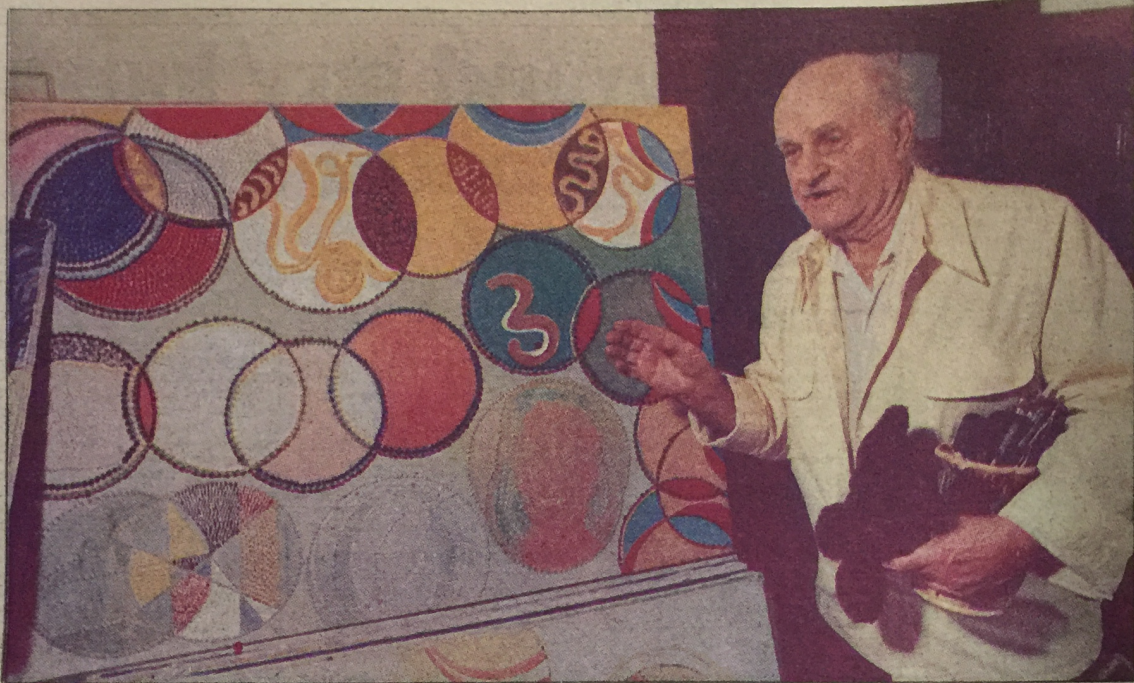


# Self-taught artist ribs masters



## State shows some of his 1,265 works

By Philip Franchine

Maurice Sullins may poke fun at the art establishment, but he's probably earned the right—the former auto worker has done 1,265 paintings in his Joliet home since 1970.

Sullins, 78, a self-taught artist, often uses other artists' images whimsically in his paintings, 60 of which are on exhibit at the Illinois State Gallery in the State of Illinois Center through Thursday.

The titles of some are: "Calder Versus Michelangelo," "Drifting Picasso Nude Cloud," "Cub Calder's Sunflower," "Miss Chicago Eagerly Awaits 1992" and "Joan Miro's Green Moon."

That's because Sullins, who started painting at age 60, developed in near-isolation from the rest of the art world, said exhibit curator Lynda K. Martin of the Illinois State Museum.

Since he started painting, Sullins has visited local museums and read art books and publications avidly. But he still shuns contact with artists, directly or through television or radio.

His work is "unique, different, not something people are familiar with," Martin said.

"People respond first to the color and activity in the canvas, then when they look at the individual works and images, they see some of the puns and references to other artworks and artists, and they really get a kick out of analyzing those images," she said.

For years Sullins refused to show his work because of his theory that art best serves people, like his grandchildren, Michael and Jessica, who can see the work in the artists'



Maurice Sullins, who started painting at age 60, shows his artwork in his cramped Joliet bedroom. Below: His "Cub Calder's Sunflower." A 60-painting exhibit of Sullins' work is on display at the State of Illinois Center through Thursday. The exhibit may soon travel to France.

own settings.

He feels museums favor artists of the past who cannot be seen.

"You can't get in the Louvre—you gotta be dead," he said.

Sullins, a onetime foreman at the Fisher Body Plant in Willow Springs, started painting in his modest frame house in 1970. He had completed 1,265 works when his wife, Marie, died in 1986 and he stopped painting.

Later he decided to show and sell his paintings to provide a financial cushion for his family.

His philosophy is that all the

world, including the art of others, can be inspiring. However, trying to pin down his thoughts can be frustrating.

Why, Sullins was asked, did he include images from works of Alexander Calder and Michelangelo in the same painting?

"You wouldn't put Michael Jordan up against a guy 5 foot 2, would you?"

Why put two other artists' images in a painting?

"[Using] only one would be like having one eye. You can't live with only one eye," Sullins said.

But is it right to borrow someone else's image?

"If you improve [on] it," Sullins said.

That's not arrogance—Sullins feels he has special advantages.

"I'm beyond all the [other] painters. I can go back in my mind. In all history I can go back and see what they didn't do," Sullins said.

"I didn't do anything in the way of art [before 1970]. I knew the artists would starve to death. They all have to paint signs to make a living," Sullins said with

a one-toothed grin.

Why did he start so late in life? "I didn't know what to do," Sullins said.

So what happened in 1970? "You can't just explain it," Sullins said.

His agent, Tim O'Keefe of Joliet, said it began in April, 1970, when Sullins awoke convinced he had to paint after dreaming about a water fountain in France.

O'Keefe, who leases billboards, did not meet Sullins until September, 1970, but has had steady contact since then.

Working feverishly, Sullins used whatever was handy. When his paper ran out, he slit open record album covers and drew on the insides.

### Keeps log of efforts

He painted on mirrors and a table top whose legs he later sawed off to hang the work, and eventually settled on acrylic paints and stretched canvas, recording his efforts in homemade log books.

"When Maurice began painting in 1970, his work was somewhat primitive and clumsy, but always exuberant, carefully composed and richly colored. . . . He progressed rapidly, learning how to handle his paint to best effect while trying out various techniques and styles in quick succession," Martin wrote in the catalog for the exhibit.

Working in isolation, Sullins named some of his techniques: the Master Stroke, Grand Stroke, Grand Sweep, and the Naughty Line, which forms the lower back and buttocks of a female figure. He also has signed his works with grandiloquent names such as Grand Maurice LeGrand LeSueur Sullins, which includes his mother's and grandmother's maiden names respectively.

Sullins, who works on canvas laid flat on two tables, derides working on upright easels by other artists he calls "dabbers."

"Picasso and them, they're copyists—they dab [paint] it on. I float it on," Sullins said.

He makes no sketches and no changes in a work under way.

"You can't teach art or painting or sculpture. Everything in the head comes out. The brain—there's nothing like it. You just don't make mistakes," Sullins said.

### Won't paint again

Sullins says he will not paint again, but since he went public to create what he calls a "legacy" for his son, Victor, and his grandchildren, he has sold 46 paintings, O'Keefe said.

Sullins' exhibit is likely to travel to France, which has provided him with many images through books and magazines.

Illinois State Museum staff are working through U.S. consular officials and hope to set up an exhibit in Paris in 1989 or 1990, Martin said.

The 60-painting exhibit has been displayed this year at the Illinois State Museum in Springfield and in its Lockport Gallery.

Sullins says he will not visit France because he doesn't go anywhere. Or maybe he's reluctant to go near the Louvre, where he might feel left out.

Walking through his house, Sullins picked up a purple abstract and said without fanfare, "This is the most modern nude in the world."

"Most modern" is what he said, but what exactly is most modern—the last modern before post-modern?