



Fred Wessel

A two-week trip to Italy in 1984 had a profound and prolonged influence on my work. I went to Italy to view the art of the Renaissance, for it is my belief that all visual artists, especially realists, should experience and study this work firsthand. I could not have predicted the dramatic impact, both direct and indirect, that this journey of discovery would have on my ensuing work. I believe that in our search for novelty in post-modernist art making, we often lose touch with certain basics: beauty, grace, harmony, and visual poetry are nowadays rarely considered important criteria in evaluating contemporary works of art. Since the Bauhaus, the term 'precious' has had a negative connotation in art schools.

It was a term used derisively in the 1960s to describe work that did not adhere to the fashionably pared down kernels of conceptualism or minimalism.

But after seeing the beauty, sensitivity, harmony—the 'preciousness'—of Italian Renaissance painting—especially the early Renaissance work of artists such as Fra Angelico, Duccio and Simone Martini—I realize that, as artists, we may have abandoned too much. The ever-changing inner light that radiates from gold leaf used judiciously on the surface of a painting, and the use of pockets of rich, intense colors that illuminate the picture's surface impressed me deeply. It was 'preciousness' elevated to grand heights: semi-precious gems such as lapis lazuli, malachite, azurite, etc., were ground up, mixed with egg yolk, and applied as paint pigments, producing dazzling, breathtaking colors! The surface of these colors forms a texture that sparkles and reflects light much like gold does, but in ways that are much more subtle than gold.

I look to the early Renaissance as a source of inspiration that I can use along with contemporary content and image making. I look to the Renaissance as the artists of that time looked back to early Greek and Roman art—not as a reactionary but as one who rediscovers and reapplies important but forgotten visual stimuli.

Fred Wessel

Retired from 35 years teaching at The Hartford Art School, University of Hartford, Fred Wessel continues to work at his studio in Northampton, MA. He earned a B.F.A. at Syracuse University, studied at the Pratt Graphics Center, and then obtained an M.F.A. at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Wessel's work has been exhibited in numerous invitational and solo exhibitions across the country, and can be found in public collections, including The Museum of Modern Art, NY, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL.

*Draco the Dragon*, 2016, egg tempera with gold, silver, and palladium leaf



*Delphinus*, 2014, egg tempera and cultured pearls with gold, silver, and palladium leaf

# ETERNAL BEAUTY

EGG TEMPERA PAINTINGS BY FRED WESSEL



JUNE 25 – OCTOBER 2, 2016

KALAMAZOO INSTITUTE OF ARTS



KALAMAZOO INSTITUTE OF ARTS  
314 S. PARK STREET | KALAMAZOO, MI 49007 | WWW.KIARTS.ORG



*Jacqui (Study)*, 2012, egg tempera and gold leaf

This spectacular assembly of recent paintings by Fred Wessel principally features young women on the brink of maturity yet who linger willingly and leisurely in states of innocence. They are depicted in harmony with—if not as the fruits of—the nexus of terrestrial and celestial spheres. A master of both iconography and technique, Wessel combines portraiture with still life against a foil of astronomical maps in homage to the Renaissance paintings that he has assiduously observed. The models' anonymity encourages viewers to contemplate universal themes rather than to dwell on comparing likenesses with specific sitters. Yet,

in their familiarity, we can glimpse the quintessence of youth. In line with the paradox of capturing the infinite within a grain of sand or drop of rain, so too can we witness an interminable realm within each of Wessel's minute details: a single leaf, a fold of drapery, or the subtle gradation of flesh tones from a shadowy chin to the blush of a cheek.

Overarching themes in Wessel's *opere d'arte* are embedded in dichotomous pairings: the infinite magnitude of the night sky compared to the brief, material complexity of life on earth and in the sea; the measurable, knowable nature of science in contrast to the insights about humankind's role in the universe that can only be discerned through the arts and humanities; precision and fluctuation; the continuity of time as marked by seasons, the zodiac, and lunar phases in contrast to ephemeral youth within a single life span; the timelessness of deities in classical mythology as a foil to individual, contemporary women; the beauty of blossoms and awakening femininity with an awareness of their inevitable waning; and in formal terms, the illusion of three-dimensional, hyperrealistic figures against gold-leaf backgrounds. In Wessel's paintings, a frozen moment during the prime of each woman's life is likened to one of the fixed stars in the vault of heaven above her. The depth of Wessel's iconography and his mastery of Renaissance techniques yield works of art that are as sublime in meaning as they are expertly crafted. Beyond luminous jewels that delight the eyes, these gilded panels invite us to envision and embrace the empyrean.

Katherine T. Brown, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Museum Studies and Art History  
Walsh University, North Canton, Ohio

On the cover: *Libra*, 2013, egg tempera with gold leaf on panel. Private Collection



*Pearl*, 2015, egg tempera with gold, silver, and palladium leaf. Courtesy of Dr. Michael Wood



*Taurus*, 2015, egg tempera with gold, silver, and palladium leaf. Courtesy of The Loewenhardt Family Trust

#### Exhibition Checklist

*Giana (Virgo - Fibonacci Revisited, Sacred Geometry)*, 2008, egg tempera and gold leaf, 20" x 16"

*Lauren (Study)*, 2011, egg tempera and gold leaf, 7" x 5"

*Meghan*, 2011, egg tempera and gold leaf, 18" x 14"

*Jacqui Corona*, 2012, egg tempera with gold, silver, and palladium leaf, 30" x 24"

*Jacqui (Study)*, 2012, egg tempera and gold leaf, 9" x 6"

*Libra*, 2013, egg tempera with gold leaf on panel, 33" x 22". Private Collection

*Cassiopeia*, 2014, egg tempera with gold, silver, and palladium leaf, 24" x 18"

*Delphinus*, 2014, egg tempera and cultured pearls with gold, silver, and palladium leaf, 24" x 18"

*The Constellation Cancer*, 2015, egg tempera with gold, silver, and palladium leaf, 24" x 18"

*Katie (Study)*, 2015, egg tempera and gold leaf, 7" x 5"

*Pearl*, 2015, egg tempera with gold, silver, and palladium leaf, 14" x 11". Courtesy of Dr. Michael Wood

*Taurus*, 2015, egg tempera with gold, silver, and palladium leaf, 24" x 18". Courtesy of The Loewenhardt Family Trust

*Aquila*, 2016, egg tempera with gold, silver, and palladium leaf, 24" x 18"

*Draco the Dragon*, 2016, egg tempera with gold, silver, and palladium leaf, 30" x 24"

*Self-Portrait (Carnival)*, 2004, silverpoint, 9" x 7"



*Cassiopeia*, 2014, egg tempera with gold, silver, and palladium leaf

On the occasion of Fred Wessel's residency as a visiting artist in the Kirk Newman Art School, the exhibition has been organized by the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts. We acknowledge the cooperation of the Arden Gallery, Boston, in facilitating loans for the exhibition.