

# ARTIST SPREADS HIS LOVE OF CREATIVITY AND INTELLECTUAL GROWTH

## Harold Zisla '50 reflects on an art career spanning more than six decades

By Kylie Eyre

For Harold Zisla '50, art provides opportunities for intellectual growth. And over the course of a 60-year career as a painter—with periods as an industrial designer, art museum director, and art professor—he has opened hundreds of others to the intellectual growth that art can spur.

At age 90, Zisla still spends time in his South Bend, Indiana studio, although he now focuses more on reading and thinking about art than creating it.

In a recent conversation, Zisla recalled that his interest in art began at a young age when a teacher at the Council Educational Alliance in Cleveland identified his special aptitude. From there, his mother took him to weekly free classes at the Cleveland Museum of Art, where his love of art further blossomed. As a teenager, he jumped at the opportunity to learn figure drawing from Paul E. Travis '17, who at the time was also a full-time professor at the Cleveland School of Art (now CIA). So it came as no surprise that Zisla enrolled in art school following a three-year stint in the Navy in the mid-1940s. "It seemed like just a natural kind of progression," he said.

Zisla, two of whose paintings are in the CIA study collection, fondly recalls his student days. He learned progressive ideas about perception from John Paul Miller '40, design techniques and skills from Kenneth Bates, and portrait painting from Rolf Stoll. Majoring in both painting and art education, he was able to explore art and design from a variety of perspectives.

Significantly for him, this included the freedom to focus beyond creating art. He explained, "I was interested in the intellectual aspect of art: not just to do it but to know the basis for what occurred historically and was occurring."

After graduating from CIA in 1950, he pursued his intellectual curiosity by completing an M.A. in art education from Case Western Reserve University. He then spent several years as an industrial designer at Ball Band, a division of Uniroyal, working on coated fabrics, among other projects, followed by ten years as the executive director of the South Bend Art Center (now South Bend Museum of Art), where he also taught a weekly portrait painting class.

"I think one of the important things that propelled me [to teach] was an authenticity of being," he said. He devoted the next 20-plus years to teaching at Indiana University South Bend. His tenure included an appointment as the first chair of the Fine Arts Department in 1968.

In studio classes, his teaching style mirrored the experiences he'd had as a CIA student: he challenged students to probe beyond specialized learning techniques and develop intellectually through broad reading and study of allied fields. "A successful artist in any aspect of art cannot be limited intellectually. It's a need to grow intellectually," he explained of his philosophy.

Zisla remains committed to seeking meaning in his work, continually asking himself "why am I doing it?" and "what does it mean?" He said his art is often dictated by "particular psychological and intellectual profile demands...which, I think, all creative people have to deal with." He continues to challenge himself to find new ways of approaching his image making and studying art.

An active promoter of the arts in Northern Indiana, and the recipient of numerous awards for his service, when asked what he felt proudest of, he replied, "I feel very positive about the fact that



I've given pleasure to a number of people and have contributed to their enjoyment in being creative."

Evidence of the scope of his influence is visible in the 'Me and My Zisla' section of his recently launched website, haroldzisla.com. The section invites people to submit photos of themselves with their Zisla artwork. Nearly 200 friends, former students, collectors, and family members from California to New Jersey lovingly pose with their "Zislas," providing at once a moving testament to his impact and a retrospective of his range of styles.

"I feel very positive about the fact that I've given pleasure to a number of people and have contributed to their enjoyment in being creative."

Harold Zisla '50