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The Four Frolicsome Frogs of Willimantic’s Frog Bridge

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As any first-time visitor to Willimantic can attest, the city has become known for its landmark Frog Bridge. While city officials christened it “The Thread City Crossing Bridge,” Google and Wikipedia and the rest of the world know it as “The Frog Bridge.” And the rest of the world certainly has taken notice.

The historical significance of its folkloric frogs is another story altogether, and anyway that folk tale has largely been overshadowed by the entranceway bridge.

Not that there is anything remarkable about the bridge itself. Rather, the bridge has achieved fame for its four Disneyesque bronze statuary of eight-foot-high frogs that perch atop columns shaped into spools of threads. In the mere 24 years since their installation, those four frogs have been canonized into icons representing the very identity of romantic Willimantic.

Yet the origin and evolution of those four larger-than-life-size monumental sculptures seem forgotten even by Willi’s own residents. They were designed by the Connecticut pop artist Leo Jensen, and they auspiciously serve as the centerpiece for a retrospective exhibition of his artwork on view at The Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut. The show, “Fun & Games? Leo Jensen’s Pop Art,” dedicates the entire central wall of its third gallery to the documentation of the legendary frogs of The Frog Bridge.

From preliminary ink drawings to wooden maquette to bronze model to their fabrication in a foundry in Bridgeport to their final installation on the cement spool-like pedestals, their creation spanned from 1995 to 2000. The artist likened the frogs’ slouching postures to “beanbags the size of Volkswagen Beetles.” The final model Beetle left its assembly line in 2019, but the Frog Bridge four frogs live on. In case you’ve been wondering, yes, each frog has a name. Willy (for *Willimantic*), Manny (again, for *Willimantic*), Windy (for *Windham*), and Swifty (for *Swift Waters*, the English translation of the Algonquin word “Willimantic,” which means “Land of the Swift Waters”). Dunno who’s who. We should ask the artist, but unfortunately he died five years ago, so is no longer granting interviews.

Also unfortunately, by the time you read this article the show will have closed. Darn!. But wait! All is not lost! The museum has spared us not only the trip to the Connecticut shoreline, but also the price of admission. It

has preserved the exhibition as a freebie virtual tour.

Go to:

<https://FlorenceGriswoldMuseum.Org/leo-jensen>

Then scroll down to the bottom of the webpage just past the sponsors’ logos to “Take a Virtual Tour of the Exhibition.”

Or go directly to:

<https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=iqWHuk9ag8m>

If you’re reading the dead-tree edition of *Neighbors* and you dread typing in those obscure characters and symbols, plugging into your search engine “Leo Jensen’s

Pop Art” will get you there, too. Or if you’ve wended your way onto the museum’s homepage, you will find the *Leo Jensen Virtual Tour* listed under Exhibitions Virtual Tours Leo Jensen.

Once inside the museum’s third gallery, in addition to zooming in on the amphibious artworks, you can magnify eight of the wall labels to render them legible enough to read. Good luck, and have fun! Indeed, the title of the

exhibition is, “Fun & Games!”

If touring the online exhibit from the comfort of your home, you might want to add to your fun by playing some ambient jazz music, namely “Get Your Kicks on Route 66.” When Nat King Cole in 1946 first recorded his signature song, he was singing about the legendary US Route 66 that stretches from Chicago to Los Angeles. By ironic coincidence, after crossing the Frog Bridge from Route 32 and onto Main Street, you’ve arrived on Connecticut’s own Route 66. Swimmers who engage in the breast stroke perform what’s called the “frog kick,” so adventurers on the Willimantic River who swim under the Frog Bridge all get their kicks along Route 66.

