

# Through eyes of art: Bigfork woman sees portrait of herself for first time at Missoula Art Museum

By [JAMIE KELLY of the Missoulian](#) | Posted: Wednesday, February 24, 2010



Betty Wetzel views a painting of herself by Missoula artist Megan Moore for the first time. The Bigfork resident traveled to Missoula on Wednesday morning to see the painting, which is part of the exhibit "Variations in Portraiture" at the Missoula Art Museum. "I think it's wonderful," says Wetzel. Photo by LINDA THOMPSON/Missoulia

For the first time on Wednesday, Betty Wetzel saw herself as an artist sees her - as "Betty," a wise, wonderful old woman with a compelling face, weathered with 94 years of a full life.

"Betty" is the title of a new portrait painted by Missoula artist Megan Moore, and is one of seven of Moore's portraits hanging in the Missoula Art Museum for the exhibit "Variations in Portraiture."

On Wednesday morning, Wetzel's daughter Susan Hinman drove her mother from her Bigfork home to show her the painting - a vision of herself she was admittedly nervous to see.

Before taking the elevator upstairs at the MAM, Wetzel had this to say: "I've never been known as a great beauty."

Thirty minutes later, she sat in front of her likeness in oil, her eyes wet and both her hands clasping the two others that spun magic from oil brushes.

"I think it's wonderful," said Wetzel.

"You just gave me chills," said Moore.

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**For Megan Moore**, portraiture requires nothing more than a person and a story.

Pretty? Pretty is fleeting, she said.

Poses? Poses possess no humanity.

So when Moore first met and got to know Betty Wetzel last spring, her thoughts turned to the canvas.

"Betty has an extraordinary face, and that is exactly what I love to paint," said Moore, who works from a studio in her University Area home. "The structure of her face is compelling, but as a bonus she is just a fantastic woman."

Moore got to know Wetzel through Wetzel's daughter Gretchen Von Rittberg, a friend who lives in Germany and is also a part-time resident of Bigfork.

Sharing lunch last spring, Moore familiarized herself with a world traveler, an author, a tennis enthusiast, a mother of four, a 1937 University of Montana journalism graduate and a stately lady with a philanthropic heart. Moore, who normally works from commissions, was looking for subjects for her portion of the MAM exhibit "Variations in Portraiture," which includes, among others, Moore's striking portrait of Missoula Mayor John Engen. So she set a date for a photography session with Wetzel, who has lived in her Bigfork home for 30 years.

Over the summer, she spent an entire month on the painting.

Moore's goal was simple: Paint the essence of Betty Wetzel. Don't force a prettiness that is not there in the moment. Don't over-sentimentalize her. Keep focus, she has insisted of herself, on essence.

That's why the painting is devoid of background objects. Those, said Moore, only serve to distract from the woman.

"I really try to put as few nouns in a painting as I can, other than the human noun," she said. "My challenge was to paint the fabulous Betty, in a nonsentimental way."

Moore does not question her artistry or her motivations, but after the painting was complete, she was admittedly a bit nervous about the reactions of both Wetzel and her family.

"Gretchen is super-close to her mom, and it's hard for her to be so far away from her," said the artist. "It was difficult for me because I wanted it to be meaningful to her."

Wetzel's four children all loved Moore's rendering of their mother.

Said Susan Hinman, who had traveled from her California home for the occasion: "I think it captures her wisdom over the years, having survived raising four kids, traveled over the world and lived life fully."

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**It has been quite** a life. Wetzel, born and raised in Roundup, was the daughter of the founder of that little town's newspaper. She graduated in journalism from UM in 1937, and was working for her father when she met

a teacher and superintendent named Winston, who would later become superintendent of Missoula County's high schools, among numerous other places in and out of the state. They lived and worked in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), New York, Massachusetts and other places before landing in Bigfork 30 years ago. Winston died in 1998.

A pianist, a talented tennis player, Wetzel is also the author of two books, including 1987's "Missoula: The Town and the People," and "After You, Mark Twain: A Modern Journey Around the Equator," in which Wetzel followed the same path that Twain traveled in his literary journeys.

On Wednesday, there was only one last nagging question in Moore's head: Would this remarkable person be pleased with the portrait?

"She really is an artist," Wetzel said before she spent 15 minutes with the painting.

Later, Moore knelt and held Wetzel's hands.

"I was not trying to flatter you," she said, explaining her motivations.

"Portraits are normally meant to flatter people."

"Well," responded Wetzel, squeezing Moore's hands, "there's the truth ... "

"Yes," said Moore. "And the truth is beautiful."