



The hands and tools of Wolfgang Flor.  
Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Maria Flor.

# Wolfgang Flor

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## Master Sculptor

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By Randy Yohe

Most noted sculptures created by master artists tend to be roped off in museums, untouchable by the public. Master sculptor Wolfgang Flor wrought his masterpieces from repurposed timbers. No cordoned-off ropes

for Wolfgang; he demanded just the opposite, saying, “Wood sculpture is made for the hands. When someone touches my work, I consider it a compliment. What the music is to the ear, the piece of sculpture is to the eye. It

must be so you WANT to put your hands on it.”

Moreover, the Upshur County artisan didn’t *carve* from wood—he *sculpted*. In his renderings, emotional beauty and durability went hand in hand. Wolfgang once commented,

“My work comes from within the log. You could roll one of my pieces down a hill, and it would not be seriously damaged.”

In Wolfgang’s sculptures, the hands were just as important as the ingrained faces. Maria Flor, Wolfgang’s wife of 59 years, says the hands fashioned in her husband’s works “expressed the whole personality. Was it a worker, or were they refined hands? And how were they moved? In which position did people put them?” As for Wolfgang’s own two hands, Maria lovingly exclaims, “He did have beautiful hands. Yes, very beautiful hands!”

Wolfgang Hubert Flor of Rock Cave was 89 when he passed away on December 2, 2017. He was born in Naumberg, Selesia, Germany, on January 29, 1928. After World War II, as a teenager from war-torn East Germany, he was forced into wanderlust. Maria explains how her husband-to-be made the most out of a struggle to survive, “He was a *D.P.*, which is a derogatory term nowadays and was really bad back then. They would say to many people, ‘Oh, you’re just a *D.P.*,’ not realizing the origin of it. The term comes from *displaced person*. Wolfgang was among 10 million people displaced from Selesia (most of which is now part of Poland). Wolfgang and others were told, “Go walk, or sit in the railroad cars if you are lucky, but just go west.”

Young Wolfgang did what he needed to survive while



The Flors built their enchanting house into this rock formation near Rock Cave. Photo by Vickie Yohe.

traveling from village to village. His journey turned into a passion to learn what was around him and how it all related to his heartfelt thoughts and dreams. Maria says, “Every stream he saw, he put his feet in. Every church he saw, he would go in and look at the sculptures and whatever was in there. He was influenced probably more by the Middle Ages than anything else. That’s all you were seeing at that time.”

For a short period, Wolfgang worked with two ladies who were doing some carving. He eventually found his way to Maria’s hometown of Herford, West Germany. The two met in a little Catholic church. In Herford, Wolfgang went to a little craft shop where they were making nativities and joined in.

Maria and Wolfgang came to the United States in 1957 and married the next year. He took

on any job available, including one at a Greyhound bus station, while doing carpentry work on the side. Maria says, “Since he didn’t speak the language, they would use him for hanging doors and things like that where you didn’t have to talk. But in the evenings, he would go to his loft, and he would carve and have his ideas and be very stubborn about it. Very stubborn. He exhibited partly in Cleveland but didn’t really fulfill his dream.”

The couple decided they needed a place of their own that met their personal and creative needs. They wanted to live where the overhead was low, where there was plenty of good wood, and where they could live a simple lifestyle. Maria says, “Wolfgang heard a little radio report with a man saying, ‘If it is made, somebody wants it.’ He carved that saying onto an old table we got from the Salvation Army.



Maria Flor gives the author a tour of the eclectic house she and her late husband shared for more than half a century. Photo by Vickie Yohe.

I still have that table, now turned into a plaque. We then read a very negative article about West Virginia that said, 'Don't ever go there because there is extreme poverty, and artists and those types of people don't have a chance there.' So, Wolfgang looked at me and said, 'You know what? If West Virginia is that low down, it can only go up. Let's go!'"

Wolfgang and Maria settled on a rugged piece of Upshur County land, outside Rock Cave. Like the heavy wooden sculptures the master artist would soon produce, the couple built their own home and workshop from repurposed timbers—and whatever else Mother Earth had to offer.

Maria says, "We designed and built it ourselves, mindful of the principle not to borrow money because he wanted to keep his freedom. He said, 'If I have debts, then I have to compromise.' We lived very, very simply, which was not hard for Wolfgang because he loved simplicity. We picked many stones out of the stream for our home. He was very peculiar and particular as the stones had to have a flat front and flat top so you could stack them and make a natural corner."

The Flor home is warm, beautiful, functional, and quite unique. The walls and floors of the two-story house are built into a giant, hillside rock formation. A deck off the upper

floor looks out over a sloping green lawn and Wolfgang's workshop.

The rolling farmland around the Flors' rural retreat was rich in hewn timbers. Maria says, "We would buy up well-seasoned old barns and buildings. In those years, you could buy it for very little money, maybe a barn for \$5 or \$10. People just wanted to get rid of it. But Wolfgang saw the beauty in the chestnut. We even bought one homestead in the neighborhood because it had a barn we could store things in."

In his workshop, Wolfgang had at least 90 carving tools but used only about a dozen for his average sculpture. He chose a specific kind of wood—cherry, walnut, or



Wolfgang Flor (far right) loved to share his ideas and techniques with young aspiring students. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Maria Flor.

chestnut—that best suited the particular piece he was working on. He'd study the timber for hours, seeing what was inside and what he could bring out. He'd first make a clay model of every figure he wanted to produce and then take up to 10 weeks to sculpt it. And people all around West Virginia and beyond bought these one-of-a-kind compelling figures.

Wolfgang's figures expressed themes of life. Maria explains, "When Wolfgang sculpted people from wood, themes were his strength. He gave meaning to many of his statues. Let's say the *war* theme, or the *miser*, or *listening*. He felt we all did not listen enough—that this was not a generation of listening people."

She says her husband had a consistent idea about people and life, not just in Appalachia, but in general. Wolfgang felt we have good times and bad times; he sculpted hard lines and smooth lines to emphasize that balance between the good and the bad. Wolfgang also used the grains in the wood, the striations, to emphasize emotion.

Noted Grafton woodcarver Greg Cartwright sought out the master artist after marveling at Wolfgang's sculptures. He says, "[His works are] simplistic and emotional, not truly realistic and not impressionistic, either. Just a very unique and pleasing art form but also very diverse."

One reporter described Wolfgang's work as an attempt to

mediate between the old traditions and the extreme modern. Maria says, "Yes, there is some truth to that in that he did not like deformation. As a young man, he had seen a young boy with an [enlarged head], and it absolutely shocked him. He mentioned this many, many times and said, 'Never will I distort the human figure.' He would simplify it, maybe with expressive hands and heads."

Maria feels that the rural poor and young college students perhaps appreciated Wolfgang's art more than anyone. She says, "The poor felt closer to his subjects and his issues. He had gone through poverty and gone through having to listen to people. They understood his themes. Like one theme in a piece, *Who is*



Mrs. Frank A. Baer commissioned Wolfgang to craft this untitled work for Temple Israel in Charleston. Both oak panels are 36" x 13" and were stained with sulfurous drainage water Wolfgang found in coal mines. The left panel depicts Abraham about to sacrifice his son Isaac; the righthand one shows Isaac's son Jacob fighting with an angel. In this 1972 photo, Wolfgang (left) shows his work to Don Page, director of the state Arts & Crafts Division. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Jane George Collection.

*the hero?* [is] all about war—where he showed the man with the gun, the man being shot, and the woman holding the hand of her dead husband. And his question was, ‘Who is the hero?’ And, of course, Wolfgang’s opinion was there are no heroes in war.”

Wolfgang loved to share his insights with aspiring artists. Maria says, “Wolfgang visited colleges for the purpose of having a little extra income as an artist-in-residence. However, he was inspired by the young generation. They questioned him, and he would demonstrate in front of them. He loved people, and his workshop was open to all, especially the backcountry people. We were

questioned at times on why we were not participating more in the art scene in town. Wolfgang considered it more important to give his [neighbors] a true idea of what art is all about. He would continue carving as to not lose too much time, but he would let them be right there in the workshop.”

Wolfgang Flor’s works are on display in more than a dozen West Virginia colleges and universities, in the West Virginia State Museum, and in many places around the country and the world. But his signature creation came in 1968, when nearby West Virginia Wesleyan College in Buckhannon commissioned him to create *Twelve Apostles*, which now

lines the Wesley Chapel’s back wall. Greg Cartwright recalls, “I was a WVU student when the *Apostles* happened in 1968, and I remember vividly it was front-page news.”

Wesleyan’s communications director, Rochelle Long, says it is internationally iconic, adding, “For our college, the connection is major. People come from all over to see the *Apostles*. It was an honor to know who made these fantastic sculptures in the chapel and see the hands that created them.”

Maria says *Twelve Apostles* took Wolfgang a year to create, about a month for each statue. “The wood for them all came from this area, [including] antique chestnut logs from a



*Twelve Apostles*, Wolfgang Flor's 1968 masterpiece, graces the back wall of the Wesley Chapel at West Virginia Wesleyan College in Buckhannon. Photo by Vickie Yohe.

doctor's barn in Sutton. The college left him total freedom in his work. He would make a clay model, and the committee would come out. He would explain the research he had done on each one. They liked it, and then he went into the wood." The artist incorporated the distinctive chestnut wood grain for each apostle, depicting a concerned face or a raised eyebrow.

Wolfgang wrote biographies for the apostles, explaining the meaning and feeling in each sculpture. He worked to be authentic as possible, not just to depict the stories surrounding Jesus. He particularly wanted to incorporate something special into "Doubt-

ing Thomas" and "Peter the Rock." Greg Cartwright adds, "I'm drawn to go back and see the *Apostles* every time I go back to Buckhannon. I look at them, and it inspires me to look at his inscriptions and the symbolism. He didn't just make 12 unique sculptures of 12 guys from 2,000 years ago. He made wooden people who represented the personalities, desires, and lives of the 12 people most important in the life of Jesus."

When asked about her husband's legacy, Maria Flor says, "To be simple and be satisfied. He would be able to carve a tiny little thing, and he would be satisfied, but he would not sit still. He would still carve

a big thing. Whichever job he did in life, he was satisfied. After the war, when he was in the town where I lived, he shoveled coal for the English people, and he was satisfied shoveling coal, even though he already knew how to carve and use those wonderful hands."🍁

RANDY YOHE has his own video production company and does freelance writing, radio work, political consulting, and music festival production. For 30 years, he was a broadcast journalist in the Huntington-Charleston TV news market. Randy and his wife, Vickie, have a website geared to inform, entertain, and inspire baby boomers: [www.our-boomlife.com](http://www.our-boomlife.com). This is Randy's second contribution to GOLDENSEAL. His first was in our Summer 2018 issue.