

Memorial services for world-renowned bronze sculptor Elden Cecil Tefft, 95, Lawrence will be held 2:00 p.m. Monday, February 23, 2015 at Warren-McElwain Mortuary in Lawrence. Private inurnment will be at a later date. He died Tuesday, February 17, 2015 at Lawrence Memorial Hospital.

Born December 22, 1919 in Hartford, KS, Elden was the son of Cecil Elden and Lois Olive (Wilson) Tefft. He spent the first eight years of his life on the family farm, which Tefft called “the Ranch,” before moving to Lawrence. Bringing his farmer’s innovative spirit, Tefft grew up hanging around outside Woodlawn Lake and playing along the Kansas River sandbars. At local fairs and carnivals, Tefft became interested in magic and became a showman, having mastered the art of fire eating and sword swallowing.

As a student at Lawrence High School, he studied with Bernard Frasier, who became Tefft’s mentor and helped Tefft develop a passion for sculpture. He went to art school at the University of Kansas, but his studies were interrupted by WWII. The Air Force enabled Tefft to travel to other countries and study art and artists. While in the South Pacific, Tefft honed his wood carving skills and developed an art therapy program for wounded soldiers.

After the war, Tefft went to Tulsa to study again under Bernard Frasier. While in Tulsa, he met a young violinist named Mary Hammer and married her on July 28, 1947, in Tulsa. He returned to KU and completed his B.A. and Master’s degrees at KU and served as a professor at the university for the next 40 years.

In 1953, having travelled to Mexico and observing a large foundry, Tefft came back to Lawrence and built the first “lost-wax” foundry on a university campus, and made K.U. a teaching center for this form of bronze sculpture. He then travelled the world, aiding in the building of foundries and teaching the “lost-wax” method. Tefft was even brought to China to reintroduce the art of bronze casting, which had been lost during China’s communist revolution.

Prior to Tefft’s work, bronze sculpture was considered a craft because the work had to be sent away to be completed. Tefft taught artist to build their own foundries which allowed the artist to control the entire process from beginning to the end. Bronze sculpting became accepted as a fine art, meaning art museums would finally accept bronze sculptures for display. Many pieces of Tefft’s work are scattered across the University of Kansas campus, with the 10-ft Moses statue in front of the School of Religion being perhaps his most well-known work. Lawrence High School students frequently passed by his sculpture of “Chesty Lion.”

Because of his pioneering work in bronze casting and the success of many of his students, Tefft was awarded an honorary Ph.D. by Baker University in 1999. His many honors included the Kansas Governor’s Arts Award for Lifetime Achievement. The Kansas Senate passed resolution 1828 in 2009, recognizing and commending Tefft for his contributions to the art world and the state of Kansas.

During his lifetime he published numerous books and articles on sculpture and bronze casting, wax sculpting, waste mold casting and head and figure molding. In 1960 he established a biennial conference that brought together sculptors from around the world. These conferences

led to the founding of the International Sculpture Center at KU, which is currently based in New Jersey.

Though he retired from KU in 1990, he never retired from his life's work. His studio was frequented by former students as well as other artists who came to learn from the master. In 2012, at the age of 92, he had a very successful one man show called "Gossamer." For this show, Tefft issued the following artist's statement. "Despite my long standing interest in carving both wood and stone, I have spent the greater portion of my life in returning sculpture founding to the sculptor's studio where it could again become part of the creative process, thus returning bronze to its rightful place in the hierarchy of fine art sculpture media."

Tefft's wife, Mary, preceded him in death September 18, 2011.

Survivors include her son, Kim Trevor and his wife, Wanda June of Lawrence and four grandchildren, Jared Elijah, Janell Esther, Jonathan Ezra and Joanna Elisabeth.

The family will greet friends from 3 – 5 p.m. Sunday, February 22, 2015 at the mortuary.

The family suggests memorials in his name to the Benevolence Fund through Indian Ave. Baptist Church or to the International Sculpture Center and may be sent in care of the mortuary.

Online condolences may be sent to www.warrenmcelwain.com.