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Art imitates long life

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Portraits of the artist

Cold Spring Harbor library exhibit fetes nonagenarian's work and the many hats he's worn in his lifetime



Louis Legakis, at right with daughter Connie Legakis Robinson and her husband, Rick, at the Cold Spring Harbor library, sold his home and now lives with his son Peter, left.



PHOTO BY STEVE FENN

BY JOSH STEWART
Special to Newsday

Connie Legakis Robinson calls it a "pilgrimage." In April, relatives came to Cold Spring Harbor from all over the country to pay tribute to her father, Louis Legakis.

Yet it wasn't a memorial for Legakis, who at 97 sometimes has difficulty hearing and comprehending but is still sharp enough to recall being shooed away from the famed "Spirit of St. Louis" by aviator Charles Lindbergh at Roosevelt Field in 1927.

Family members had come to have a last look at Legakis' Cold Spring Harbor home and its interior and exterior treasures. Legakis, an artist at heart but not by profession, had reached the point where he needed to sell the home he built in 1962 and move to Commack to live with his son, Peter, 64.

The property represented Legakis' passion for creating art in many different forms, a love fueled in his youth, then reinforced in adulthood as he witnessed the carnage of war.

His oil paintings — of landscapes, rocks, trees, the sea, his mother — were all over the home, along with 21 self-portraits he created over six decades. Legakis started working

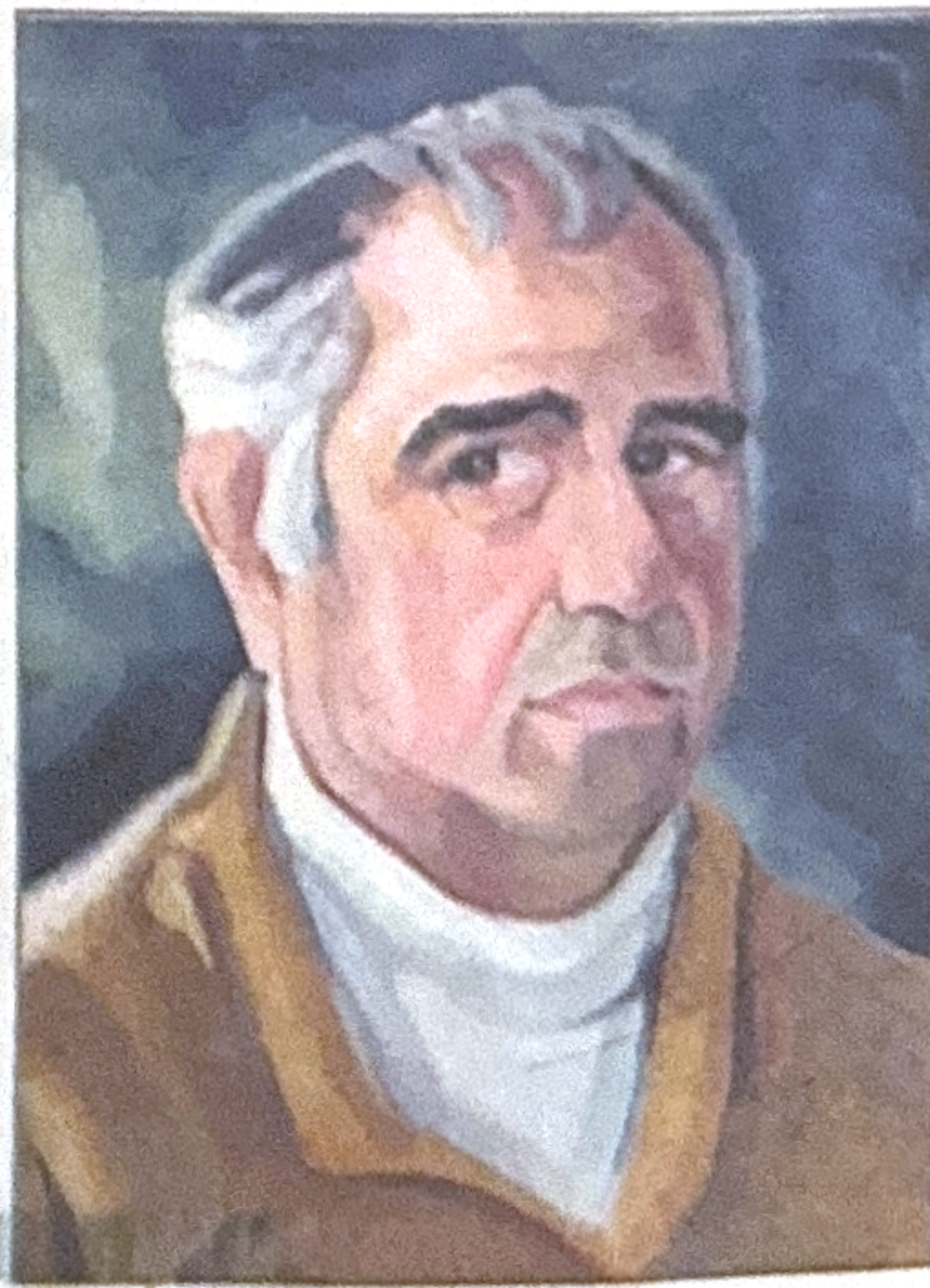
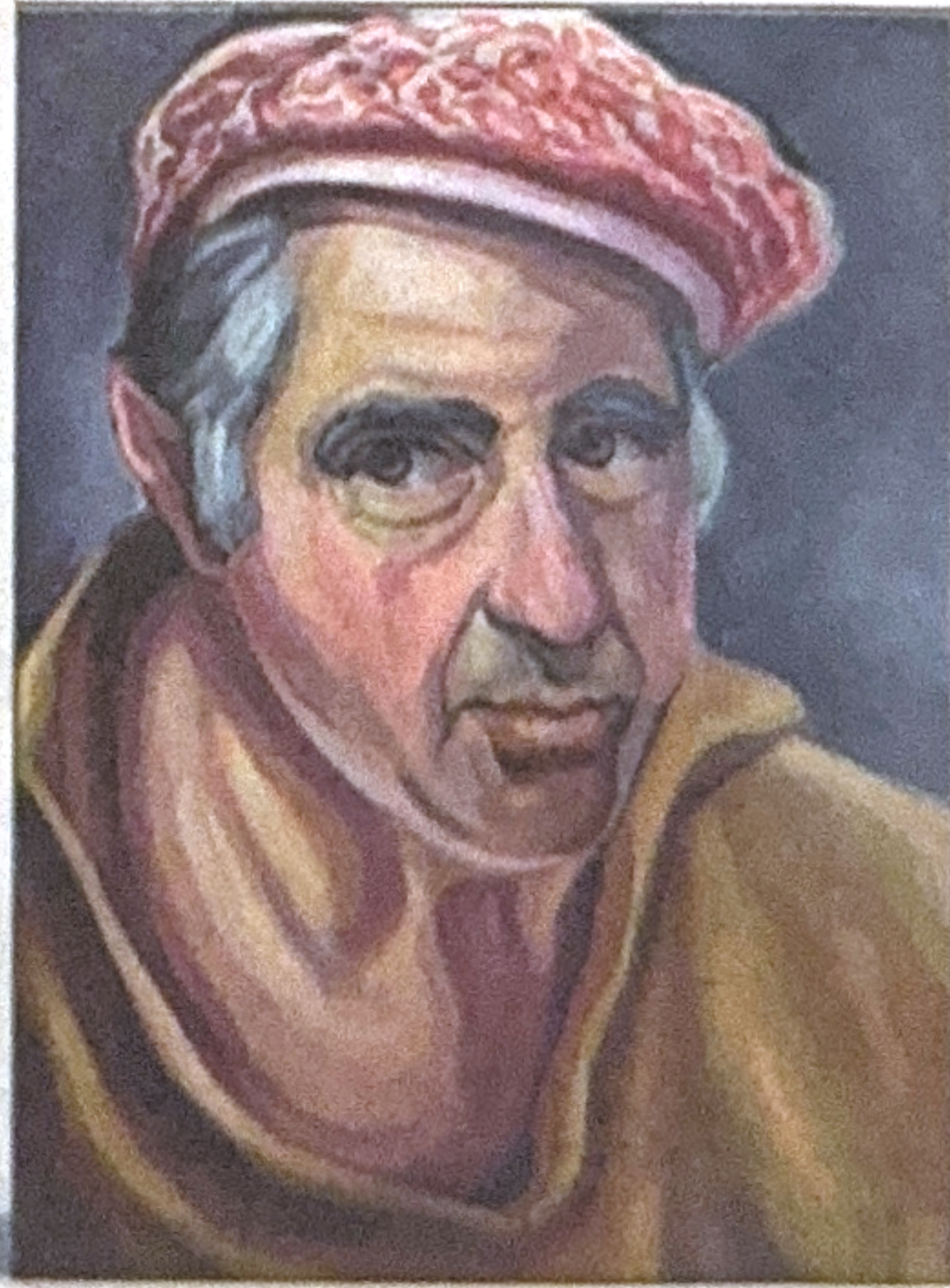
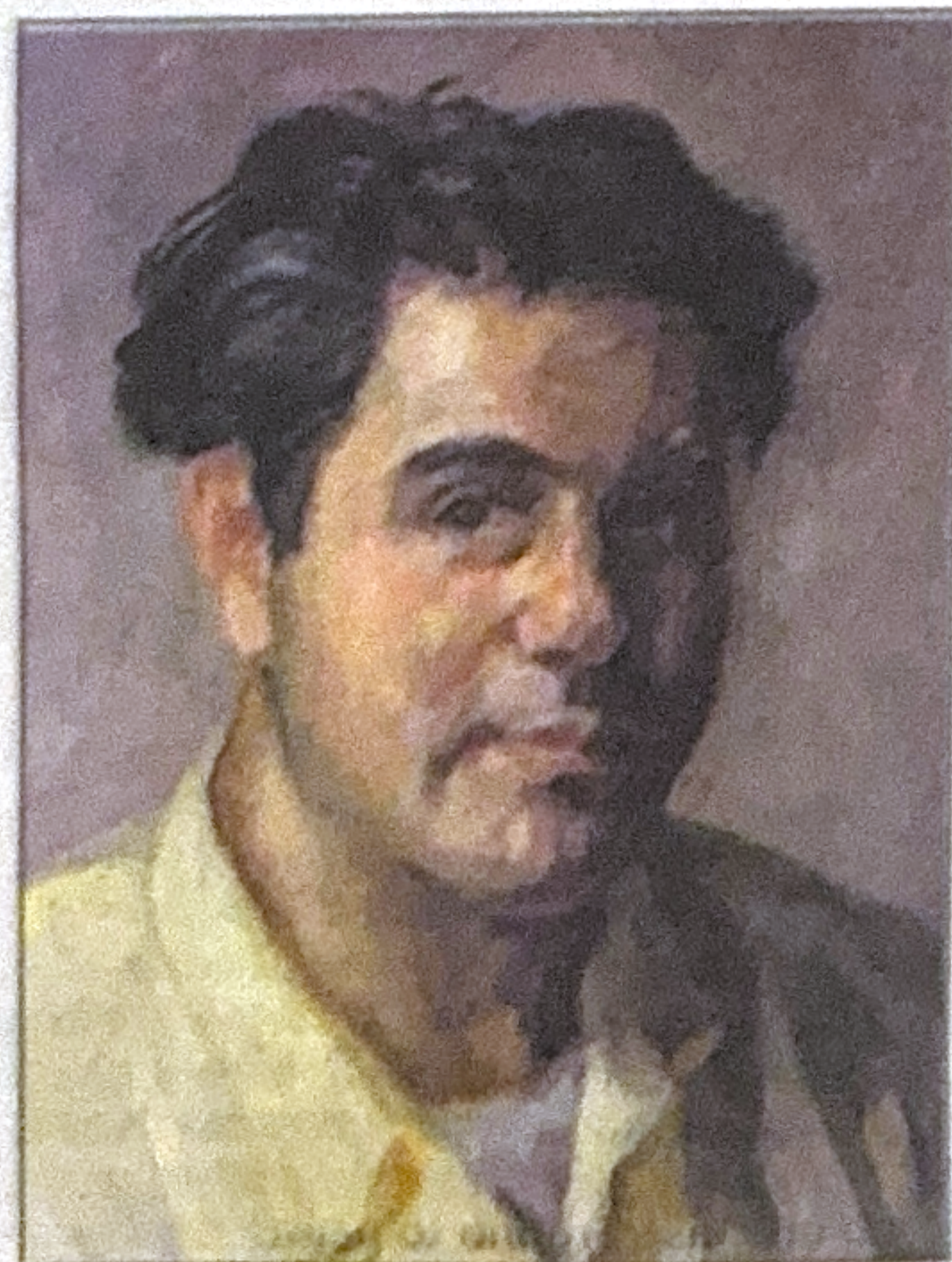
See COVER STORY on G8

1950

1969

1975

1980s





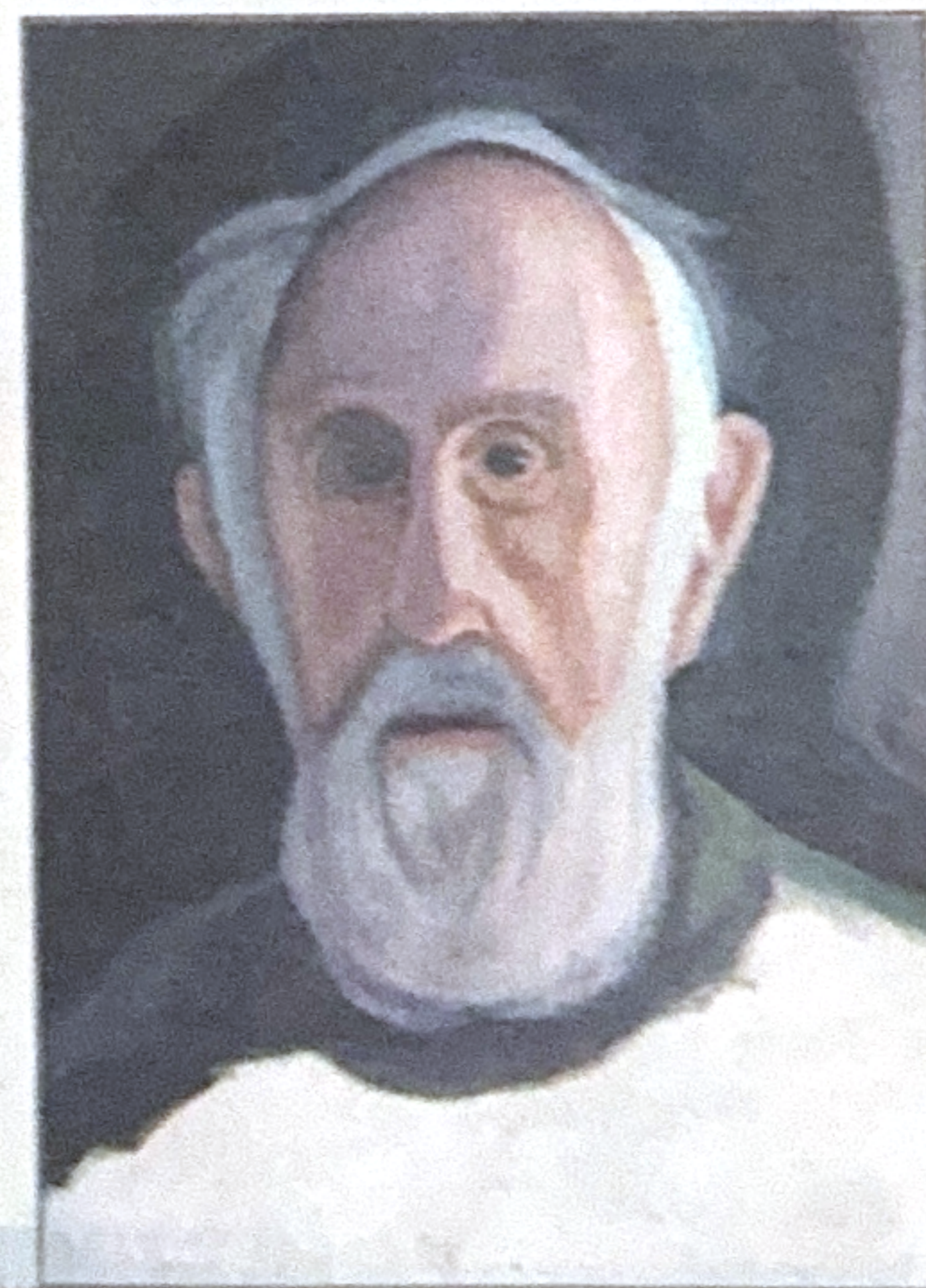
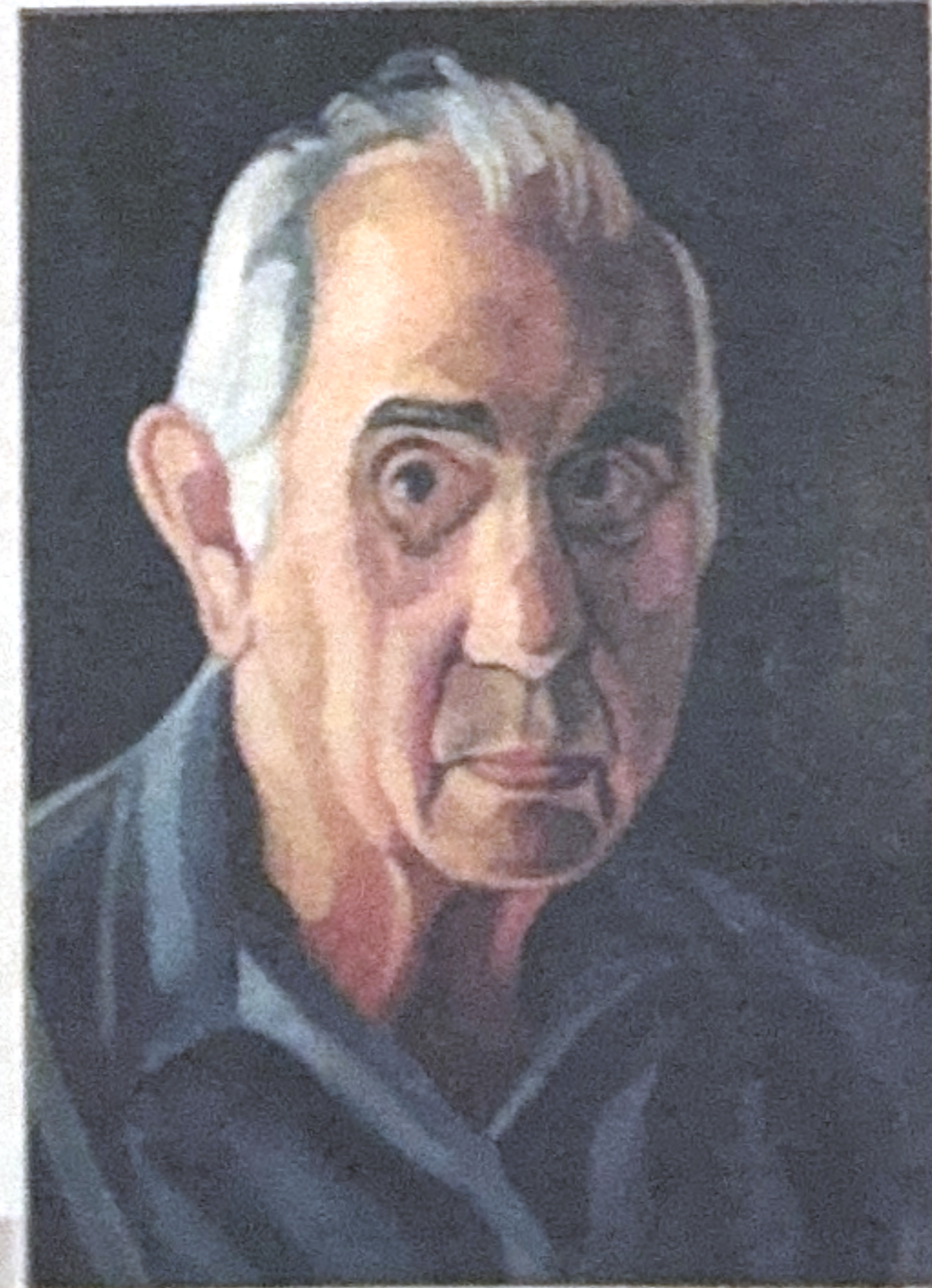
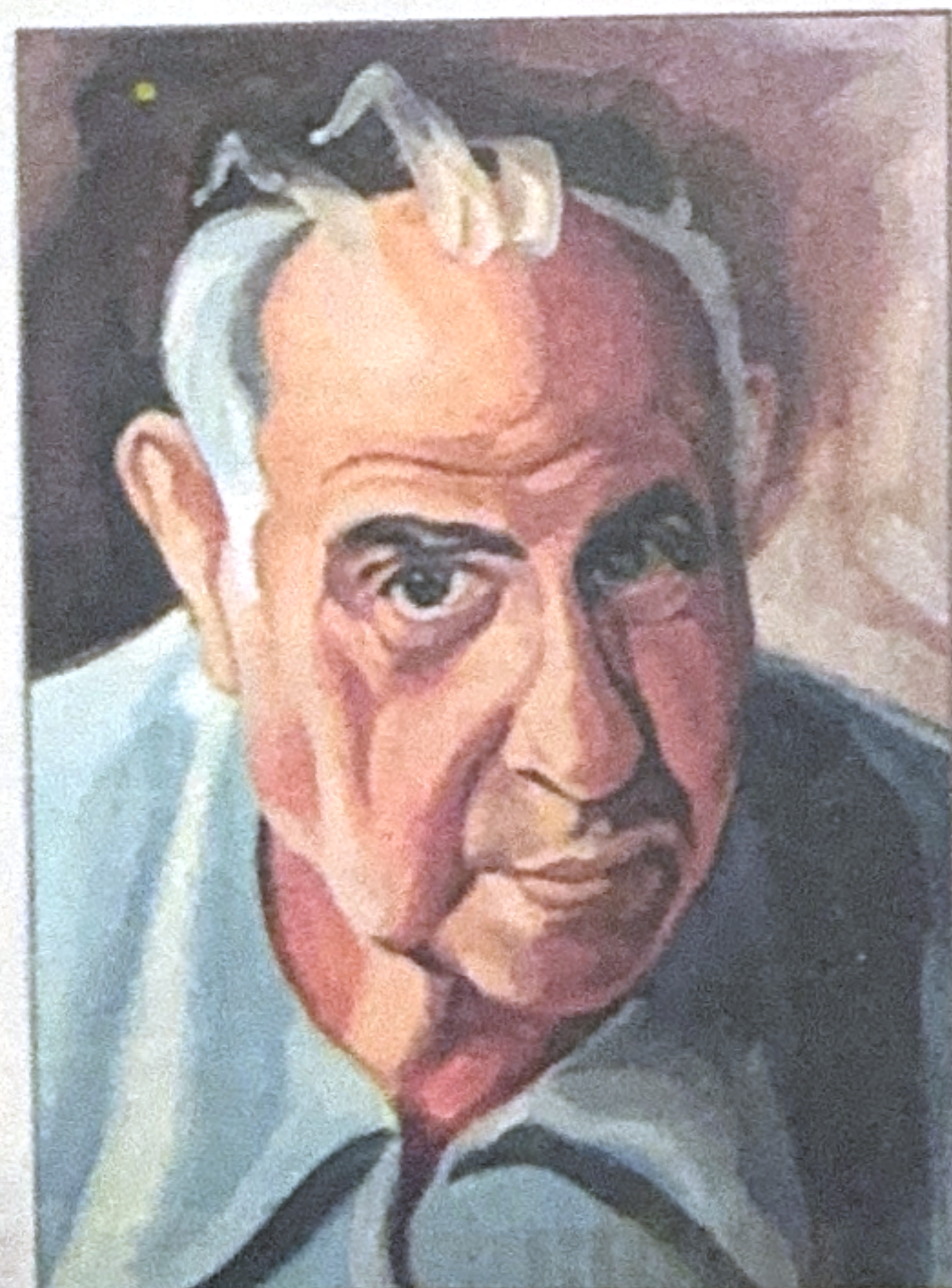
ON THE COVER. WWII veteran and former Cold Spring Harbor resident Louis Legakis with one of five self-portraits on display through Thanksgiving at the Cold Spring Harbor Library and Environmental Center.

Legakis, who began drawing at age 12, paints his last self-portrait in 2010 inside the home he built. He never made a living as an artist, instead working odd jobs until settling in as a master gardener and landscape designer.

1994

1996

2010



NOW SHOWING

See more of Louis Legakis as he saw himself through a series of self-portraits at the Cold Spring Harbor Library and Environmental Center, 95 Harbor Rd.

- **Library hours:** Mon.-Thurs. 9:30 a.m.-9 p.m.; Fri.-Sat. 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sun. 1-5 p.m.
- **Admission:** Free
- **Exhibit:** Through Thanksgiving
- **Contact:** 631-692-6820

Legakis began painting self-portraits when he was in his mid-30s and continued until 2010, leaving his last one, near left, unfinished. He said he resorted to the genre whenever his children couldn't sit still or there was no one else around to paint.

Art is legacy of a lifetime

COVER STORY from G4

on the self-portraits when his children wouldn't sit still or no one else was around. Five of them, spanning 40 years from the 1950s to the '90s, are on display at the Cold Spring Harbor Library and Environmental Center through Thanksgiving.

They are part of what drew relatives back to Cold Spring Harbor. They had to see the intricate Japanese-style garden Legakis — who made his living as a master gardener and landscape designer — built that is toward the front of the house and wraps around one side, showcasing the skills he employed at the 1939 World's Fair; walk in the house and look up at the Frank Lloyd Wright-esque redwood beams he installed when he built the home; take one more glance at a carving bolted into a shelf that was left behind for the new owners.

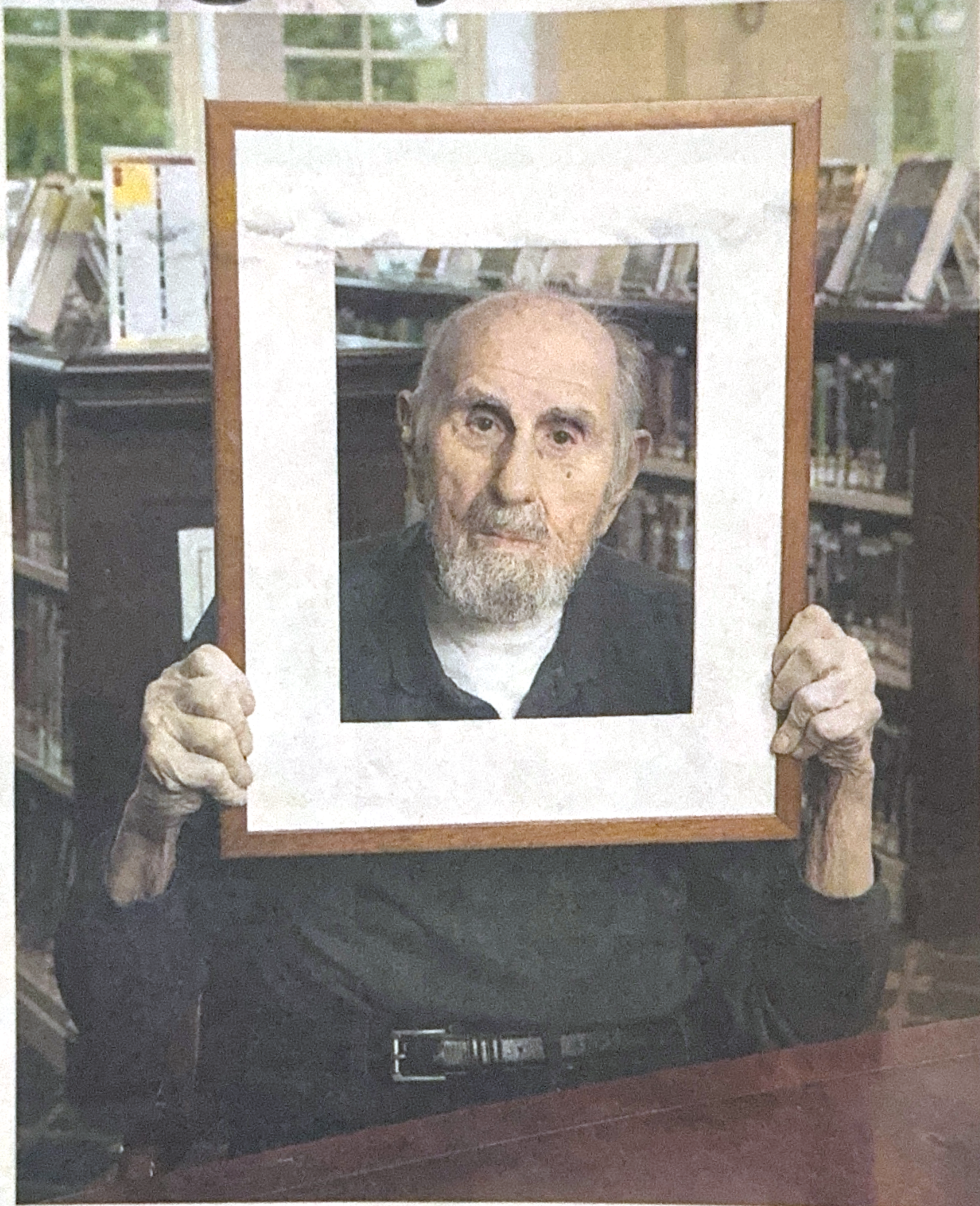
House sale led to exhibit

Legakis' artwork has proved to draw in not only loved ones, but strangers, too. When he enlisted a real estate broker to sell his home earlier this year, he expected to become a client, not an artist on exhibit. But when the broker stepped inside and toured the property, she was so impressed by the artwork on display and a subsequent viewing of Legakis' website that she told her friend, who is the library's director, about the artist, and plans for a special exhibit were set in motion.

Certain words come to mind when library visitors glance at the exhibit selections, located on the wall behind the DVDs and periodicals. It's hard to ignore Legakis' concerned look in a 1980s portrait, with his eyes shifted to his right. It's an expression his daughter recognizes.

"He's always concerned," said Robinson, 62, who lives in West Orange, N.J., and is also an artist. "He's very much into politics and world issues, those kind of things. He sees the state of affairs in the world and gets [troubled] at times about stuff. . . . He went through World War II and saw all that killing, and is lucky he came out of there."

And yet, a playful side comes across in Legakis' 1969 portrait, embellished with a



Louis Legakis, who started working at age 9, still has a playful side, as in an impromptu live self-portrait.

red felt-looking hat that resembles a cross between a hunting cap and something you might see on a matador. Legakis said he included the hat to add color, and according to Robinson, it's one of his favorites.

"It just shows him in a totally different perspective, kind of like a person who wears different hats," she said. "He has others with hats where he looks debonair, but this is kind of a work hat."

Legakis, a World War II veteran, has worn many hats

during a life filled with twists and turns. He was born in 1915, but his father died when he was 9, forcing him and younger brothers Andrew and Steve to quit school and look for odd jobs to help support their mother.

"On May 20, 1927, I was 11 and my brother Steve was 9 years old," Legakis recalled. "We lived in Manhasset and walked nine miles to Roosevelt Field to watch Charles Lindbergh take off for the cross-Atlantic flight [nonstop from New York to Paris]. My brother sold peanuts

for 5 cents a bag to the spectators. I walked up to the plane and Mr. Lindbergh told me to step away from the plane; I was too close."

The brothers also worked as golf caddies, and Legakis, who never made a living as an artist, found his career through the game. He ended up working as a greens superintendent at Timber Point Golf Course in Great River — where Steve was head golf pro — and at the now-defunct Woodcrest Club in Syosset. Andrew was a

greens superintendent at another Long Island course.

But Legakis, who started drawing when he was 12, spent much of his spare time exploring art, a quality not lost on his Searingtown neighbor in the mid-1930s, a landscape artist from Japan named Shogo Myaida.

"He started kind of apprenticing with him in a sense," Robinson said of her father's working with Myaida. Their collaboration culminated in the creation of the Japanese-style gardens at the Nippon Pavilion for the 1939 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, Queens.

"I enjoyed working on the waterfall and pool of the Japanese garden," Legakis said. "As I was working on the garden, Queen Elizabeth and King George [VI] drove by in an open car. I'll never forget that."

A survivor had hope

The 1950 self-portrait in the exhibit shows Legakis in a yellow oxford shirt looking hopeful. After what he survived — and the way he survived it — he had every right to feel that way.

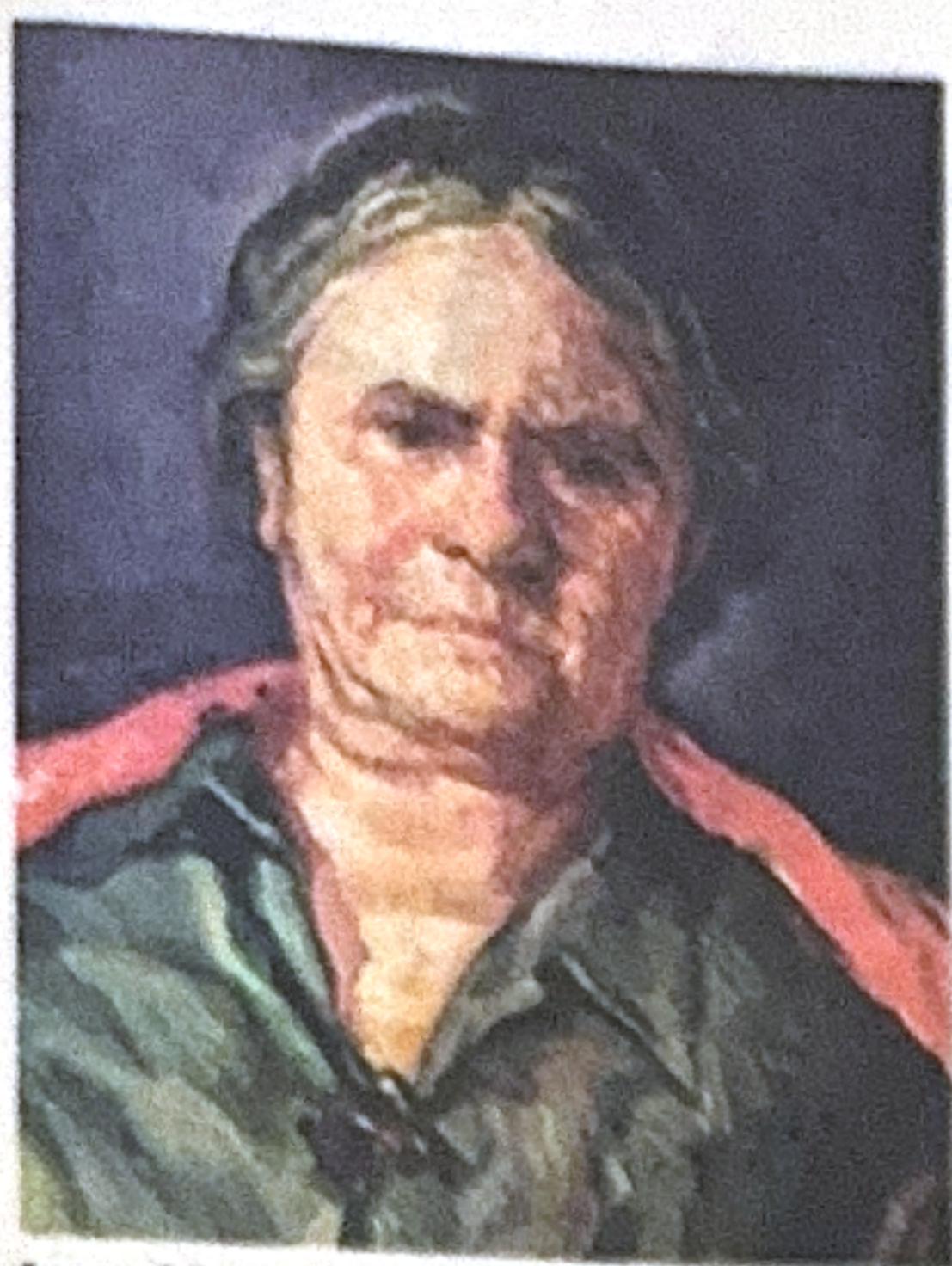
"He actually fought in the Battle of the Bulge, and some of the stories he told were hair-raising," recalled his nephew, Dennis Comis, 58, who grew up in Garden City Park and now lives in Houston.

The counteroffensive by the Germans against the Allied Forces in the Ardennes Forest — an attempt to turn the tide of the war after the successful D-Day invasion of Normandy, France — took place in December 1944. Comis recalls his uncle's story of how the weight of Legakis' 50-caliber machine gun caused him to fall through the ice of a frozen river he and his fellow soldiers were trying to navigate.

Legakis said he floated down the river and nearly died, but that not being at the site where he fell through kept him from being killed in a German attack like most of his buddies. About 500,000 Americans fought in the Battle of the Bulge — the largest land battle of the war that U.S. troops participated in — and the fighting left 75,000 of them dead.

Legakis built his Cold Spring Harbor home in 1962 with the

PHOTO BY STEVE FENN



Legakis' subjects include his mother, Helen, painted in 1962.

help of his wife Irene's relative, George Petrakis, who was a general contractor. Comis said he remembers how much fun he had at the home, with the exception of his uncle's displeasure when Comis would shoot at animals with his BB gun.

Legakis enjoyed a house of peace, except the times he made a mess with his artists' tools of the trade. Then, Comis said, an occasional "Honeymooners"-type discussion, similar to those had by Ralph and Alice Kramden on the 1950s TV comedy series, could take place between Legakis and his wife, who died in 2010 at the age of 94. They were married for almost 63 years.

"Any time a tree fell down and he saw it, he was interested in taking it and drying it out to make carvings," Robinson said of her father, who turns 98 in November. "Once my mother visited my aunt, and he rolled up the rug in the middle of the living room."

He proceeded to stick a large log he found in a snow tire in the space and, before long, wood was flying all over the place as he went at it with his carving tools.

"It's weird," Robinson said, "but artists do stuff like that."

Legakis always was finding something to work on, which is why Comis isn't sure every self-portrait dealt with one specific part of his uncle's life. His art, like his life, was just one progression after another.

"I was part of a lot of his paintings and saw him while he was doing them," Comis said. "The thing that always amazed me, he'd take out four or five paintings, touch them up, start a new one. It was always kind of an evolution . . . I always remember him modifying, trying to reach perfection."



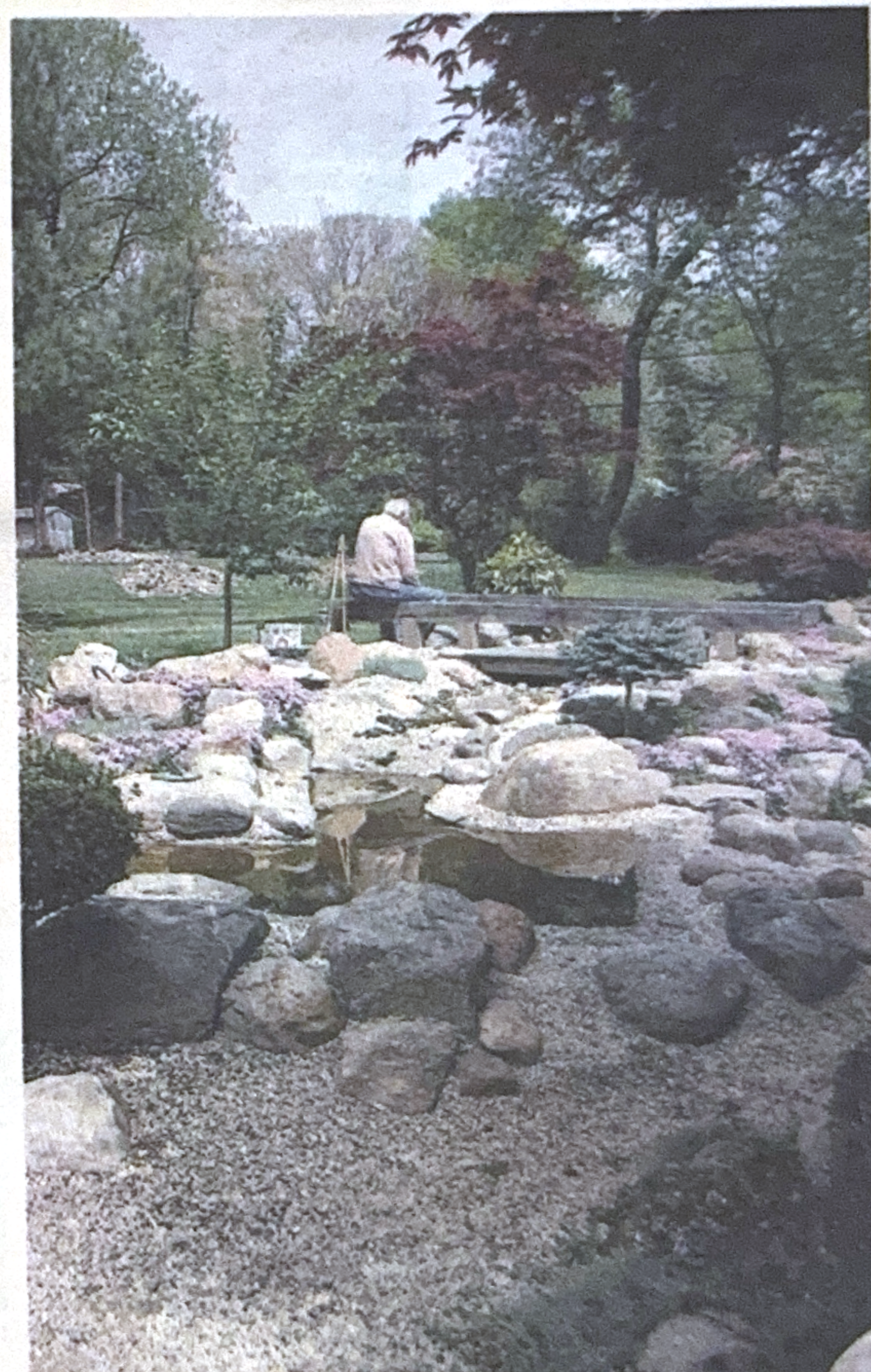
Legakis painted this seascape in 1985. His exhibit at the Cold Spring Harbor library came about after a broker he had hired toured his art-filled home and told her friend, the library director.



A winter landscape, oil on canvas panel, Legakis painted in 1999



"Fall Sand Dunes, Dix Hills," 1992, oil on wood panel



Master gardener Legakis sits in the garden he built at his Cold Spring Harbor home. He had an apprenticeship with Japanese landscape artist Shogo Myaida when they were neighbors in Searingtown in the 1930s. The two worked in the Japanese-style gardens for the 1939 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, Queens.