

Westmount Profile: Gabrielle Pilot

Where colour reigns

BY LAUREEN SWEENEY

Surrounded by paintings, Gabrielle Pilot announces with a dramatic sweep of the arm: “Colour is very important in our family.”

She’s referring to its role in her own artistic evolution and her paintings that hang in hundreds of homes as well as to the legacy she has inherited. Robert Wakeham Pilot, her father-in-law, and his step-father Maurice Cullen, are both renowned Canadian painters.

But figuratively speaking, Gabrielle’s own life can be likened to a canvas splashed with the colour of early days in faraway places, schooling on the high seas, a passionate pursuit of community causes and her conversion of a mountain-top swamp into a garden estate.

“My use of colour has changed dramatically from the gaudy fuchsias and lime greens of the 1960s,” Pilot explains. “At the time, my father-in-law watched and watched my experiments, and I learned a lot from him about mixing colours.”

But influenced by his work and that of Cullen, she has come to adopt the softer blues, whites and pastels that characterized their landscapes and winter scenes.

Exhibiting at Art Westmount

Gabrielle is one of the 60 Westmount painters currently preparing to exhibit their work at various locations during the Art Westmount 2008 open studio weekend October 18 and 19.

And that’s just one of her many community commitments that currently include the co-presidency of the Westmount Horticultural Society, organization of events for the city’s Horticultural Advisory Committee (HAC) and work for the Thomas More Institute, for which she helps run an annual trip to Stratford.

A co-founder of the Westmount Cooperative Pre-school and the Brome Lake Garden Club, Pilot also brought La Leche League to Quebec in 1966 to promote the values of breast feeding. She and her husband, investment counsellor Wakeham Pilot, have three children – Christopher, Cullen and Kyle – as well as four grandchildren.

Global upbringing

Born in Melbourne, Australia, Gabrielle’s global upbringing has had a profound impact on the way she embraces

other cultures. Her mother, Rosalind Cosgrave Moquette, grew up in China, the daughter of Canadian diplomats.

Gabrielle’s own father, Henri E. Moquette served in the Dutch air force in the Far East and became an international banker. As he travelled, the family circled the globe by sea three times, going to Indonesia, Vancouver, South Africa, China, Portugal and Holland. Gabrielle’s first school days were on board ship.

When her father founded the Mercantile Bank of Canada in Montreal in 1953, the family came to Westmount. She remembers how amazing it was to come right off the boat from “flat Holland” and ride up the switchbacks of Belvedere to reach their first home here at 6 Sunnyside. Later, her father built the house at 62 Belvedere Rd.

Speaking mainly Dutch, Gabrielle’s introduction to The Study proved difficult and she was sent to boarding school (the former St. Helen’s) “to be disciplined,” she says with a smile.

But it was later at St. George’s where she developed a serious interest in science, winning a scholarship to university in Rhode Island. Disillusioned by a party atmosphere, however, she returned home and began studying art. At École des Beaux Arts, she was a member of the last graduating class, which designed the children’s playground for Expo ’67.

Launching into textile design, she proceeded to sell hundreds of her own hand-painted jogging suits to Bloomingdale’s in New York.

With the birth of her children, she took up her first volunteer pursuits along with painting and teaching. She created a course at the YM/YWHA called “My Hands Can” for pre-schoolers and their caregivers, and introduced it to other schools. She later taught art to seniors at Place Kensington.

A passionate piano player, Pilot became involved in the Suzuki Parent Foundation, learned to play the violin and played in “The Silver Strings”.

In the last 25 years, gardening has become an obsession. More than 300 members of various garden clubs have visited her garden estate atop a mountain in South Bolton in the Eastern Townships.

She and her husband discovered the area while climbing one day in 1976. It was swamp and thick forest. “But we fell in love with it and began buying up bits



Gabrielle Pilot at work.

and pieces. We were basically pioneers on this land.” After years of clearing it, knocking down beaver dams and connecting the swamp to a lake, they built the house they now call “Amik” after the beaver symbol of the ’76 Olympics.

Pilot now tries to spend a portion of each day painting. She pursues a separate

theme at each of her three studios. In town, it’s children’s portraits. At a winter home on Sugar Loaf in Maine, she works on “Drapery & the Human Body”. In the country, she paints “Flight & Birds”, the collection that is the focus of her exhibit during Art Westmount.

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