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Primitive artist recalls 'happy times'

By CAROL HASKIN

With sweeping social statements and intimate emotional explorations filling many galleries, it is sometimes a pleasant change to look on the crayola-bright, uncomplicatedly happy world of primitive—or naïve—art.

Bloomfield Hills artist Muriel Clayton has been populating canvases for the last three years with minuscule people, animals and trees who live in a quaint but well-ordered world of neat buildings and straight roads.

"I like to do work around the turn of the century," Mrs. Clayton said. "Those were the happy times."

Mrs. Clayton, a former advertising executive, began her art career in 1972 when she and her husband, J. Walter Thompson Vice President Wallace Clayton, were living in New York.

AN ART NOVICE, she went to the YMCA to learn how to sketch, but found charcoal to be a dull medium. Pastels didn't give her the results she wanted, either.

She took her work to some of the best eastern art schools and workshops for critiques that hopefully would lead to her admission and finally found the Greenwich Art Barn.

"I talked with several people, but I didn't know what sort of art I wanted to go into. I didn't want portraits or landscapes. They had me paint something in acrylics. I thought it was realistic but the instructor said, 'My God, you're a natural born primitive. It's the dream of every art instructor to find someone like you.'"

Mrs. Clayton's work now hangs in several New York galleries and in Arwin Gallery in Detroit. Last month she had a one-woman show at J. Walter Thompson headquarters in Dearborn.

SHE ALSO does a considerable amount of commission work specializing in private homes and weddings.

In the wedding paintings, she includes the church with the host of the wedding on the steeple clock and the wedding party with tiny bridesmaids dressed like the real ones.

"One group of bridesmaids were dotted swiss," she recalled. "Imagine doing that when the figures are no higher than three-fourths of an inch."

The number and size of the figures in each painting, and the amount of detail involved, presents some logistical problems for the artist.

MRS. CLAYTON works with her canvas flat on a baker's table so it can be rotated. She uses size 000000 watercolor brushes for the tiny details and keeps the paints on a saucer instead of a palette.

She puts water in the depression that usually holds the cup and can place the saucer on the canvas within easy reach.

With so much going on in one painting, it's easy to lose track of some of the characters.

"The heads go in last and sometimes I forget them. Once it was embarrassing. At one exhibit I was showing a beach scene that had a kid on a bicycle. A woman came up to me and said, 'There's no top to the kid!' When there are over 100 bodies on the canvas, it's easy to overlook one."

A close look can uncover several whimsical peculiarities.

"MY SECOND painting was a barnyard scene. I went back later and saw I had four legs on each chicken. That was really primitive."

Some of the whimsy is intentional. In a painting of a turn-of-the-century summer home, there is one set of third-floor drapes that are mysteriously closed.

"Everybody's out having fun," she explained. "But there is some hanky-panky going on up there."

Mrs. Clayton's works are denoted by two signatures—the printed one in the lower right hand corner of the canvas, and a figurative one, a dog and a little boy holding three balloons, in the lower left.

The most difficult part of every work, Mrs. Clayton said, is finishing it.

"I have to ask myself if it's finished. Is there anything else I can put in? I sit for 20 minutes trying to think of what I can put in a hole."

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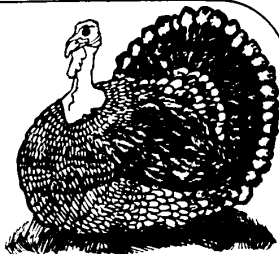
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