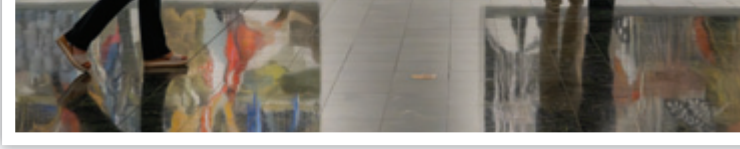


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Sculpting art with science

Naples sculptor explores interplay of science and art with one-ton gift

BY KELLY J FARRELL

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Internationally acclaimed sculptor Joel Shapses of Naples donated a monumental one-ton sculpture to Temple University Maurice H. Kornberg School of Dentistry, where the artist's parallel passions for dentistry and sculpture first began to take shape. On of his early manifestations of the interplay between art and science was when he chiseled a tooth out of marble while attending the university

decades ago.

Dubbed “Spirit of ’83” the recently donated artwork carved from raspberry alabaster was ceremoniously unveiled and dedicated in late April—not at a studio, gallery or museum—but at the nation’s second-oldest dental school. It was a full circle moment for Shapses.

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COURTESY PHOTO

Spirit of '83 installed at Temple University.



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SHAPSES

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The sculpture now remains as a central symbol of that connection between scientific precision and artistic creativity.

“Science and art are often treated as opposites, but they are deeply connected. Both are ways humans explore, interpret and communicate the world,” Shapses told Florida Weekly.

“Science seeks to understand how things work; art explores what things mean emotionally, culturally and visually. Together, they often push creativity and innovation further than either could alone.”

For Shapses, who built an internationally recognized career in sculpture after graduating from Temple Dental, the installation represents a deeply personal homecoming and tribute to the institution that helped shape both his professional and artistic identity.

“Temple Dental played a pivotal role in my journey, not just as a dentist, but as an artist,” said Shapses.

“Spirit of ‘83’ honors the creativity, discipline and precision shared by both sculpture and dental craftsmanship. I hope it serves as a lasting inspiration for students to see artistry as an essential part of their profession.”

Throughout his career in both dentistry and fine art, Shapses has embraced experimentation, innovation and meticulous craftsmanship — qualities he believes unite the worlds of sculpture and dentistry and continue to drive discovery in both fields.

Internationally recognized for his



JOEL SHAPSES / COURTESY PHOTO

Sculptor Joel Shapses (kneeling in first row center wearing blue jacket and colorful bowtie) with dental alumni poses in front of Maurice H. Kornberg School of Dentistry building at a recent Alumni Day celebrating his one-ton Spirit of ‘83 sculpture donation that portrays the blend of art and science.

work in stone, bronze, fused glass, aluminum and neon, Shapses has created more than 800 sculptures over a 55-year career, earning more than 80 awards and honors while exhibiting extensively throughout the United States and abroad. His works are held in corporate, institutional and private collections, including Saks Fifth Avenue locations in New York and Michigan and Temple Emanu-El in Fort Lauderdale.

Born in New Jersey, Shapses displayed artistic talent at an early age, beginning to sculpt at just five years old. While his academic studies focused on science, he pursued both disciplines simultaneously, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in Biology from C.W. Post College in 1967 while also studying sculpture under noted art-

ist Alfred Van Loen.

A defining moment came during his first year at Temple University Maurice H. Kornberg School of Dentistry, where anatomy and precision dental modeling formed the core of the curriculum. Faced with a routine assignment to sculpt a tooth in wax, Shapses instead spent an entire weekend carving a molar from Carrara marble using only a hammer and chisel. The piece astonished both faculty and classmates, marking the moment his artistic identity fully emerged.

That marble tooth soon launched Shapses into the professional art world.

“I was inspired by courses I had taken in college — forms with soft lines and curves. ‘Spirit of ‘83’s’ soft lines and curves are forms seen in embryology and evolution,” Shapses said in a recent interview with Florida Weekly.

That relationship between science and art became integral to his work and life in increasingly visual ways.

“The relationship shows up in art through science-based tools and ideas like light, anatomy, perspective and technology — which I use to create more realistic, expressive or experimental work,” Shapses said in an interview.

At his first outdoor exhibition on Long Island, the sculpture earned second place honors, and Shapses quickly became a regular exhibitor at prestigious Greenwich Village Spring and fall art shows, winning awards while still completing dental school and establishing the foundation for his parallel careers in dentistry and fine art.

Following graduation, extensive world travel immersed Shapses in the ancient traditions and cultural history of stone carving, further shaping his artistic vision.

In 1972, he partnered with fellow Temple Dental graduate Jerry Pyser to open a general and cosmetic dental practice in Fort Lauderdale. While Pyser managed the business operations, Shapses focused on cosmetic and restorative dentistry, applying the same artistic sensibility that defined his sculpture. During this period, he also refined his sculptural techniques while working alongside acclaimed Italian sculptor Enzo Gallo.

“Spirit of ‘83’ was created for a special nook inside my then-new dental office in Fort Lauderdale in 1983. The sculpture has been on display in my Naples gallery since retiring from dentistry in 2006. While reconnecting with my alma mater, I was also looking for a new home for the sculpture. It was a match,” Shapses said.

For more than 40 years, Shapses had balanced both professions at Gallery 421, his innovative combination dental office and art gallery centered around “Spirit of ‘83.” Patients often sought out his artistic approach to cosmetic dentistry, particularly in complex restorative procedures. One especially meaningful case involved reconstructing the face of a cancer patient — restoring not only physical appearance, but confidence and dignity.

“My art is my love and soul,” said Shapses. “But my dentistry was also deeply creative and innovative. My artistic abilities allowed me to approach dentistry in a completely different way.”

After retiring from dentistry in 2006, Shapses and Pyser relocated to Naples, drawn by the city’s growing arts community. Now fully immersed in the Naples Art District, Shapses continues to expand his work across a diverse range of materials including alabaster, granite, black chlorite, limestone, marble and onyx, creating both abstract and representational forms that invite tactile and emotional engagement.

“With new materials comes new freedom,” he said. “My work has evolved into more avant-garde constructions where I combine multiple media to create sculpture. Whether realistic or abstract, I want viewers to experience the work beyond the visual — to feel compelled to explore each form more deeply.”

Visit Joel Shapses Gallery, located at 6240 Shirley St., Suite 102, in Naples, to view more than 100 sculptures, paintings and ceramic works. A prominent destination within the Naples Art District, the gallery features works by sculptor Shapses and work from architect and painter Richard Diedrich as well as from ceramic artist Joan Eshkenazi. The gallery is open by appointment. Call (954) 830-3156 or visit www.joelshapsesstudio.com. ■

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Dr. Amid Ismail, dean; sculptor Joel Shapses and Jerry Pryser with the Spirit of ‘83 sculpture.