

Artist finds 'Symphony' in field unforgettable

Story: CORINNE ABATT
Photos: DICK KELLEY

It's the biggest and most ambitious commission in his 13 years as a full-time studio artist. And the particular pleasure of this one, aside from the challenges, is that he will be able to visit it any time he wishes. The 12-foot by 30 inch oil is now hanging in the main lobby of the Engineering Society of Detroit in the Rackham Building.

Nordlund did the bulk of his work on the painting on Masonite, in a field at the corner of Livernois and Auburn in Avon Township. It took at least two people and a van to move the work almost daily, when it wasn't raining, out to the field. Once in place on a table and a saw horse, Nordlund would spend eight or nine hours with the crickets, the

birds and a steady stream of field superintendents to keep him company.

"I LIKE to paint on location," he said. "Three years ago I came out here to paint that big beautiful tree (the second largest Oak in Michigan) and when I stepped into the field, I didn't know what to do first."

He painted the great oak with its thick, knarled branches, returned to do several more paintings, but in the back of his mind was the urge to do something more in that rolling field of Michigan wildflowers.

The idea of the 12-foot painting for the lobby began to develop when Al Blair of Harley Ellington, Pierce and Yee, the architect for redesigning the building after a fire, wanted one of Nordlund's smaller paintings for the new lobby.

Nordlund eventually convinced him and Douglas Mathieson, executive director of the Engineering Society, that something larger, designed especially for the lobby, would be appropriate.

The commission began with a search for Masonite 12 feet long, not easy to find, said the artist.

critical in any painting," said Nordlund. "The wind was really blowing and the Masonite was like a great big sail. I started with a lot of thin washes, and being 12 feet long created a lot of problems. How do you get one load of paint on your brush and make it go 12 feet?"

He stood in the field where he had spent the bulk of the summer, looked at the completed painting and said smiling, "It was a challenge and a lot of fun."

Nordlund is convinced the painting wouldn't have pleased him half as much if he had resigned himself to doing it in his studio.

"Boy, when you're out searching with your eyes, it's like a symphony. All the colors come to life, I would keep seeing new things all the time just looking at the simplicity of it and the miles and miles of land," he said.



Howard Nordlund can joke now that his 12-foot-long painting, is completed. There were moments during his work outdoors when things weren't always so much fun. A steady audience of telephone linemen working on the poles along the road gave him encouragement.

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