinguished Floridians were also the subjects for Wittrup’s portraits, including five of Florida’s state senate presidents whose portraits hang in the state’s capital.⁴⁰ Aside from his portrait work, Wittrup was also an instructor at the Norton Gallery, Boca Museum of Art, and the Broward Art School, significantly contributing to the community.⁴¹

¹ Deborah C. Pollack, *Florida Sculptors and Their Work, 1880-2020* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2022) 101

² Deborah C. Pollack, *Florida Sculptors and Their Work, 1880-2020* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2022) 101.
Drollene Brown, “Sculptor Pellegatta Left His Works Behind.” September 11, 1984.

³ “Tampa Artist Taken by Death.” *The Tampa Tribune*, September 14, 1950.

⁴ Ruth Crawford, “Children of Famous Artist Served as His Models and Were Greatly Responsible for His Success.” *Tampa Bay Times*, April 26, 1925.

⁵ Leone King, “Remembering Cleveland Van Dresser.” *Palm Beach Post*, October 2, 1963; “Tampa Artist Taken by Death.” *The Tampa Tribune*.

⁶ Howard Goodman, “Wrecking Ball Flirts with a Piece of Boca’s Past.” *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, January 20, 2004; “Tampa Artist Taken by Death.” *The Tampa Tribune*; Marie Collison, “Ode to Sun and Warmth.” *Fort Lauderdale News*, April 24, 1940.

⁷ Andrew Selsky, “A Russian’s Memoirs.” *Tri-City Herald*, July 5, 1992; Janie Gould, “Boca Resident Recalls Czarist Days.” *The Palm Beach Post*, April 23, 1972.

⁸ Glastonbury, “Exhibition by Artists to Continue This Week.” *Hartford Courant*, August 7, 1966.

⁹ Sandy Wesley, “The Home Front.” *The Boca Raton News*, October 19, 1969.

¹⁰ Ronald W. Sawyer, “Man on His Fourth Career.” *Hartford Courant*, April 15, 1956.

¹¹ Dick Meyer, “Ex-Russian Officer Talks Way to Job—Soccer Coach.” *The Miami Herald*, January 6, 1963.

¹² “Boca’s Russian Recalls Horrors.” *Fort Lauderdale News and Sun-Sentinel*, March 26, 1972.

¹³ “Boca’s Russian Recalls Horrors.” *Fort Lauderdale News*.

¹⁴ Sawyer, “Man on His Fourth Career”; Boca’s Russian Recalls Horrors.” *Fort Lauderdale News*.

¹⁵ Sawyer, “Man on His Fourth Career.”

¹⁶ Glastonbury, “Exhibition by Artists” *Hartford courant*.

¹⁷ Sawyer, “Man on His Fourth Career.”

¹⁸ “The Arts.” *Boca Raton News*, January 31, 1965.

¹⁹ “Glastonbury Arts, Connecticut, Non-Profit, Art,” www.glastonburyarts.org, 2022, <https://www.glastonburyarts.org/>.

²⁰ “Boca’s Russian Recalls Horrors.” *Fort Lauderdale News*.

²¹ Douglas Cohen “Who Killed Leno and Louise Lazzari.” *The Palm Beach Post*, January 19, 1992.

²² Cohen “Who Killed Leno and Louise Lazzari.” *The Palm Beach Post*; Gwen Harrison, “Two Statues by Lazzari Shown Here.” *The Miami News*, August 29, 1943.

²³ “Fifth Annual Members’ Show Opens at Society of Four Arts.” *The Palm Beach Post*, January 15, 1943.

²⁴ Anne Geggis, “Death in the Sculptor’s Studio.” *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, December 8, 2014.

²⁵ Milt Sosin, “Slain Pair’s Jeep Found.” *The Miami News*, November 15, 1948.

²⁶ George Hathaway, “The Studio Murders.” *Panama City News Herald*, May 10, 1953.

²⁷ Sosin, “Slain Pair’s Jeep Found.” *The Miami News*.

²⁸ Wesley Stout, “Murder in the Studio.” *The Beachcomber*, July 24, 1953.

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- ²⁹ Geggis, "Death in the Sculptor's Studio." *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*.
- ³⁰ "Marie Mason Website," <http://www.mariemason.com/biography.htm>.
- ³¹ "Shrine Club Gets History Paintings." *Fort Lauderdale News*, January 7, 1964; "Marie Mason," www.mariemason.com.
- ³² "Shrine Club Gets History Paintings." *Fort Lauderdale News*, January 7, 1964.
- ³³ "Dong Kingman," www.kodnergallery.com. https://www.kodnergallery.com/artist/Dong_Kingman/biography/.
- ³⁴ John Opel, "Encouragement Was All Kingman Needed." *Boca Raton News*, March 29, 1970.
- ³⁵ Opel, "Encouragement Was All Kingman Needed." *Boca Raton News*; "Dong Kingman," www.kodnergallery.com.
- ³⁶ "Artist Jack Wittrup Leaves a Painting Legacy." *Boca Raton News*, October 30, 1989.
- ³⁷ Diana Crawford, "Boca's Place to Put People in Best Light." *Fort Lauderdale News*, November 12, 1972; Lorraine Huber, "Four Artists," *Boca Magazine*, March 1983, 41-42.
- ³⁸ Crawford, "Boca's Place," *Fort Lauderdale News*.
- ³⁹ "Artist Jack Wittrup," *Boca Raton News*.
- ⁴⁰ "Portraitist Jack Wittrup Fascinates NSAL." *Boca Raton News*, June 2, 1986.
- ⁴¹ "Artist Jack Wittrup," *Boca Raton News*.