



Meet Mike Bennett, the official in-house artist for the **Jon Gnagy Historical Society**. In case you might be wondering about Mike and his connection with world-famous artist Jon Gnagy, here's his story:

Growing up during the 1960's proved to be an exciting time for me. As a child, I very fortunately possessed a natural inclination toward art and I well remember diligently copying coloring book characters from contemporary television cartoon shows such as *Yogi Bear*, *Huckleberry Hound*, and *Mighty Mouse*.

My mother, after assembling a small group of my sketches, showed them to a priest who was visiting us and he remarked how well drawn they were. When asked if I had traced them, Mom said, "No! He drew them freehand."

Also in the 1960s, filmed re-runs of a very popular television program, hosted by the first ever television art teacher—Jon Gnagy—were routinely broadcast from our local television station.

Mr. Gnagy's program was the first—and the best—television art instruction program; televised long before future artists Bill Alexander and Bob Ross had instructional shows on Public Television.

In the primitive years of television, there were very few stations from which to choose. Reception was often poor due to the strength of the telecast and the quality of a viewer's antenna. Jon Gnagy's first televised art program was telecast in 1946 from station WBTV's Studio-4, high atop the Empire State Building, and Gnagy is rightly credited as the first ever American Television Star to host the very first regularly scheduled television show.

Later, after Gnagy had left the National Broadcasting Company to start his own syndicated *Learn To Draw* series, I remember watching one particular half-hour show on a Saturday morning in which he demonstrated the creation of two separate "10-minute" landscapes, using light gray, medium gray, and black chalk to work artistic magic on the large sheet of newsprint attached to his easel. The ease and speed of his drawing abilities were simply mesmerizing.

Later in that decade, I experienced the supreme privilege of personally watching Mr. Gnagy work his magic *twice* while being only a few feet away from him. The first

time was in 1966 as he drew a Moonlit Tree lesson and the second time was in 1971 when I watched him draw a Cabin In The Snow lesson.

When watching his television shows, I had only a pencil and paper and I found it impossible to keep up with him. There were accusations from some viewers that he used “trick photography” when drawing, but I can personally testify that there wasn't the slight bit of trickery involved when he was at the easel. When I watched him—in person—drawing his sketches, he was simply *fast!*. In those days of filmed kinescopes—before videocassettes, DVDs, and digital video—there was no way to pause and study his programs. On some occasions, he would demonstrate one of his television lessons taken from one of his instructional books. When I was given a brand new *Jon Gnagy Art Set* for Christmas, I thought I was in Heaven. Once I picked up those Jon Gnagy pastel chalks, I was unable to put them down. They were messy, yet so much fun to work with; they blended colors very nicely.

During my school year as a 5th grader in 1965 at *Our Lady of the Assumption School*, my talent was starting to be recognized by the teaching nuns and I was asked by at least three of them, including my own teacher, to sketch an elaborate scene of Bethlehem on the chalkboards using different colored chalks. The scene was to be the backdrop for our Christmas play as each class traveled the classrooms—just before Christmas break—to see the same reenactment of the Christmas story by different grade levels. One year, I portrayed St. Joseph and another year one of the Three Kings. I could feel all of the 6th grade children's eyes on me as I was sketching out palm trees all over the chalkboard. As I worked, I wondered why the other students couldn't do the same thing.

It was in 1966 that one of my fondest memories came true. Our local newspaper, *The San Bernardino Sun-Telegram* announced that **Jon Gnagy was coming to San Bernardino, California!** He would be appearing at the Inland Center's *May Company* for the launching of their new Art Department which, of course, would be stocking Gnagy's *Learn To Draw* kits.

For his instructional demonstration, Gnagy chose six children from the audience to follow along with him as he taught the lesson of a Moonlit Tree from one of his books. I could hardly wait as the day approached for the happy arrival of the Master Artist. I managed to work my way to the front of the crowd and as he started asking for volunteers, I was jumping frantically and waving my arms in all directions at once, hoping that he could see me. And he did! He chose me and we all began to start our sketches. The other children and I worked with Gnagy's own chalk collection and I felt like I had really made it to the big time!

When the presentation was finished and as the crowd began to disperse, I asked Mr. Gnagy if he would autograph my sketch. He replied, “I can't do that since I didn't make it. First, I want you to sign it.” After signing my name to my first “professional” looking color sketch, Mr. Gnagy grabbed a piece of chalk and wrote on my sketch, “Instructed by Jon Gnagy.” My tree sketch was immediately framed behind glass by my mother and it stayed in our family home until I moved out. I still have that picture in my studio and a close examination of the bottom of the sketch will reveal Jon Gnagy's autograph. The picture is featured on my website with the notation: “This pastel scene was done under the instruction of *Television Art Instructor Jon Gnagy.*”

Five years later, during Christmas Break in December of 1971, I met Jon Gnagy again in Idyllwild, California. It would prove to be my final meeting with him. I was

in high school at the time and I had discovered that he had a studio gallery at the *Welch's Carriage Inn* where he gave demonstrations in the evenings. My parents asked the manager of the Inn were Mr. Gnagy's demonstration was to be held, he immediately phoned the artist who generously and graciously left his warm, cozy home, trudged through the snow, and appeared at the Inn less than a half-hour later to demonstrate his talents to us—a group of strangers. He began by asking what we wanted him to draw. I loudly exclaimed, “A cabin in the snow,” and when he was finished with the sketch, we thanked him. My mom reminded him that I was one of the youngsters at the May Company in 1966 when he did a demonstration of the Moonlit Tree lesson.

Mr. Gnagy said he remembered me and he asked if I would like to appear on a new *color television show* that he was currently developing. Of course, I jumped at the offer! Unfortunately, the show never materialized but a year later, I was able to acquire an original Jon Gnagy pastel sketch. On the back of that sketch, he had written that it was developed specifically for a new color television program. Gnagy was definitely planning a comeback but the dream of appearing on the Master Artist's show was shattered.

Even as the years continued to pass, I kept waiting for that phone call or perhaps a letter in the mailbox from Mr. Gnagy inviting me to work with him on that color television show, but to no avail.

I had no idea exactly where he lived and I was unable to contact him. Sadly, the *Welch's Carriage Inn* was bought and demolished by Glenn Bell, the founder of the *Taco Bell* restaurant chain.

In 1981, the same year I married a wonderful girl named René, I read a newspaper obituary reporting Jon Gnagy's death. While it was the end of one era for me in a sense, it was also the beginning of another more exciting one.

More of my art experiences can be found in a book entitled *Jon Gnagy: America's Art Teacher*. In addition to writing a section explaining *How to Complete a Pastel Sketch*, I drew two sketches for the book. One appears on the cover and the other is nestled inside the book. The author of the book is *Charles M. Province*, the famous and prolific author of a number of books, many on the subject of General S. Patton, Jr.

The book may be found on both *Amazon.com* and on Province's website at www.pattonhq.com

Mr. Province has also created the *Jon Gnagy Historical Society* and published an entire website pertaining to *The Great Master Artist*. The society site is at www.pattonhq.com/Gnagy.html.

As my artistic talent has improved over the decades, I've been fortunate enough to sell and license my artwork in many venues. My art has been published as International Postage Stamps, Wood & Cardboard Jigsaw Puzzles, Book & Magazine Covers, Cross-stitch Designs, Paint-By-Number sets, Pixel Hobby Crafts, Wall Murals, Tin Signs, Prints, and Greeting Cards. I taught art to 6th-to-8th graders for the California Public School system for 25 years. I've sold my art in galleries throughout the 1980s to the 2000s and on the *Art & Coin* TV program between 2011 and 2012.

In 2016 I had a horrific scare when I lost the sight in my right eye due to a “spontaneous detach retina.” Luckily, an eye surgeon was able to freeze the retina and push it back to its proper place in my eye socket. He said I was extremely lucky; most people permanently lose their eyesight if they don't get to an eye surgeon

quickly enough to salvage the retina. I also ascribed the successful procedure to God, along with the help of a few favorite saints such as *Padre Pio*. My right eye is still far from perfect but at least I still possess “reasonable” eyesight. I have to wear “prism” glasses, otherwise I see double images—but that's preferable to complete blindness in the eye.

Lastly, I must say that I would never have experienced such success, nor would I be sketching or painting today, if it weren't for *Jon Gnagy*, his *Television Art Instruction* program, and his *Learn To Draw* art kits.

My life is complete with a wonderful wife, Rene, three beautiful daughters (Nicole, Victoria, and Kathleen) and their husbands, and all of my grandchildren.

God gave me the talent, but Jon Gnagy ignited it!