

## Creating Art in Unlikely Places

BY MARIA MNOOKIN

A distinguished educator and structural engineer, Duane Ellifritt is also one of the world's few fore-edge painters.

**ART, IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER**, has been a part of Duane Ellifritt's life for as long as he can remember. "I have been drawing since I was 5 years old," he said. This life-long interest led him to develop his craft using various media including pencil, charcoal, pen and ink, pastel, and his primary medium, watercolor. His creative ability is not limited to art, as it is also quite evident in his writing and teaching techniques.

Born in 1935 and raised in Greenwood, W.Va., Ellifritt had humble beginnings in this small, rural area. He has documented his early life in a collection of memoirs, several of which have been published. His stories describe neighborhood baseball games, household chores and the like, transporting the reader back to a time that today seems unimaginable.

"With a garden and chickens and milk straight from the cow and hogs to slaughter in November, there was always enough to eat," he wrote in his unpublished memoir *Climbing the Logarithmic Ladder*. "We had a comfortable home, with indoor plumbing and electricity, even though we had no car or telephone. We considered ourselves rather well off, in fact. There were many in this small hill community in West Virginia that had no running water in the house, no electricity, and burned coal in the fireplace for warmth in the winter."

Despite being surrounded by few who continued their education past the age of 16, including his parents, Ellifritt pursued a higher education. He ultimately earned a Ph.D. in 1970 in structural engineering from West Virginia University.

While he was in graduate school, he began to paint with watercolor. "It was around 1967 that my wife pushed me in that direction," he said. "She found a woman who was willing to give private lessons, and I did some painting with her. But it wasn't until about 1975 that I started into it pretty seriously."

After receiving his doctorate, Ellifritt taught at the Oklahoma State University for five years, then worked for a

time in Cleveland. He moved to Florida in 1984 to join the civil engineering faculty at the University of Florida, where he continued to explore his interest in painting. That also was when Ellifritt created a 3D model to help students visually grasp the concepts underlying steel connections, and the now famous Steel Sculpture became a reality.

In 1988, Ellifritt was in a Memphis, Tenn., bookstore and came across a book on display as an example of the nearly lost art form of fore-edge painting. He was fascinated with the 17th century practice, which consists of decorating the outer edges of a book's pages to create a work that can only be seen when the pages are fanned open. However he discovered there was very little information available on the subject, so he decided to teach himself. He published an article on the subject, which can be seen on his website ([www.ellifritt.com](http://www.ellifritt.com)), and as a result has become acquainted with half a dozen other people around the globe who also work in this rare medium.

Today, as he continues his watercolor painting, the original steel sculpture stands a proud 14 ft tall just outside the Weil Hall, home to the university's Civil Engineering Department.

Is the steel sculpture art? Ellifritt first deemed it simply a teaching tool. But during his original pitch to the university, an art professor on the committee asked that exact question. "Why not?" Ellifritt answered. Vindication came two years ago. "The alumni association put out a calendar called 'The Art of UF,' and my sculpture was one of the pages in the calendar!" he said with a laugh. "So now it's officially 'art.'" **MSC**

*More about the 25th anniversary of the Steel Sculpture appears on page 20 of this issue. To see a collection of Ellifritt's watercolor paintings and other excerpts from his body of work, go to [www.modernsteel.com/photos](http://www.modernsteel.com/photos). Maria Mnookin is an educational specialist with AISC.*



- ◀ **Far left:** Duane Ellifritt devised two clamps, one for hard-backed books (shown) and another for paperbacks, that allow him to practice the nearly lost art of fore-edge painting.
- ◀ **Center:** The original Steel Sculpture on the University of Florida campus was designed by Duane Ellifritt and celebrates its 25th anniversary October 29, 2011.
- ◀ **Right:** Duane Ellifritt, Ph.D., P.E., Professor Emeritus of Civil Engineering, University of Florida.