Renaissance Man: Virgil Cantini

Throughout his prolific career, Virgil Cantini was and continues to be celebrated as a modern Renaissance Man in Pittsburgh art history. Known for his work in mobiles, enamels, mosaics, ceramics, and sculptures, Cantini’s artistic malleability continues to enliven and adorn city structures throughout Pittsburgh.

From his studio on South Craig Street, Cantini produced artistic works that both affirmed and reflected his Italian heritage. To many, Cantini’s studio was seen an homage to the Renaissance bottega, where the artist moved with ease from one art form to another. In addition to the art crafted inside its walls, the documents, sketches, photographs, and color slides from this studio (now preserved in the History Center’s Detre Library & Archives) reveal not only Cantini’s artistic vocation, but also his business acumen, his administrative vision, and his role as a father.

Born to Maria and Giacinto Cantini on February 28, 1919, in Roccaroso, Italy, Virgil David Cantini was one of 10 children. In 1930, Cantini and his family immigrated to Weirton, West Virginia. Although the grandson of a sculptor, Cantini was discouraged to practice art. Having borne financial hardship in Italy as a result of her father’s profession, Cantini’s mother dreamed of a more stable career path for her son. Defying his mother’s wishes, Cantini pursued an artistic education at Carnegie Technical Institute (now Carnegie Mellon University). When not experimenting with form and media in the classroom, Cantini took to the gridiron as a member of the Carnegie Tech football team to subsidize his education.

Before Cantini could complete his undergraduate education, the Second World War dictated that he enlist. Serving as a technical sergeant in the Engineer Corps, Cantini exploited his artistic abilities to generate topographical maps and models of North Africa. Following his discharge, Cantini graduated with a bachelor’s degree in painting and design and married fellow artist Lucille Kleber in 1946.

Two years later, Cantini received his master’s degree in fine arts from the University of Pittsburgh. Cantini had his first public art exhibition through the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh. In addition, Cantini also received his first commissions from Pittsburgh’s Bellefield Presbyterian Church and St. Michael’s Catholic Church, and he was instrumental in the formation of the Department of Studio Arts at the University of Pittsburgh.1 As an instructor, Cantini lobbied for the interdisciplinary value of the creative process in art, remarking that, “Creativity is essential not only in art but in other fields as well, in business and in professional or scientific areas.”2

Referred to as “Pittsburgh’s all-round man of art,” Cantini created many pieces that complemented Pittsburgh’s industrial, athletic,
In an address, Cantini acknowledged the link between an artist and his surroundings: “The artist of today is unconsciously reflecting the spirit of the time in which he lives and is ever searching for a deeper idea in which to bring out his interpretation of symbols and pictures in form and color tones.”

Together with his wife, Virgil raised two daughters, Maria and Lisa, to share his love and passion for art. Personal letters and photographs serve as exclusive windows into Cantini family life. Cantini is quoted as saying, “This is our credo, to help our children see the sense of wonder and creation, to give body to their observation; to develop their dreams; to battle ignorance; to question authority; and finally, to grow into wholesome and contributing individuals.”

Virgil Cantini’s identity as a Renaissance Man was as far-reaching as the mediums he employed to create his art. For those interested in learning more, the Virgil Cantini Papers and Photographs are open for research at the Detre Library & Archives.

1 During Cantini’s tenure, the University of Pittsburgh’s Department of Studio Arts was established as the Henry Clay Frick Fine Arts Department.