

Photographer has the art of healing

Monte Nagler's camera captures serene scenes of outdoors that make patients feel better inside



Photo COURTESY MONTE NAGLER FINE ART LLC **Beaumont Hospital-Wayne** purchased some of **Monte Nagler's** photos and put them on the ceiling so patients lying down for an MRI would have something to look at.



Monte Nagler:
Sees photography
as therapy.

Engineer and businessman-turned-fine-art photographer Monte Nagler spent 20 years in the automotive industry and later in the muffler business before finding his niche taking photographs of outdoor nature scenes that promote healing. In 1983, Nagler and his wife, Mickey, opened **Monte Nagler Fine Art LLC** in Farmington Hills. As Mickey Nagler says, "Our art gallery is our home."

Heavily influenced by the late Ansel Adams, whom he met and studied with in **Yosemite National Park**, Monte Nagler started out taking pictures of Michigan environs in black and white.

But it wasn't until he got an offer in the late 1990s to shoot pictures for a Troy medical center owned by Royal Oak-based **Beaumont Hospital** that

Nagler got into health care, where he said he fully developed his style of creating calming images intended to heal.

The architectural firm employed by Beaumont "thought the imagery I was shooting would be suitable for hospitals," he said. "It really started to excite me. I thought if seeing a nice, calming photograph in the health care environment could help relax people, get them through a procedure, MRI, CAT scan, radiation a little easier, that is a terrific feeling."

Over the past 20 years, health care organizations have begun to invest more into art, music, color and lighting within their four walls to create "healing environments" for patients. Studies have found that patients relax and recover more quickly during inpatient stays or during such diagnostic procedures as MRIs or breast biopsies.

From mufflers to photography

Nagler graduated from the **University of Michigan** with an engineering degree in 1962 and an MBA in 1963, then went to work for **Ford Motor Co.** By age 29, he had decided to go into business for himself and opened two **Midas** muffler businesses.

"The muffler business was exhausting. Not motivating. I never liked it," he said.

But Nagler already had become interested in photography. In 1979, he won a major photo contest that included a three-week trip to Spain. So at age 43, in 1983, Nagler sold his muffler business and opened his photography shop.

Over the next 32 years, Nagler, now 75, wrote a column on photography for the weekly *Observer & Eccentric* newspaper chain and had six books on photography published. He still teaches classes at **Schoolcraft College** in Livonia and gives seminars in the Upper Peninsula and at **Interlochen Center for the Arts** in northern Michigan.

During the 2008 recession, annual revenue at Nagler Fine Art dropped. It had been growing at 20 percent a year and peaked at \$360,000, said Mickey Nagler, adding that revenue could come back to that amount this year.

Besides his wife, Nagler employs a graphic designer and an office manager. The Naglers also count Simon, a bernese mountain dog, as the official company greeter.

An average piece of health care art, matted and framed, could run \$400 to \$600. Larger ones for hospitals, framed in glass, could run about \$1,200. Photographs also can be mounted on aluminum or acrylic backing, he said.

Nagler also sells photographs to **Art Van Furniture, Barnes & Noble**, other companies and dozens of hospitals in Michigan and around the world.

Technology changes

For years, Nagler used a Linhof Technika IV camera that uses 4-by-5-inch sheet film. He would set up the heavy camera on a tripod, get under a black cloth, put the 4-by-5 plate on and start shooting away. He still has hundreds of high-quality pictures from that camera.

"When we began our health care program, I had lots of color photographs," he said. "The 4-by-5 camera has such good quality, we can use it for very large pictures in hospitals."

Now, Nagler is all-digital and uses two cameras — a Canon 5D Mark 3 with 51-megapixel quality and a Canon 5D original version that has been converted into an infrared camera for special photos.

"We get calls to blow up pictures to 15 and 26 feet. The digital cameras give us high quality," he said.

Nagler has an 89-foot wall mural in the entrance of **Henry Ford Hospital** in Detroit, an 18-foot-tall canvas at **Beaumont Hospital-Troy** and recently installed 72 photographs in the surgery areas at **Beaumont Hospital-Wayne**, the former Oakwood Annapolis Hospital.

"When I am out photographing, I am always thinking health care," he said. "Would it relax a patient? A photographer needs to picture what motivates him or her."

Recently, Nagler sold about 35 pictures to **St. Joseph Mercy Oakland Hospital** in Pontiac for a new eight-story patient tower.



Photo by COURTESY OF MONTE FINE ART.
Monte Nagler's 18-foot canvas hangs at Beaumont Hospital-Troy.

St. Joseph healing arts

St. Joseph CEO Jack Weiner said the hospital's healing arts program is integrated into its overall effort to improve the quality and outcome of patient care.

Early last year, St. Joseph Mercy Oakland opened a \$135 million south patient tower with 136 staffed private rooms — and more than 200 pieces of art, all from Michigan-based artists including Nagler.

Weiner said the 301,000-square-foot wing was designed as a safe and calm "healing environment" for patients and families and to feature some of the most cutting-edge medical technologies possible.

"There is a tremendous amount of literature about impact of environment on the healing process," Weiner said. "The shapes, configuration of design, color, lighting, art, sound, all the visual acuties

go together to create an environment where people feel they can heal, both overtly and subconsciously."

For example, St. Joseph's seventh floor houses its joint and orthopedic services, featuring art that illustrates rejuvenation, movement, sports and the outdoors. On the other hand, the oncology floor portrays more reflective-type art, he said.

"The combination of arts, sounds and technology helps us drive performance," Weiner said, noting that patient falls at the hospital have been cut 60 percent and that patients recover from illness quicker.

"We get lots of comments: It doesn't feel like a hospital," he said. "They say it feels like a hotel. They tell us they feel good when they are here."

The veteran hospital administrator said hospitals need to focus on improving their look.

"Twenty years ago, we would buy a bunch of posters and say we were decorating the walls. It was better than a sterile wall, but people react to ... familiar things," Weiner said. "When they see a lighthouse in western Michigan, they say, 'I was there on vacation!' and that brings back positive memories."

'Serene concepts'

At Beaumont-Wayne, CEO Eric Widner said he became familiar with Nagler 10 years ago. Widner originally purchased ceiling photographs for the hospital that patients could look up at while lying down for an MRI.

"As we have upgraded and renovated, we use Monte's photographs in our departments," he said. "His work is exceptional, capturing serene concepts that resonate with patients and staff."



Photo by COURTESY OF BEAUMONT HOSPITAL-WAYNE

Beaumont Hospital-Wayne has purchased more than 200 photographs over the past six years, CEO Eric Widner said. Among them is this Monte Nagler panoramic view of Detroit. His works "resonate with patients and staff," Widner said.

Over the past six years, Widner said, the hospital has purchased more than 200 photographs for the emergency department and cardiac catheter lab, and a 6-by-16-foot photograph covers the entire wall of the west entrance of the outpatient lobby.

"We have a panoramic view of the Detroit River, from Windsor facing Detroit," Widner said. "He shot it in color, but we had it converted to black and white. It is very striking."

Nagler said some of his favorite themes cover waterfalls, forests, mountains and gardens.

Mickey Nagler said many studies and articles have been published about how the imagery in photographs or paintings can physiologically affect people.

"It becomes a positive distraction," she said. "You start focusing in on the art and are less focused on (the procedure). Your heart rate goes down, and less medications are necessary. Brain tests have shown you have less anxiety."

Weiner said that to relax, he often goes out into the St. Joseph Mercy lobby — where there is a waterfall, calming music and artwork.

Nagler said hospital administrators tell him patients leave sooner in a healthier state of mind and body. "Proper art, music, lighting," he said, "saves them money."

Jay Greene: (313) 446-0325. Twitter: [@jaybgreene](https://twitter.com/jaybgreene)