ART REVIEW
STARS AND HEROES
Don’t-miss retrospective showcases Wexler, Hahn partnership

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The world applauds stars and heroes while sometimes mistaking one for the other. The New Mexico Art League is hosting “Howard Wexler and Siegfried Hahn — A Retrospective,” which showcases stardom and heroism in the fine arts covering more than six decades. The show is of a general high quality that would be the envy of many small museums.

American-born Wexler, the hero, and the late South African-born Hahn, the star, 1914-2008, met in Paris in 1961 where they joined forces as artists and educators. The retrospective mostly focuses on Hahn’s development as an artist with the inclusion of his 1935 self-portrait at age 19 and his first still life completed utilizing the Maroger medium and painting technique under the hands-on instruction of neo-Rubensque painter Joseph Sheppard in 1958. Sheppard was a star pupil of Jacques Maroger, a French artist, chemist and restorer at the Louvre who developed the Flemish and Italian mediums as aids in the restoration of Renaissance paintings for the museum.

For complex reasons Maroger moved to Baltimore, Md., during the late 1940s where he taught Renaissance painting techniques and materials science at the Maryland Institute College of Art-MICA.

In 1961 on a cold, damp and pewter-gray winter day in Baltimore yours truly and a few other students climbed into sculpture instructor Sam Golson’s equally gray 1950 Plymouth to visit the then retired master Maroger in his studio. In repose on a balcony he waxed eloquent on Renaissance painting technologies while pointing to passages within his own paintings with a six-foot-long maulstick. Maroger passed away during the following year. That close encounter raised a few issues about dedication to mastering techniques once used by others and the pitfall of the medium becoming the master of the artist.

Hahn, who was very well educated in the arts, won a Gold Medal at the Royal Academy of the Arts in London and was world-renowned as a landscape, still life and portrait painter in both oils and watercolor. He and Wexler were inspired by 18th-century English watercolor paintings and based much of their work on the subdued palette found within the British cultural and geographic landscape.

For Hahn that aesthetic baseline worked quite well in “Greek Mountain with Village,” an oil painted in 1953. The composition captures an enormous amount of space with clear demarcations between fore, middle and background. The rendering includes wonderful details featuring figures, small buildings and simultaneous activities throughout the composition. However, a much later Hahn landscape painted in Taos carries the same palette and light quality. New Mexico light is unique and has drawn artists from everywhere. But in this case technique and rigid style trumped reality.

Hahn is a solid portrait and figure painter with work like “Peg, Music Student, London” 1980 and several other quality portraits in the galleries. A brightly painted nude rounds out Hahn’s figurative repertoire. My favorite painting in the show is “Red Bench” 1980 a beautiful image of a young woman by Wexler whose masterfully brings together his own sensibility, a touch of Steve Hanks style and Maroger’s medium. The seated fully dressed figure is surrounded by cut flowers, her own sunhat with ribbons and an architectural setting that skilfully juxtaposes organically fluid forms with more rigid geometry.

A purely architectonic and beautifully composed Wexler painting is “Holy City of Spain, Santiago de la Compostela” from 1966 reveals his early roots in cubism.

Both Wexler and Hahn are exhibiting watercolors but my favorites are Wexler’s recent plein air renderings of the area around San Antonio. They exude life and a positive world view.

In the end Hahn with his charisma, charm and prolific creativity was the star gleaming behind the bowsprit while the Hahn/Wexler ship’s canvas and paper sails captured imagery that prolonged them around the world on the ocean of Samsara with Wexler the hero’s hand firmly on the tiller. Some flowers thrive best in the shade. Don’t miss the show.

“Greek Mountain with Village” by Siegfried Hahn in 1953 echoes the subdued light and palette of 18th-century English watercolor paintings.

“Red Bench” 1980 by Howard Wexler allowed the artist to masterfully bring together his own sensibility, a touch of Steve Hanks style and Maroger’s medium.

“Holy City of Spain, Santiago de la Compostela” by Howard Wexler reveals the artist’s roots in cubism.