

AFD Profile

By Tanya Kenevich



Photo: Stephen Canneto, an established artist, has recently started a new creative venture: making handmade urns. *(Photo by Jill Gross)*

An Artist's Calling

Stephen Canneto started his life like many others, but soon felt like he had a calling in life that he needed to answer. After quitting his job and volunteering in Israel in 1967 during the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War, he was asked to create a memorial for those who had lost their lives in a hard-hit community. After his first memorial, he continued to honor those who have died.

“ I believe art is a calling,” said Canneto, president of Urns By Canneto, Canneto Studios and director of ArtSafe in Columbus, Ohio. “I’ve always felt that, as a calling, I have really been a part of a vessel for conveying ideas that are much larger than myself. My career as an artist began rather circuitously.”

Canneto had been working at United States Steel in the mid-1960s, after finishing a tour of duty in the Air Force. Although he enjoyed his job, he wasn’t able to fully express his creativity. Canneto had originally wanted to be an architect in his early years.

“Putting up a building for U.S. Steel was a way of fulfilling some of that need, but it wasn’t supporting my creativity, it wasn’t nurturing my creative side. That is why I thought I would go to art school,” Canneto said. He soon left U.S. Steel to focus on his artistic career.

But plans changed for Canneto. In 1967, the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War

was in full-effect, and Canneto faced a tough decision. “I responded to the threats coming out of the Middle East against Israel and decided that I would go as a volunteer to Israel in the summer of 1967,” he said. “Instead of finding myself in art school, I found

myself in a tank battalion. As I was going into the Israeli army, in the block that said ‘occupation’ (on my form), I put ‘artist.’ I wasn’t sure what that meant at the time. I hadn’t gone to art school but I loved creating, I loved making things, I loved drawing



Photo: In 1996, ArtSafe’s first violence prevention program was the Memorial to Our Lost Children. Built in Canneto’s studio by prison inmates, the memorial toured throughout Ohio from 1996-2004, honoring the lives of children killed by violence. (Photo courtesy of Canneto Studios)

and painting.”

Despite going back into military service, Canneto’s dreams of being an artist did not fade away. “As luck would have it, late that summer, an Israeli NGO asked if I would go to a community that had taken quite a beating during the war and design a memorial for them,” Canneto remembered. “That memorial, which stands today in Israel, was my first memorial project. That really started my career as an artist.”

When Canneto finally came back to the United States from Israel, he entered Ohio State University, where he studied art and sculpture. Canneto learned many art skills in college, and after finishing his study at Ohio State, he opened up his own art studio in the early ‘70s and started to create small-scale sculpture. Canneto received a lot of attention and praise for his work, winning awards and having his work shown at the Smithsonian.

Giving Back to the Community

Canneto became successful in his artistry, but after having a daughter his perspective changed and his sense of social responsibility grew. This would be the beginning of the Art for a Child’s Safe America Foundation (ArtSafe), a not-for-profit organization established to provide opportunities for communities to use the arts to create safe, nurturing environments for children, youth and adults.

“ArtSafe came as a one-year project, embraced by my naivety, in 1993. I was raising my young daughter, Luisa, who was just a couple of years old, and I became increasingly aware of the violence that was taking the lives of so many children. I decided that, as a father and as an artist, I had an obligation. I had a voice. We know historically that art can focus attention on social issues, so I thought that I’d take a year of my studio’s time and devote it to a memorial for children killed by violence,” Canneto said. “As I began sharing the concept of a memorial with people in law enforcement, health care education, the judiciary and people who had lost their

children to violence, I realized the enormity of the project. The concept of the memorial resonated through all walks of life, and especially with those families who had lost children.”

The memorial, built in the summer of 1996, was shaped like a broken house. The house was filled with objects given by families that had lost children to violence. Objects ranged from Barbie dolls to teddy bears to awards that filled the lives of the children when they were alive. The memorial also had an interactive kiosk, programmed with stories and voices of the families who

““ We always want to remember the good times, the things that are special in our lives, and that has really helped me to think about the figurative forms that I use in my cremation urns. ””

- Stephen Canneto

told of their experiences of children lost to violence.

“It became a very powerful tool, touring through Ohio, for quite a number of years. As we toured, we were mostly in schools and in recreation centers – places where children and families go,” Canneto said. “We began developing a tool kit of art-based activities which has turned into a curriculum which today is in publications that are used to help young people who are perhaps on that trajectory, that road towards violence, as a prevention tool.”

ArtSafe branched out and created programs for schools, as well as youth incarcerated in the adult and juvenile correctional system. The programs used art to promote healing in those who were affected by a life of violence. According to the foundation, each goal of the program

is designed to support participant healing, provide community service and facilitate successful re-entry into society.

Canneto believes this art-based curriculum helps these children of violence heal. “Using the arts to help people heal from the effects of violence and from the loss, I really found another outlet for public art,” he said.

Canneto added, “Our objective is to help these young people build life skills.” The programs can also help children of violence find their passions in life through art and can create a meaningful way to get their emotions across without being violent, Canneto said.

A New Venture

With the success of ArtSafe, Canneto decided to try a new venture: handmade urns. The urns often focus on the ideas of his regular sculpture, adding in a sense of feeling and emotion. He frequently uses themes from nature and human interaction as the base of creation for his urns.

“We are searching for that spirit. We are searching for a way to connect to each other, and to connect to those who we have lost,” Canneto said of his urns. “We always want to remember the good times, the things that are special in our lives, and that has really helped me to think about the figurative forms that I use, both in my public art and my cremation urns.”

“I look to my feelings of connection, and the feelings of connection that we have to each other and what brings us together,” he added. “For me, it’s that search for that human spirit, that sense of connection, to come alive through an object.”

Canneto does get input from families and will make custom urns for whatever the needs are of the family. “I just finished an urn, it was a butterfly urn. And I was just contacted by a grandmother who found my work on the Internet and wanted to create an urn for her young granddaughter who had passed away. She loved butterflies,”

Canneto said. "I did a series of drawings and she found one she really liked and the next stage was to do the actual model." Canneto would take photographs of the urn's progress and send them to the grandmother. "I got a wonderful letter from her, and how (the urn) captured her granddaughter's spirit," he said.

Although his urns can be elaborate and look expensive, Canneto prides himself on the fact that they are

affordable. "I go through a series of drawings and model making, and then into the casting process. Metal urns are very expensive, and I wanted to make them accessible to a greater number of people who'd like to have them," Canneto said. "So, we've created a line of cast resin, cultured stone, cold-cast bronze, that take the same design and the same high artistic quality and through the use of a less-expensive metal, makes

them more affordable."

Canneto is excited about his future in urn making, and wants to create urns that are not only dignified but are also filled with the spirit of the decedent. "I would really love to work with distributors that enable me to focus my energy on what I love most, and that is the design and the creation of urns," he said. "My goals are to provide (the death-care industry) with the highest design and products that I can." ❖



Find new uses
for your
miniatures

and we'll help your sales grow.

Funeral homes across the country are replacing these outdated sales tools with beautiful new display systems designed to increase sales. What are miniatures good for then? See what Trigard dealers have come up with at www.facebook.com/trigardburialvaults.

If you are ready to make the switch, call us for information on how we can help, details on prices and pictures of our newest display systems.

800.637.1992

www.facebook.com/trigardburialvaults



Trigard®