CONVERSATIONS

Robert Wilbert reflects on life of an artist

obert Wilbert agrees to take a few minutes to talk about his lecture on Tuesday at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center. He neatly folds his long, slender hands, sits back and for a moment looks like a white-laired Anthony Perkins, except Wilbert appears much more reasonable and calm.

Nearly two hours later, he's still pondering exactly what he'll cover at the lecture.

But in between handshakes, Wilbert has managed enough aphorisms to fill a book about the ironies of life that an artist must face. "All the choices you make are reflections of who you are."

A painting, he explained, can hide neither the depth nor superficiality of its author.

An observation that Wilbert finds bitterly accurate and starkly honest. "You can be too proud of anything you do," he said. Art is so much about mystery."

How do you cover topics that float like osmosis in a two-hour lecture? Fold your hands. And listen.

An easy chair

An easy chair

"I'm really an old-fashioned artist," said Wilbert, who retired from Wayne State University after 38 years of teaching painting.

He recites Matisse's oft-quoted remark: "Good art is an easy chair." That seems to settle comfortably with an artist who claims to have painted sunrises for the second artist of t

led4-0986 who continued to pursue representational painting while many of his colleagues explored abstractionism and minimalism, art – like life – should have a simplicity.

In his work, there are no excuses. And no references to complex psychology interpretations or social issues. Just a relentlessly realistic and detailed rendering of the world.

There's something to be said about clarity.

Portrait of an artist

Growing up in Chicago and going to the nearby art museum with an

the nearby art museum with an extensive Impressionism collection, Wilbert said for a while he didn't realize that there were other styles. He came to Wayne State in the mid 1950s from the University of Illinois. And for more than 30 years he taught, and his work was exhibited at the prestigious Donald Morris Gallery.

the prestigious Bonaia morris
Gailery.
Today, the Susanne Hilberry
Gallery in Birmingham represents
Wilbert.
"I don't strain over my work as
much as I used to," he said. "It comes
a little easier."
In the spring, Wilbert expects to put
tagether a retrospective that features
his still life and some of his portraits.
But he's reluctant to call himself a
portrait artis.

portrait artist.
In June, Wilbert's commissioned portrait of former Michigan Governor James Blanchard was unveiled at the

James Blanchard was unveiled at the State Capitol.
Although he enjoyed the 30-plus seasions with Blanchard, he said it's the last commission he'll accept. I'm too lazy for that kind of work, he rationalized.
Instead, willbert plans to spend more time in his downtown Detroit studie, located in the shadows of the impleded Hudson's building.
In his studie, he explained, he can rourrange whatever he's painting, including models. And practice the

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Detroit Opera House hosts revamped holiday tradition

BY FRANK PROVENZANO . STAFF WRITER

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choreographer Donald Byrd
found a way to merge an
honored ballet tradition with
modern-day African-American
sensibilities. Byrd's utterly
entrancing "The Harlem Nutcracker" proves that respecting a
106-year ballet tradition isn't
just a recitation of the tried-ant
true, but a vital source of inspirration to create new works.

"The Harlem Nuteracker,"
which opens Friday at the
Detroit Opera House, refreshingly transforms the grand magical
music of Tahakowsky's "Nutcracker Suite," and the elegant
choreograph's "National Suite," and the elegant
choreograph's "Nuteracker Suite," and the elegant
choreograph's the Nuteron
Instead of The Nuteror
with classical ballet set to finatasy-inducing music, Byrd this
migrated African Auterien
very suite of the Suite of the
Ellington's quantific, Byrd
E

"The major difference (from the original) is that we're deal-ing with a different culture," said Eleanor McCoy, who por-trays Clara, a grandmother who reminisces about her family, and senses the presence of her recently deceased husband, who appears as the Nutcracker Prince.

ney-like "Prince Charming plot.

In contrast to the "happy ever after" ending, "The Harlem Nuteracker" is more soulful with an unmistakable history lesson, said McCoy, The second scene of Act Two, for instance, features a time-travel sequence from the 1930s to the Civil Rights Marches of the 1950s and 1960s to the desolution caused by the deterioration of some of today's African-American communities.

At the end of the scene.

Theatre of Harlem formed in the late 1960s, is also a former dance coach to Michael Jackson. "Our version is more of a love story," she said. "H's struck a universal chord because the story is about a grandmother, her eternal love for her husband and their family, You hardly ever see senior citizens in a love story."

In the original ballet, the young girl, Marie, and her fantasy love with a Nut-cracker turned prince combines a Lewis Carroll-like surrealism (candies come-to-life) with a mawkish Disney-like "Prince Charming" nlot.

At the end of the scene, Clara faints, exhausted and discouraged by the prospects for change. But hope is not lost. Not as long as there is love.

lost. Not as long as there is love.
It's hardly a coincidence that in the end, the lessons of both Nuteracker stories are identical: Love is as timeless as a melody and a dance that stays in your heart long after you've left the theater. And that sounds like an ideal theme; just in time for the holidays.

Timeless affection: "The Harlem Nutcracker" is based on the love story of two grand-parents. The modified classic also features a lesson on recent African-American

Is collaboration the future of arts groups?

BY FRANK PROVENZANO STACE WRITER

When Ken Fischer of University Musical Society first brought up the idea of collaborating with the Arts League of Michigan and the Detroit Opera House, the timing wasn't particularly good.

Times change. And so has the timing.

Three years ago. The Arts League wasn't in a position to allocate funds or resources to the project, nor could the Detroit Opera House, which was in the midst of luring Pavorotti to the grand opening of its world-class venue.

That didn't stop Fischer. As president of the UMS of Ann Arbor, Fischer knew that commissioning Donald Byrd's "The Harlem Nuteracker" couldn't be passed up.

up.
So, in 1995, UMS pushed ahead and joined five other communities around the country in contributing a \$500,000 commission for Byrd's interpretation of the Nutcracker classic.

For the last two years, the ballet has been performed at the Power Center in Ann Arbor.

Please see COLLABORATION, C2

me The Martem Nuteracker' – presented by the University Musical Society, Detroit Opera House and The Arts League of Michigan, Friday-Sunday, Nov. 27 to Dec. 6, Performances B p.m., Wednesday, Sunyala, matthews 12 to Prince. McCoy, who was one of the original ballerinas at the Dance

AN THE DESIGNATION OF MAIN

On the prowl: The Egyptian's so admired the cat, they creat-ed the War Goddess Sekhmet (1554 - 1305)

B.C.) with the

Struttin': This dragon with a cat-like body, 604-562 B.C., was sacred to Marduk, a Mesopotamian god.

Running free:

Museum makes animal art fun for kids

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN . STAFF WRITER

head of a lion.

head of a lion.

sacred to Marduk, a Mesopot

ions and leopards and bulls, oh myl No, this inn't a tour
of the Detroit Zoo. Although that's a great place to take
the kids during the holidays too.
The large cats, horned animals, monkeys, birds, and
water creatures in the Beastly Delights for Children'
exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Aris introduces
children to the animals in the art of ancient Mediterranean and Near Easterre cultures. Condensed in one
gallery, the bulls from Turkey, Rome and Egypt,
allow parents to keep an eye on wandering
kids while teaching them about history.
Similar types of creatures are displayed
tagether in categories such as Fantastic
Animals. Fiji labels placed on a stand
alongside the exhibit cases are designed
to create an interactive experience
between child and adult. Learn
about the more than 35 objects
from the permanent collection of ceramics,
toxiles, levelly, armor, coins, and sculpture,
and how they were used in daily life. The innovative labeling system provides family entertainment and an
educational experience at the same time.

"We wanted to do an exhibit for children, something the

Running free: The Etruscan's cast this bronze figurine of a leop-ard in the Fifth Century B.C.

oid, Designed by Hemmila, Slough, and the education depart-ment's Jennifer Czajkowki and Gina Granger with assis-

DIA had never done before," said Beth Hemmila, curator of the exhibit with Penelope Slough, associate curator of the ancient and Islamic art department. "We wanted people to see that different cultures use the same animals in different cultures use the same animals in different cultures use the same animals in different ways — lions for earrings or for the head of the Egyptian's Goddess Sekhmet. The animals were all revered, but in different ways, and were used for funcary or religious purposes, decoration, and functional objects. Cats – they'r incredible hunters. They were threats to herds but people were both afraid of, and anestruck by them. The animals were more important to ancient peoples than today. Back then, you farmed, you herded and hunted. There were work animals, beasts of burden." The original Tigger
The oldest object, a conical-shaped bowl encircled by spotted leopards that look like they're bouncing on their tails, is close to 5,000 years old.

What: An exhibit exploring the use of animal representations in art in Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures from 3,500 B.C. to 800 A.D. to cultures from 3,500 B.C. to 800 A.D. Woodward Aw. For information, call (313) 833-7900.
When: Through Bundoy, Jan. 31. Hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesdays Fridoys. until 5 p.m. Saturday-Sundidoys. Sundidoys. Jan. 31. Hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Vednesdays Fridoys. until 5 p.m. Saturday-Sundidoys. Sundidoys. Sundidoy

Society members free.

Related activities: All are free with museum Related activities: All are free with museum Related activities: All are free with museum Related activities: All are free with related to a p.m. Solitor Solitor. We fail and the Studio. We fail and the Studio. We fail and the Studio.

© Callery Tours fed by Beth Hemmila of the Ancient and Islamic Art department noon Tuesday Dec. 20 and Thursday, Dec. 31 and 19 2 p.m. Safurday. Dec. 20 and 19 2 p.m. Safurda

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