



Island Packet file photo

Joe Bowler in his studio in 1981. The Portrait Society of America recognized him with a lifetime achievement award.

Hilton Head arts giant Joe Bowler dies at 88



BY DAVID LAUDERDALE
dlauderdale@islandpacket.com

Joe Bowler, a hall of fame illustrator in the glory years of American magazines who then helped establish Hilton Head Island as an arts center, died Monday at his home in Sea Pines. He was 88.

In the Lowcountry, he turned to fine art — figurative work and portraits — and in 2014 was pre-



Bowler

He was a pillar of the Evening of the Arts annual fundraiser that has pumped millions of dollars into arts education in local schools. His work was a traditional highlight of the auction, with the bidding hitting five figures.

Bowler moved to the island in 1972 from the New York City area, where his illustrations from dashing beach scenes of a go-go America

sented the Gold Medal Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Portrait Society of America.

to a portrait of Rose Kennedy were constantly on the pages and covers of Time, McCall's and Saturday Evening Post. He was awarded Artist of the Year by the Artists' Guild of New York in 1967 and was inducted into the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame in 1992.

His impact on Hilton Head was felt immediately.

"Not only because of his astounding work," wrote Island Packet arts columnist Nancy Wellard, "but because of his leadership in building an artist community right here on the island. He helped to form the famous Red Piano Art Gallery Round

Table, which brought together other artist friends. Names such as Walter Greer, Joe DeMers, George Plante, Ray Ellis and Ralph Ballantine were all artistically in place and connected with the island community. What enormous artistic impact."

He was urged to come to the island by illustrator Coby Whitmore, his longtime friend and mentor from their days at the Charles E. Cooper Studio in New York City.

Bowler said the work of an illustrator was great training for a portrait artist, and he quickly had a long waiting list for his portraits. He was deliberately a follower of representational art and was floored at art school graduates who could not draw a horse.

Hilton Head artist Aldwyth said, "As far as the Round Table goes, he was

really the leader." He often kicked off the weekly discussion among a close group of working island artists by reading the latest from Christian Science Monitor art critic Theodore F. Wolff.

Bluffton artist Louanne LaRoche fondly remembers Bowler's special affection ("bromance") for her dog, Escher, who would put his head in Bowler's lap as he read Wolff. Bowler even painted a self-portrait and signed it for Escher. In fact, Bowler painted portraits of many dogs.

LaRoche said Bowler was an inspiration other artists.

"He embraced everyone at every level as long as they genuinely wanted to improve," she said.

She said Joe and his late wife Marilyn, who died in 2008, were keenly interested in raising the level of art, artists, arts education and art appreciation on Hilton Head. Their opinions were highly sought after and influential.

Marilyn was his artist representative, followed by their daughters, Jolyn and Brynne.

"I don't know two people who have given to and devoted more of themselves to the education of youth in the arts than Joe and Marilyn Bowler," said Charlene Gardner, owner of the Four Corners Art Gallery in Bluffton, where Bowler's show "Bluffton Connection" was held in June. He participated at the opening via Skype.

"Joe has spent many hours offering encouragement and sharing his expertise with young artists who have a plan to be as accomplished as he," Gardner said at the time.

Bowler's good friend Charles Perry said Bowler donated artwork to raise tens of thousands of