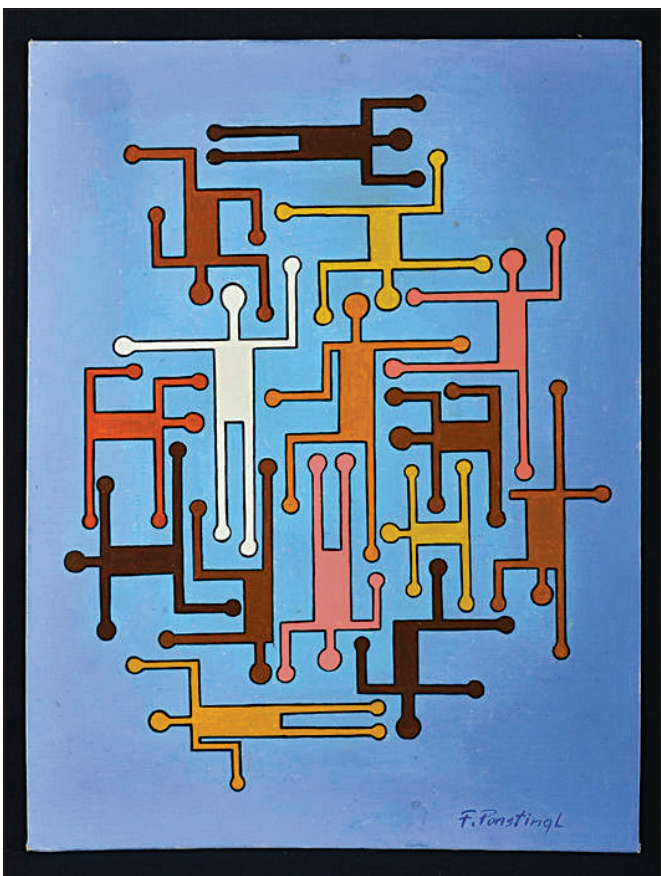


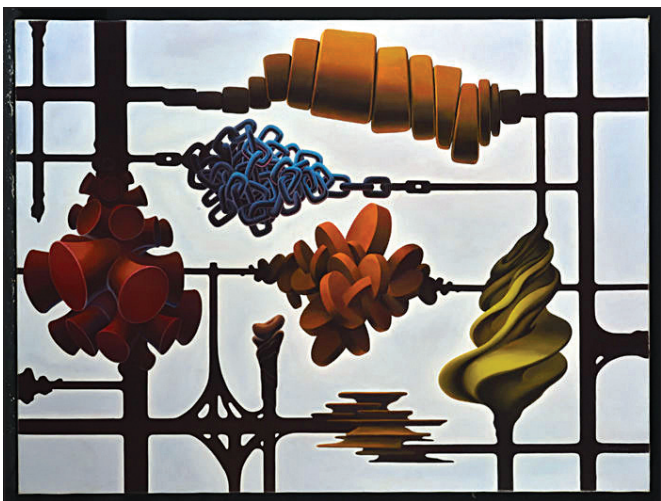
# COMMUNITY



COURTESY OF JOHN MUNICE  
Untitled oil on board from 1970-72 by Franz Jozef Ponstingl



COURTESY OF JOHN MUNICE  
Untitled oil on board from 1970-72



COURTESY OF JOHN MUNICE  
Oil on canvas from 1970-72

# Magical wanderer

Thirteen years after his death, the surrealist work of Franz Jozef Ponstingl is beginning to take its place in the region's art history.

By GWEN SHRIFT  
STAFF WRITER

Disappointed that his paintings were unheralded in his own backyard, the extraordinarily talented Franz Jozef Ponstingl moved from eastern Pennsylvania to California in the early 1990s and stayed there until his death in 2004.

His accomplished surrealist works ended up at the Salvation Army, then in an art dealer's damp attic. He painted extensively, but almost nobody knew his name. Ponstingl, who was self-taught, marched to his own rhythms, out of step with then-trendy minimalists and Pop artists.

Then, too, he was down on the farm. When not wandering the world, he lived in rural or semi-rural Lehigh and Monroe counties.

He painted odd, and oddly logical structures that combine biomorphic shapes and mechanical imagery. Scholars say his polished, visually ingenious style prefigures digital art.

"He was left by the wayside because he didn't have a dealer, he wasn't a self-promoter, and he lived in Coopersburg, Allentown," said John Munice of Lambertville, New Jersey and New York City, who owns numerous Ponstingls.

Interest is growing in this nearly forgotten talent. Munice, who said he likes American Pop Art and works from New Deal art projects of the 1930s, saw an image of a Ponstingl sold by a local auction house about 12 years ago.

"It knocked my socks off," he said. "That one painting started me looking." Through descendants of the painter Walter Emerson Baum, he found more work, some of it stapled to walls and many in need of cleaning and stretching.



Untitled oil on canvas from 1970-72

**"Ponstingl is his own artist, certainly, with his own artistic vision, but I would see him aligned with this thread (of magical realism) in American art, which tends to be overshadowed by abstract expressionism, minimalism and pop."**

KIRSTEN JENSEN, THE MICHENER'S CHIEF CURATOR

Last year, the Baum School of Art in Allentown showed works from Munice's collection in "Rediscovering Ponstingl: Visions of the Extraordinary." It was the first exhibit of his work since the early 1970s. This year, the James A. Michener Art Museum included his work in "The Death of Impressionism? Disruption & Innovation in Art," which recently closed.

So when the New Hope Arts Center scheduled its own Ponstingl show of more than 20 works this weekend and next, organizers invited Kirsten Jensen, the Michener's chief curator, to speak at the opening reception on Saturday.

"Ponstingl is his own artist, certainly, with his own artistic

vision, but I would see him aligned with this thread (of magical realism) in American art, which tends to be overshadowed by abstract expressionism, minimalism and pop," said Jensen in an email.

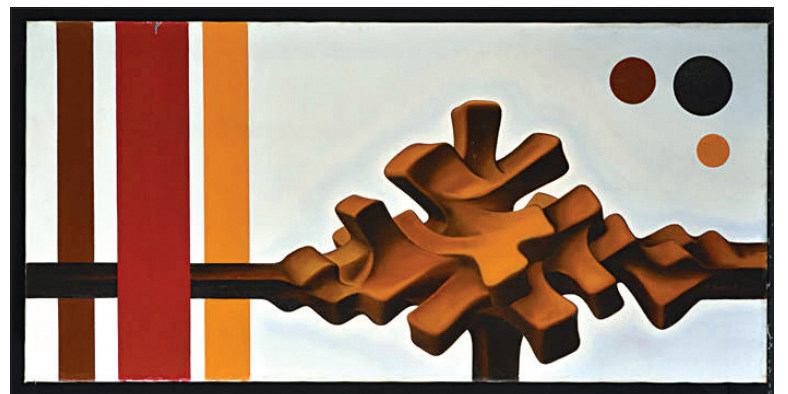
Jensen pointed out that the work of surrealists came about as they "were struggling to come to terms with the atrocities of WW II — including the nuclear bomb — and American culture."

Ponstingl was born in 1927 and served in World War II, seeing firsthand the results of the nuclear detonation at Hiroshima. He roamed the globe and apparently favored South American archaeological sites.

Far from wealthy and even homeless at times, he worked

## If You Go

**What:** "Rediscovering Ponstingl," surrealist works by little-known painter Franz Jozef Ponstingl of Lehigh County  
**When:** Opening reception 5 to 8 p.m. April 22 with talk by James A. Michener Art Museum chief curator Kirsten Jensen; gallery hours noon to 5 p.m. April 23, 29 and 30 or by appointment.  
**Where:** New Hope Arts Center, 2 Stockton Ave., New Hope  
**Information:** 215-862-9606 or newhopearts.org



COURTESY OF JOHN MUNICE  
Oil on canvas from 1970-72 by Franz Jozef Ponstingl

subistence jobs in Washington, D.C. to make money to paint. His family lived on a farm in Coopersburg, in Lehigh County just north of the Bucks County line, where he returned from time to time.

"He was his own man and he was doing his own style, the classical outsider artist, called himself a gyrovague (a wandering monk)," said Munice. "Around here, in the country, you're not going to find people who want this kind of stuff. That's why his work was hidden away in a closet."

The rediscovery of Ponstingl owes much to the legacy of Baum, a native Bucks County impressionist. Baum was the king of snow scenes painted in plein air and, according to the Michener, "discovered the beauty of

Main Street."

Ponstingl's vision was often otherworldly, as in a work Munice saw that resembled "a Martian family, like with round heads."

Some of his works were acquired by Emerson's son Bert, who was an art dealer. Bert's son David sold them to Munice.

According to Jensen, Ponstingl exemplifies the variety of styles followed in the area.

"There has been a tendency in the past to see the arts of this region as being only Impressionist (and even those artists associated with it did not like classification or think it fit their work), but artists associated with the region were certainly more varied — just as American art was and is."

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