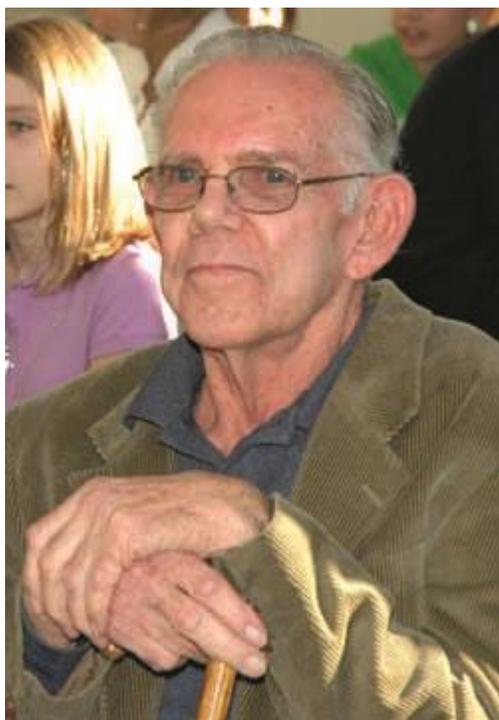


Lionel Kabel: Artist, citizen, gentleman

By Carol Stuart Feb 22, 2009



On Dec. 29, 2008, after years of effort to have it restored, Lionel Kabel attends the first city council meeting in decades to be held in Denham Springs' Old City Hall. (News photo by Mike Dowty)

Well-known for his personal modesty, Lionel Kabel was equally famous for the pride he felt in his city. That pride was evident in everything he did - as a painter, a historian and a historical preservationist, roles which all bore fruit during the final years of his life.

Kabel began painting when he was 9 years old - we won't say how long ago that was - and fine tuned his craftsmanship in the advertising business with a position at Lamar Advertising and later with his own business, Kabel Signs in Denham Springs, now operated by his son.

Kabel's retirement from the sign business freed him to devote more time to the oil paintings he had been producing all along. Employing the meticulous brushwork he had developed through years of painting, he recreated historic subjects with accurate detail gleaned from intensive research, all of which took time.

Many of Kabel's oils were drawn by combining old lithographs and his own photographs. As was typical of this generous man, Kabel offered those photographs, taken over a lifetime and filed by subject, as a reference tool for other artists.

Former Denham Springs Mayor Jim DeLaune lived near Kabel, and their sons were friends growing up.

"Lionel gave my son pointers with his painting and never charged for it," DeLaune said. "If he could get somebody to paint, he was happy."

As part of that proselytizing effort, Kabel rented a building attached to his sign shop to Gayle Reviere and helped her start her art business. Then she and a few more artists started the Denham Springs Fine Art Association, which met at the gallery.

"Lionel was so proud to have an art community here in this parish," said 2005 Artist of the Year Bonnie Smith Williams. "I did not really know anyone, but was trying to fit in and find the art community here. I met Tom Wallace [2007 Artist of the Year] at the second or third meeting. He had just joined. My gosh, Lionel pushed for the arts, was a historian and had an active role in the old court house rebuilding project. He did so much."

Kabel's various interests grew out of each other and interplayed throughout his life. While DeLaune was mayor, Kabel commented to him that the old City Hall should be restored and used again. And he didn't stop with a comment, but himself chaired a committee formed to accomplish that goal. He also created a painting of Denham Springs' Old City Hall as it appeared in the 1940s, made prints of it and dedicated their sale to raise money for the building's restoration.

The combination of Kabel's interest in the old building and the research he did over the years to make his paintings historically accurate, also inspired him to author a book, "Benton's Ferry: Life and Times of Robert Benton," which documents the early history of Denham Springs and Livingston and Feliciana parishes.

The book has become a valuable resource for genealogical studies, Kabel's painting by the same name became its cover, and his involvement in historic preservation garnered him the 1997 Volunteer of the Year award from then Lt. Governor Kathleen Blanco.

Kabel continued to portray historic scenes but also painted timeless and contemporary scenes, all of which can be seen across the Baton Rouge area. They consistently win awards.

Kabel's fellow artists have returned his esteem. He was the second artist to be nominated by the DSFAA and subsequently named 2002 Artist of the Year by the Arts Council of Livingston Parish.

In 2007, Williams and Bob Mellon, another local artist, conspired to arrange a show for Kabel in the Old State Capitol. Mellon, who had exhibited there himself, and Williams, who was offered an exhibit, agreed that Kabel's work, more than either of theirs, belonged in that setting. They proceeded to convince marketing and events coordinator Nancy Chesson that they were right.

And they were. Sales of both Kabel's paintings and his books made a giant leap following the show, which was billed as "Painting Louisiana Life - Past & Present." A wide audience of art patrons attended the reception and became acquainted with Kabel's handsomely framed, traditional oils painted with skill and love and depicting life, past and present, along the rivers, lakes, bayous and bays that have given birth to a waterborne culture that is uniquely Louisiana's.

As his paintings and book sales took off, so did action on the frequently stymied Old City Hall restoration. At a final fundraising gala last fall, Kabel, who was seriously ill with his cancer, was honored in absentia. In his stead, his son Lionel Kabel Jr., accepted a plaque and gift basket from Denham Springs Mayor Jimmy Durbin and Main Street Chairman Nelson Sanchez.

Kabel's dreams were coming true, for his art, for his books, for the Old City Hall. But, Williams says, one goal remains unfulfilled.

"His hope for the Livingston Parish art community was to have a center for the arts," Williams said. "He worked so hard and gave so much to make this parish a better place to live._ The loss of his presence will be felt all over this community for years to come. We seldom have the honor of meeting people like Lionel."