

Professor teaches architecture, works on successful art career

By Susan C. Akin
Reporter

Somewhere in the middle of collections of carved wood sculptures, rare tropical plants, ties, pipes, ancient Christian artifacts, African wedding aprons and masses of architecture students, Rodney Hill can be found.

This architecture professor doubles as a sculpture artist and one of Texas' most successful architects.

"People come to me for designing and sculpturing commissions, so I don't have to go looking for them," Hill said. "Clients hear about me through word of mouth."

Hill also designed and created the 50-foot-long carved walnut murals hanging in the MSC. They were done for A&M's centennial celebration in 1976.

One of his next projects will be to continue these carved wood murals to include the liberal arts, medicine and education colleges.

Among his many different commissions and professional undertakings, Hill prizes his design work on the State Fair of Texas, the Apparel Mart in Dallas, Highland Park Methodist Church, the Garden Show in Dallas and numerous restaurants, houses, business offices, gazebos, wine cellars and art pieces throughout the state and country.

In addition to using his creative talents, Hill manages to intrigue most audiences with his own fascinating interests.

"My rare tropical plant collection is the hobby I escape to," he said. "I have one of the better rare tropical greenhouses in this part of the state."

Hill has plants from India, Japan, Africa, Mexico and other countries. His collection includes an 18-year-old ponytail palm and a 15-foot tall cactus.

"I also enjoy gourmet cooking, particularly making pastries," he said.

He's a sculptor, a gourmet cook and has a tropical green thumb, but what does such a multi-talented person do just for the fun of it?

He collects ties. "Men's ties are almost the only thing that changes in men's fashion," he said.

Some of the more unusual ties in his collection include a wooden tie, a bone-shaped tie, a silver-sequined tie, a Texas flag tie and a clear plastic tie filled with unusual objects like plastic toys and BBs.

The ties are sure to attract a lot of attention when Hill wears them. He was wearing the plastic gadget-filled tie when he answered a delivery man's knock at the door. The delivery man was inquisitive about the unusual objects around Hill's neck.

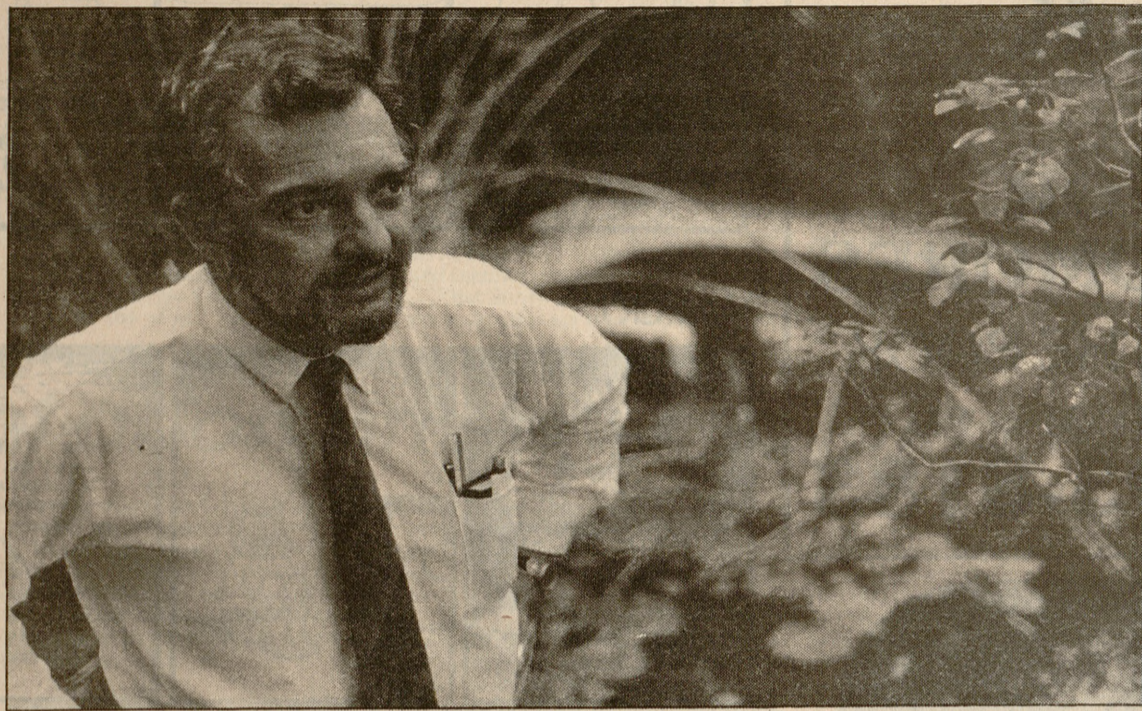
Just as men's neckwear follows changing trends, Hill sees his own artwork changing.

"My work is getting a little more non-objective," he said. "It's getting a little more abstract. But most of my commissions have been toward the realistic."

Sitting in his living room filled with unusual and interesting art pieces of all colors and variety, Hill described his beginnings in art.

"I was raised with art," he said. "It was just a normal part of my life. It was something that I always did. My parents encouraged all forms of art — painting, drawing and sculpting."

"Both of my parents were artists. My father was an advertising artist. He founded the advertising department at Texas Tech. And my mother was a fine artist, a painter."



Rodney Hill, an architecture professor at A&M, looks at plants in his greenhouse.

Photo by Susan Akin

Hill received his bachelor's degree in architecture from Texas Tech University in 1962.

"Twenty percent of my undergraduate courses in architecture were fine art courses," Hill said. "Add those to all the art experience I had as a child and it gave me a good background for my work."

In 1969 Hill received his master's degree in architecture from the University of California at Berkeley.

"I did a lot of welding sculpture at Berkeley," he said. "I essentially worked my way through graduate school selling sculpture. I did a 50-piece welding sculpture for Macy's in New York and also showed a lot of my art in several galleries."

Hill has exhibited his artwork at many galleries in the country such as the Houston Museum of Fine Arts;

the MSC murals — because of their close grains.

"Walnut and pecan are two excellent hardwoods to work with," Hill said. "Their close grains hold a lot of detail that something with a wide grain, like oak, couldn't handle."

Hill explained that the bulk of his work is with wood, although he enjoys creating molded-bronze and welded-metal sculptures as well.

"It depends so much on what I'm commissioned for," he said. "I can do just about anything, but the clients usually tell me what they want."

Hill got his first commission after his architecture agency included sculpting wood stairs as part of his job.

"I designed some art nouveau stairs for a house in Highland Park," he said. "And since there weren't

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— Rodney Hill, A&M architecture professor

the Dubose Gallery, Houston; the Country Gallery, New York; the University Museum of Fine Arts, Berkeley; the Baker Gallery, Lubbock; the Sutton, New Orleans; the Igor Meade, San Francisco; and One Main Place, Dallas.

He also has had exhibits at A&M in the MSC Gallery and the Langford Architecture Center Gallery.

Anyone can view Hill's permanent artwork on campus. He designed and created a bronze and walnut sculpture on the second floor of Sterling C. Evans Library.

"Texas A&M commissioned me to do that sculpture for a fund-raising venture for the library," Hill said. People donate money to have their name put on the sculpture and the money goes toward buying the library more books, he said.

The Lubbock native said he likes to work with walnut and pecan wood types — such as the ones he used for

any woodcarvers in Dallas, I ended up carving them. That was my first time to carve wood. Other architects in Texas found out about that and ever since it's been one commission after another. And generally architects commission me."

Hill has had more than 70 individual commissions, taking up about three pages of his professional 12-page resume.

"One of my latest commissions was an eight-foot walnut mantelpiece for a couple in Wyoming," he said.

Hill has also designed and created a sculpture for the American Revolution Museum in Washington, D.C., an altar for the Highland Park Methodist Church, an outdoor sculpture for the Woodcreek subdivision, two metal doors for the Capital National Bank and an earth-sheltered house in Belton — to name only a few of his projects.

A bronze sculpture he did for the

Pleasant Grove Independent School District in Texarkana won him an award in the Art in Public Places competition. Other art honors he has received include the Seven Young Artists of Houston juried show, the Houston Expo juried show and the Annual Fund Raising Tour with the Art League of Houston.

Hill also has received the Faculty Distinguished Achievement Award, Distinguished Student-Faculty Relations and the Teacher Achievement Award.

Hill said he enjoys designing and teaching at A&M because of the flexibility the University gives him.

"They're open here to individual creativity," he said. "The conservative campus tends to promote the individual. So conservatism here doesn't affect my artwork. I haven't found any stumbling blocks to creativity or exploration."

"The methods I'm using in education here would be very difficult to do at UT or Rice. The College of Architecture at A&M, next to Berkeley, is probably one of the more liberal schools of architecture in the world."

Hill uses centering exercises to get his students to think in a holistic fashion, bringing out their individual creativity. He says it is all to help students feel good about themselves, allowing them to control their creativity better.

"Architecture is a blend of art, science, engineering and psychology," he said. "Lots of architecture schools are tied to engineering schools. But this school took on a whole new way of teaching in 1969, allowing it to combine fine art and psychology with science and engineering."

"For my second-year class my students are putting some designs on a T-shirt that they'll wear for part of their presentation. That helps them think of art and architecture as being one and the same."

When Hill compared students at other schools he has visited with students at A&M, he said the students here are more open, interested and willing to learn.

"Teaching architecture at A&M is one of my favorite things to do," he said.

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Anonymous benefactor buys house for elderly woman

DALLAS (AP) — An anonymous benefactor who bought an elderly woman's foreclosed home so she could live there for the rest of her life was an angel from heaven," she said.

Maude Ellis, who is widowed and crippled, has lived in the old frame house for the past 36 years. But last month, a bank foreclosed on the home.

She found out about the help from the mysterious donor earlier this week.

"He's an angel from heaven," Ellis, 78, said Wednesday. "That's what he is."

When community members found out about Ellis' plight, a special fund was set up for her by Dr. Donald Bernstein at the First Republic Bank of Carrollton.

Ellis said she first found out about a possible benefactor Saturday, and then Bernstein called Tuesday to tell her the deal was secure.

Bernstein says the benefactor is just an average man who drives an old car.

"He and his family don't live in a big, fancy house," he said. "They are just common folks — who have a wonderful heart."

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