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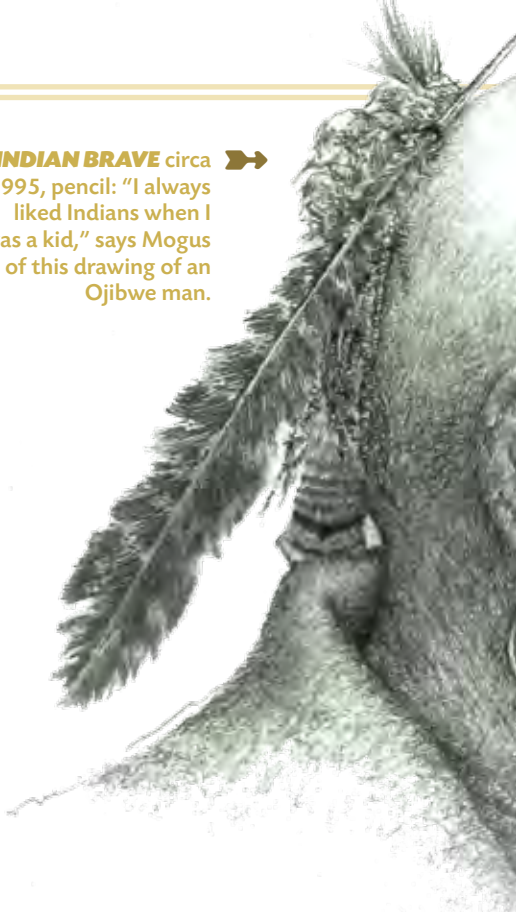
AN ARTIST'S SECOND ACT

One Veteran's story about giving up his passion—and how VA Pittsburgh helped him find it again BY LAURA MCINTOSH



INDIAN BRAVE circa 1995, pencil: "I always liked Indians when I was a kid," says Mogus of this drawing of an Ojibwe man.

LEFT Mogus as a young soldier. **BELOW** Mogus, at home in August 2010, with his latest drawing.

It is early afternoon. John Mogus sits quietly in his makeshift home studio in Murrysville, Pa. His house is quiet—and quickly swallowed by a dense forest. Mogus, 89, expertly holds a pencil as he sketches; he stares intently at the monitor in front of him. His eyes are not what they used to be.

It is a simple, frustrating truth.

Fifteen years ago, doctors had delivered the harsh news: macular degeneration, an eye disorder that damages the retina and results in a loss of vision. Time moved too fast and so did his disease. Five years later, the World War II Veteran's eyesight had grown so dim—so blurry—that he had to stop doing what he loved most.

"It's my life. Ever since I was a kid, I loved art," recalls Mogus, who had 45-year career as a commercial artist and specialized in drawing and painting portraits and wildlife. Even in retirement, the Veteran stayed busy.

"He worked at his drawing board every day. Every single day," recalls Mogus's daughter, Marilyn, 66.

But when his eyes failed him, "I stopped completely," says Mogus. For five years, he did not dare pick up a pencil. He did not even try to mix paints. "It was very frustrating. People were calling me for portraits, and I couldn't do anything. It was terrible."

In December 2009, the Army Veteran—who at the time was seeing a private optometrist—learned of VA Pittsburgh's Low Vision Clinic. He made an appointment. Sky Sallee, a VAPHS employee who oversees program support for rehabilitation therapy at the clinic, recalls the Veteran's first visit.

"He brought in his paintings. ...You rarely see that, you

rarely see someone bring in what they like to do. And he said, 'This is what I want to do,'" says Sallee. "He seemed very sad that he couldn't do what he really enjoyed."

The visit changed Mogus's life. Thanks to Sallee and the rest of VAPHS's low vision rehabilitation team, the Veteran soon received a desktop video magnifier. The simple device, which can make objects appear more than 60 times closer, enables the artist to see every detail on an LCD screen before him. "It was great. I was pretty excited," says Mogus of receiving the machine. "Now I use it constantly—for reading, writing and drawing."

Follow-up visits to VA Pittsburgh resulted in the Veteran taking home even more assistive devices, such as a talking calculator, a talking watch, a lighted magnifier, and a clever tool that alerts Mogus when to stop pouring coffee into his cup.

Today, the artist uses these gadgets as part of his daily life—brush in hand or not. And now that he is back to doing what he loves, Mogus has no plans to slow down. His latest work is a penciled, snowy scene from the Battle of the Bulge (opposite page, bottom left), which he will donate to a local funeral home. And this year—just a few months shy of his 90th birthday—the Veteran entered a painting into the state's annual "duck stamp" contest.

The Veteran also has pieces in the Bastogne Historical Center in Belgium, the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum in Kansas, and the General George Patton Museum in Kentucky.

"The important thing is that I'm getting back to painting and drawing again," says the Veteran, smiling. "I never thought I would do that...I'm happy to be getting back to that."

TOP TO BOTTOM ***UNTITLED*** 1994, acrylic: Mogus won Florida's annual duck stamp contest (see stamp, inset) with this painting of an American Wigeon. ***CROSSING THE RHINE*** 1992, watercolor: This painting shows the 809th Tank Destroyer Battalion crossing the Rhine River in Germany on March 27, 1945, and hangs in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum in Abilene, Kan. ***PENNSYLVANIA ANGLER*** circa 1997, acrylic: "This is one of my favorite spots," says Mogus of his painted scene, which is inspired by Loyalhanna Creek near Ligonier, Pa.