

An 'artistic genius' with a flair for sales

Grand Maurice won't paint anymore

By Steve Johnson

If Maurice LeGrand LeSueur Sullins couldn't paint to save his life, his story still would bear telling.

In 1970 he was Maurice Sullins, a 60-year-old waxer and detailer of airplanes at the Joliet municipal airport. Then he had the dream. He began painting with an almost matchless passion and in the next 16 years would turn out more than 1,250 canvases.

When he wasn't working or painting, he was reading about art and artists, developing his own theories and techniques. He adopted French names from his mother and grandmother. By 1986 his two-bedroom home in Joliet was stacked floor to ceiling with canvases. Instead of rooms he had paths.

But there is more to the Grand Maurice, as he likes to be called, than an eccentric-person newspaper story.

The truly extraordinary thing about him is that not only did he create so much art in so short a time, at so late an age and with no formal training, but also he created art that many people think is very, very good.

It wasn't until well after he had stopped painting, at about the time his wife died in February, 1986, that he was ready to go public with his work, ready to sell some of it for the sake of his grandchildren.

Timothy O'Keefe, a longtime friend and now his business agent, called The Tribune, and a January, 1987, story in the Tempo section introduced the Grand Maurice to the public.

Collectors and dealers began what has turned into a series of regular visits to his home. One of the collectors, Gerald Adelmann, director of two not-for-profit organizations, was so impressed he bought at least a dozen paintings and urged contacts at the Illinois State Museum to take a look at the work.

In March of that year, three experts from



Tribune photo by Bob Fila

Maurice LeGrand LeSueur Sullins

the museum visited Sullins in his home.

"As I was looking through the work," said Lynda K. Martin, the museum's fine-arts curator, "I was amazed not just at the amount of work but at the high quality, the consistent quality."

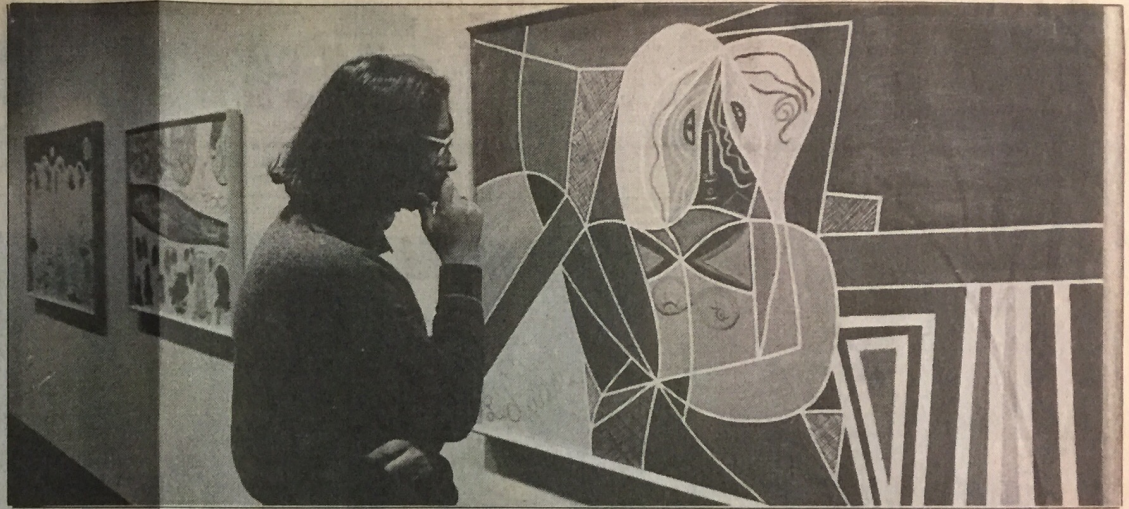
The museum decided to mount an exhibition before the collection was dispersed.

By summer, O'Keefe and Martin were spending their days at Sullins' house cataloguing and recording on slides the paintings, which the artist thankfully had numbered.

"Bless his heart," Martin said.

She looked at every single one of them at least 20 times and talked frequently with Sullins, she said, before selecting 60 of the strongest and most representative for "Maurice LeGrand LeSueur Sullins: Paintings 1970-1986," on display at the state's art gallery on the 2d floor of the State of Illinois Center through Thursday.

The paintings, in a range of styles that



Tribune photo by Charles Osgood

Sullins' works hang at the State of Illinois Center and will be heading for Paris, if negotiations succeed.

would seem to be the work of more than one man, are packed with references to other artists. Yet in their bold colors and often complex compositions they are nonetheless instantly accessible to even the most hopeless artistic naif.

"He's in tune with what's happening in modern art unconsciously," said Michael Bonesteel, Chicago correspondent for Art in America magazine. "You don't find that in any other outsider art."

Sullins' quotations from famous artists are very much in keeping with postmodernism, Bonesteel said, "only I don't think he's doing it in an intentional way, like trained artists are.

"It's something that I don't see anybody else doing quite that way at all, and it's often hard to find artwork today that's that personal."

"You can't help but recognize the talent that's there," said Adelmann, who was trained as an art historian.

"He really is an artistic genius in many ways, and I think he is eventually going to be acknowledged as one of the more important outsider artists of the 20th Century."

The show hung earlier this year at the museum's Lockport gallery and at the

Illinois State Museum in Springfield. Negotiations are underway for it to travel next year to Paris in conjunction with the centennial of the Eiffel Tower, a recurring motif in the Grand Maurice's work.

Gov. James Thompson, who has a borrowed Grand Maurice hanging in his office, lent his support to the effort to mount the show in France.

"There's a good possibility it's going to be traveling to other locations in this country," Martin said of the exhibition. "We are negotiating with several museums."

Asked if he were excited by the show, all Sullins would say was, "Well, naturally, it's a start."

But O'Keefe whispered, "He was excited."

Still, for all the furor he has generated, attention for which some artists wait a lifetime in vain, the Grand Maurice says he doesn't plan to paint again.

"Now I wouldn't paint a peanut if they wanted to pay a million dollars for it."

Most of his paintings have been transferred to a warehouse for safekeeping, and his attention has shifted to selling his work, which he refers to, collectively, as a masterpiece.

"Any piece you own, you own one segment of the masterpiece."

"He has become just as concerned about building a legacy for his grandkids, being as intense about it, as he was putting the collection together," said O'Keefe, 42, a sculptor and billboard painter.

"He feels that he's done enough painting," said his son, Victor, 46, a schoolteacher. "It doesn't appear, in the foreseeable future, that we can get him to paint again."

Grand Maurice has sold 46 paintings thus far at prices in the \$2,000-to-\$3,000 range and wants to sell more. He is 78 and wants to move quickly, to "liquidate," as he refers to it. He laments the fact that in a museum, along with his paintings, "they can't put a big sign in there that says, 'These are for sale.'"

O'Keefe and Sullins' son, Victor, prefer to let the works be shown, figuring they only can increase in value. Novices in the business side of the art world, where galleries can command a commission of 50 percent or higher, they want to take more time to understand its intricacies, before committing to any one gallery.

But Grand Maurice remains impatient. He is asked if he doesn't have a favorite work, a work he wouldn't part with no matter what.

"I can answer that technically: There ain't none of them that isn't for sale."