



A legacy continues: Charles Forrester remembered



A gifted sculptor, artist and educator, Charles H. Forrester left his unique imprint on this world through his artwork that spans six decades and captured a multitude of mediums and styles. Forrester, a beloved Professor of Sculpture at WKU from 1965 to 1992, also directly impacted generations of sculptors and artists.

In fall 2021, a retrospective of Forrester's work was held at the Downing Museum at the Baker Arboretum and a screening of the award-winning documentary *A Line Unbroken: The Charles Forrester Story* was held in Bowling Green. The exhibit was the first opportunity to view a large-scale showing of Forrester's artwork since his death in 2010.

During his lifetime, Forrester created more than 550 sculptures, including busts of five WKU Presidents—Dr. Kelly Thompson, Dr. Dero Downing, Dr. John D. Minton, Dr. Donald Zacharias and Dr. Kern Alexander. While most of his work is held in private collections, several pieces can also be seen on WKU's campus and in Bowling Green.

Winnie Forrester, daughter of the late Professor, recalls when then-WKU President Dr. Kelly Thompson initially called her father to offer him the position at WKU in 1965. It happened to be 3 a.m. their time in Manchester, England.

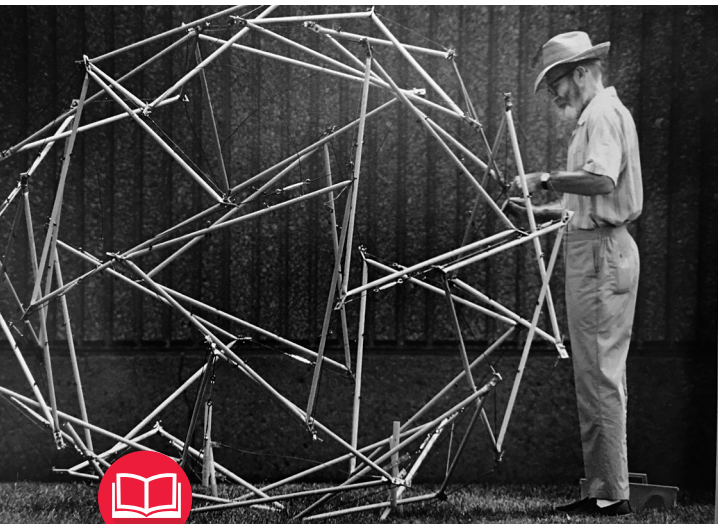
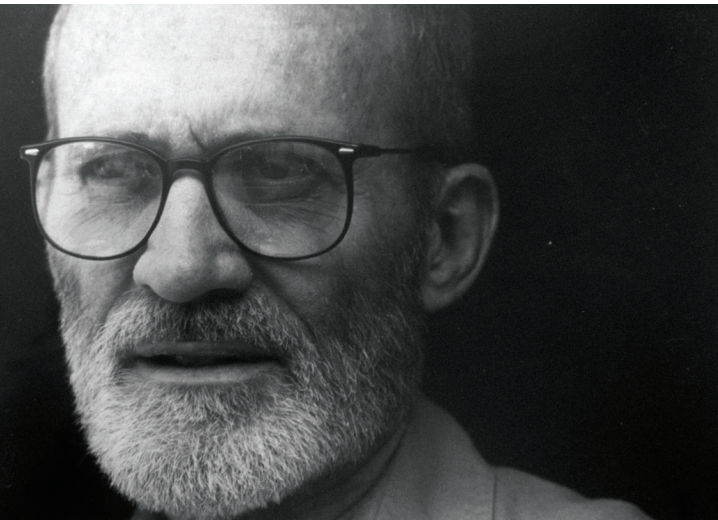
"We never knew if Dr. Thompson realized what time it was in England, but my mother, Dorothy, was happy to receive the call,"

Forrester said. "When we first moved to Bowling Green, my dad set up his classroom and studio in the basement of Cherry Hall.

"Later, after the Ivan Wilson Fine Arts Center was built in 1974, he moved into a much larger studio space that he personally designed with an impressive metal foundry," Forrester added. "Famously fastidious about order in his studio and his assignments, he made an impression on his students, many of whom joined him in the studio late into the night working on projects."

Russ Faxon ('74) of Bell Buckle, Tenn., who is a professional sculptor and member of WKU's Hall of Distinguished Alumni, was a student of Forrester's and among those who enjoyed visits to the studio to watch his professor work. Faxon remembers Professor Forrester as a "treasure trove of information who presented projects in a very orderly and practical manner."

"We always knew what he wanted us to achieve in the projects he presented," Faxon said. "Introductory sculpture classes were more technique-oriented, since much of sculpture involves the process of creating. You must give students technical skills, and that's what he did and believed in, because you can't abstract something if you don't first understand what its reality is. In the more advanced courses, he would present conceptual problems for us to solve, but he was very lenient if we had some of our own concepts that we wanted to develop."



Faxon also recalled a time when he had a specific idea for a project that involved plaster casting and the subsequent enthusiasm Forrester displayed.

“I had this idea to do something, and I said, ‘Do you think I should take off in this direction?’ and he smiled, rubbed his hands together and said, ‘I can’t wait to get started,’” Faxon said.

One of the greatest lessons Faxon learned from Forrester was to think through a project from beginning to end before even starting the physical creation.

“I see a great deal of his influence in my own creations, from the attention to detail to the structural elements that go into creating a sculpture,” Faxon said. “A lot of people make things, but not all are storytellers. Chuck was a great storyteller with all his work.”

Forrester was a master of the visual pun, and he was especially adept at working with the human figure, creating abstracted figurative forms in materials ranging from welded steel to laminated plywood. His artwork captured startlingly realistic details, yet his works are highly stylized and often twisted into sly visual puzzles and riddles.

A Mind in Motion: The Art of Charles H. Forrester, a fully

illustrated companion art book, was published in 2020 and features insight from art historians and contemporary artists exploring his compelling life story and six decades of artwork.

Dr. Guy Jordan, WKU Associate Professor of Art History, contributed to the book.

“It was really helpful that I was able to visit his studio in East Nashville and spend time with the work I was going to write about,” Dr. Jordan said. “I could see some of his finished work, but I was most interested in the notebooks and journals he kept.

“He worked a lot in metaphor—like surrealism and poetry—and a lot of his work looks for connections in disparate fields of knowledge,” Dr. Jordan added. “While studying his work was new to me, he really is an important 20th century American sculptor who hasn’t been investigated by scholars yet. It was a treat to be able to work on scholarship about him and his work.”

Professor Forrester was known for being totally in control of his studio space, and he exhibited an almost supernatural ability to keep his “uniform” of black pants, black turtleneck and black beret clean from all dust, no matter what he happened to be working on.



Dr. David Lee (A), current University Historian at WKU, was serving as Associate Dean for Potter College of Arts & Letters when Professor Forrester retired. Dr. Lee remembers that for Forrester, “everything was tidy, everything had its place, and things were in their place.

“That was particularly important to me, because I think being thorough and meticulous translated into a safe studio space for our students,” Dr. Lee said. “He came here at a time when the Department and the University were flourishing and moving into different directions. We had offered art classes all the way back to 1907, but in the 1960s we were developing different kinds of studios. Chuck came at a time when the curriculum was maturing, and he provided leadership.”

Forrester pioneered a new era for three-dimensional artwork at the University, and he helped develop the facilities to support that, many of which are still in use today.

“We are a department that links contemporary practices to traditional materials and processes, and it is unusual in a department our size to still have access to some of those traditional practices like metal casting,” said Dr. Kristina Arnold, Department Head for the Department of Art & Design. “With a sand pit and a furnace located three stories underneath my window (I can hear when the furnace fires), these are opportunities that Charles Forrester literally built into the Department that continue to inform our students’ work today.”

Dr. Arnold says that students also have the opportunity to engage with him every time they step into the sculpture lab, as his hand-painted labeling for tools still occupies the walls.

“We’ve also found hand-drawn plans of the spaces we still use,” said **David Marquez (’98)**, an Assistant Professor of Sculpture in the

Department of Art & Design. “The spaces then were likely not designed to facilitate the larger groups of students and advancements we have now. The metal casting foundry, wood shop and welding areas are good examples of rooms that have taken on little change since he left.”

Dr. Arnold did not get to meet Professor Forrester, but she said she feels connected to him, nonetheless.

“As artists, we are inspired by, and absorb ideas from, everything around us,” Dr. Arnold said. “We also communicate through our work, and that communication spans space and time via the objects themselves. I used to teach in the space that Charles Forrester designed, organized and inhabited. I’ve also spent time with the work of his we have on campus. I know him through these very personal legacies he has left us, and through them I can see him—in spirit, mind and imagination, if not in body. And I do know him, as do our students, even if we never met him, and that’s a pretty powerful connection!”

As Faxon said, “good teachers allow you to create,” and Forrester’s legacy continues because of both the strength of his personal work and his dedication to teaching and inspiring his students.

“When you look at Chuck, you not only see the curriculum and the facility, but you see the kind of teaching he was able to do reflected in the work of students like Russ Faxon, who also has work displayed on our campus,” Dr. Lee said. “It is a special kind of legacy and one that not many of us get to have.”

Forrester grew up in New York City and received his Master of Fine Arts at the University of Oregon in 1960. He also maintained a studio in the artists’ haven of eclectic East Nashville for the last 12 years of his life. ■ DEANNA M. JENKINS (’09, ’17, L)



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