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Discovering Gabriella Polony-Mountain

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Tanvi Gawde, (B.S. Studio Art, 2013), Christian Cutler, Gabriella Polony-Mountain, and Margaret and Royal Scanlon, friends of the artist.



Tobias and the Angels, 52"x35" stained glass window (left), and (L to R) Feeding Fish, 47"x45" weaving; Frozen Fish – Abundance from the Sea, 27"x3"x11" marble; and Moving Galaxy, 56"x40" weaving.

When you visit Gabriella Polony-Mountain's home in the Mission Hills neighborhood of Kansas City, you are introduced to her talent and the beauty of her art before you even enter the house. Greeting you on the doorstep of this unassuming ranch-style home are the most glorious double doors you've ever seen. Abstract nude figures dance and flow from the hinges to the handles. Gabriella (Gaby to her friends) hammered and shaped the copper panels in low relief, a process known as repoussé, which she learned while living in Rome.

Repoussé is not her only talent. Gaby is also equally accomplished with pastels, stained glass, tile mosaics, stone carving, and weaving. Her achievements are as numerous as her artistic skills, but this immensely talented 95-year-old artist isn't a household name . . . yet.

Gaby was born in Sasvar, Hungary, in 1918. She studied law, like her father and brother, but switched her concentration to art, first studying art in England before continuing her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest. "I was very lucky that I didn't get to be a lawyer," Gaby told me. "When I finally could immigrate here, I couldn't have done anything," referring to the laws of different counties. She spent years traveling across Europe and studied more in Rome, before finally arriving with her first husband in America in 1951 with nothing but suitcases and \$120.

Eventually Gaby's first husband, a fellow Hungarian artist, landed a teaching position at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. "It was meant to be," Gaby says about settling in Kansas City. Here is where Gaby would make her most lasting works of art and the place she would meet the love of her life, her second husband, Mr. Herman "Rocky" Mountain.

Gaby has told me a lot about Rocky over the course of a year; he died suddenly in February of 2013. Gaby says of Rocky, "He was a self-made man." But Rocky was not the only self-made person in the house. Gaby too was "self-made," supporting herself by making art for nearly a decade before meeting Rocky. Within a few years of her arrival in the U.S., Gaby was winning awards for her architectural commissions through prominent architects like Hungarian-born Peter Keleti. Her achievements would include the Huntington-Hartford Fellowship in 1954, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Fellowship in 1955, and the American Institute of Architecture Craftsmanship Award in Kansas City for her repoussé doors at the Taliaferro residence in St. Joseph in 1958.

Gaby aimed to be a conventional exhibition artist in Kansas City, showing her work to prominent players in the city's art scene of the 1950's and 60's. However, she was told that her art was "too primitive."

Despite these critiques, Gaby persevered and continued to receive commissions and awards. Today she will tell you, “I am my own gallery.” Her art can be seen throughout Kansas City; Boonville, Independence, and St. Joseph, Missouri; in Leavenworth, Leawood, and Mission Hills, Kansas; on the Whiteman Air Force Base; and here on the University of Central Missouri campus. I discovered Gaby’s work at UCM and her amazing talents through an unusual treasure hunt.

I had been employed at UCM as gallery director for a little over a year when, just after Spring Graduation of 2013, a woman from Iowa came into the Department of Art & Design looking for Gaby’s works on campus. Mrs. Mary Kay Vogel, whose mother lives in Kansas City, had seen an exhibition of Gaby’s art at Kansas City Upholstery in 2009. She was also familiar with the mosaic baptistry that Gaby created for St. Ann Catholic Church where her mother worships. A Kansas City Star article about Gaby and the 2009 exhibit told her that UCM also had some of Gaby’s installations. As the manager for UCM’s outdoor sculpture collection, I assured Mrs. Vogel that I would find the works. Neither Department Chair Dr. Mick Luehrman nor I was familiar with Gaby’s work, and nothing was in our files about her art installations. Where were they? What do they look like? I was determined to find out.

My first step was to familiarize myself with Gabriella Polony-Mountain’s work. I knew that if I could find some examples of her work online, I could match her artistic style and composition to anything that might be on the UCM campus. A brief search uncovered only a handful of images, but a distinct style and sense of color was present in the mosaics, stained glass, and repoussé that I saw. Ethereal figures and harmonious lines flowed through and across the works that my “Googling” had revealed. I now had something to go on.

Mrs. Vogel had mentioned that UCM supposedly had a stained glass window and some repoussé work installed somewhere on campus. The two known locations on campus with stained glass were the Elliott Student Union and the Alumni Memorial Chapel. I visited both locations with high hopes of finding stained glass in Gaby’s style. In the Union there were a few blue and green stained glass windows, but these were a bit generic. The chapel’s windows were also not indicative of Gaby’s figurative work. I felt like I was reaching a dead end. (I would later discover that Gaby also created the colorful geometric stained glass windows for the campus chapel.)

A day or so later, after Dr. Luehrman and I consulted with the McClure Archives and University Museum and visited with veteran UCM employees, a lead came in. There was



“Every Fiber of Her Being” exhibition at the UCM Gallery of Art & Design, September 30—October 25, 2013.



Horse and Rider, 70"x30"
stitched weaving (left),
needlepoint; *Dragons*, 78"x33"
door, repoussé (right).

reportedly a stained glass window in the Houts-Hosey Dormitory on the west side of campus. I dropped everything and headed to Houts-Hosey. This was it! Inside the common room of the dorm was a 6-1/2' by 6' stained glass window depicting the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. It was installed in the south-facing wall, now glorifying some rough furniture and a ping pong table. Despite its surroundings and some condition issues from over 50 years of inattention, the window was stunning. There was not a plaque or marker indicating who created this glorious window, but it was unmistakably Gaby's.

Now that I had found the stained glass, I was determined to locate the repoussé. I took another walk through campus, looking in every corner and courtyard. After getting a little lost in the hallways that connect Grinstead to the Utt Music Building, I arrived above the main entry doors to Utt. There, framed in copper, was a stained glass mosaic of four musicians mounted to a steel and copper architectural partition. Below the partition, facing the glass entry doors, were seven aluminum and copper repoussé panels illustrating the Seven Virtues. The stained glass musicians' bodies and

instruments flowed seamlessly into one another, and the repoussé panels featured art deco style figures and text, meticulously shaped into the metal. The stained glass mosaic and the repoussé panels were unmistakably Gaby's style. There too, at the bottom right corner of the panels, were Gaby's initials. UCM did indeed have art work by Gabriella Polony-Mountain.

Since discovering these connections between UCM and Gaby, The UCM Gallery of Art & Design has exhibited a mini-retrospective of her work and plans are being made to restore and relocate the Wise and Foolish Virgins stained glass window. We expect to have this work of art greet you from a prominent location the next time you visit the UCM campus.