

# Soaring imagery

## 'Birdman's' artistic flights captured on porcelain



Bill Thompson

*"I'm the type, if I wanted a new house, I would build it myself. I think that's why I try so many things — just for the satisfaction of seeing if I can do it."*

— Bill Thompson  
painter-author

By Arlene Funke  
special writer

**B**ILL THOMPSON'S admirers call him the "birdman." Thompson, editor of a Livonia-based magazine for hobbyists, paints bright, lifelike birds on porcelain tile. He also writes books, gives demonstrations and teaches people his love for painting on porcelain.

Although Thompson is multitalented, his favorite artistic endeavor is painting birds and flowers on porcelain.

"I got started because I was a bird-watcher," said Thompson, 62, of Livonia. "They (birds) always seem so free, and they are beautiful and interesting."

The fascination with birds began more than 40 years ago. Bird watching wasn't enough. At one time, years ago, he kept up to 40 imported and domestic birds as house pets.

"ANYTHING I DO, it's wholehearted," Thompson said.

He began researching birds, gaining knowledge about their habits. He would first sketch the bird on paper, then paint its likeness on the porcelain. So far, he has written an estimated 400 magazine articles and five books dealing with china-painting, ceramics and birds.

Thompson recently completed a project of painting 50 tiles, measuring 11 inches by 14 inches. Each has a painting of a particular state's official bird and flower.

"I started years and years ago oil painting," Thompson said. "I switched to this because I could get better effect. I strive for realism."

According to Thompson, the porcelain is fired between three to eight times, between coats of paint, to bring out the clarity and color.

Like many artists, Thompson's hobby of ceramics worked into a full-time job. While teaching ceramics

classes part time many years ago, Thompson was hired as editor of "Ceramic Arts and Crafts" and "Ceramic Projects," magazines for hobbyists.

According to Thompson, the former owners of the publications enrolled in his class, took a liking to him and hired him to edit the magazines. At the time, Thompson was working as an estimate assigner for Michigan Bell Telephone Co.

**THOMPSON HAS BEEN** with the publishing firm, Scott Publications of Livonia, for the past 19 years. The company also publishes his books.

It seems Thompson isn't content unless he has an outlet for his creative energy. He has taught ceramics and leatherwork. He enjoys oil painting. He has crocheted afghans. He used to build furniture.

Thompson also makes stained-glass boxes, fixtures and lamps. He gives

away most of his creations.

In addition, Thompson has judged art shows, demonstrated his china-painting at fairs and taught many classes.

"A few years ago, after an illness, I learned how to do needlepoint," Thompson said. "I wasn't allowed to go down into my shop, and I had to have something to do."

**"I'M THE TYPE,** if I wanted a new house, I would build it myself," he continued. "I think that's why I try so many things — just for the satisfaction of seeing if I can do it."

Although Thompson has taught many classes, among his most loyal students are a handful of women whom Thompson has been teaching for around 17 years.

All have, at one time or another, been associated with Scott Publications. The classes, which focus on china-painting, are held weekly at the Scott offices on Eight Mile Road. A reporter was invited to attend a session.

"He is so unselfish with himself," said Cora Lee Millenbach of Detroit, a retired bookkeeper of the firm. "He's the birdman. Everyone in the art world loves him."

"Paint," ordered Thompson, with an embarrassed laugh. Millenbach, carefully dabbing paint on a porcelain Christmas ornament she was making, ignored the order.

**"HE ALWAYS MAKES** you feel you can do it," she said. "He makes you feel it (the work) isn't all that bad."

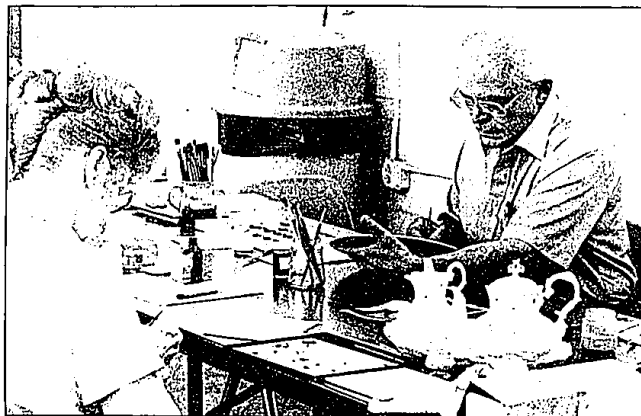
Christine Crowner of Saline, another longtime student, looked up from a china teapot she was painting and asked: "Bill, would you put any background in that?"

"It's a bit insipid," Thompson agreed. He suggested she put a bit more green on her painted flowers.

"He is kind and generous about passing along his talent to other people," Crowner said. "He is nicer than his painting, and that is saying a lot, because his work is so great."

Desire is the most important factor in pursuing a hobby of interest, according to Thompson.

"The rest is practice," he said. "I'm of the opinion that almost anybody can do anything they want if they try hard enough. I'm very interested and I want other people to enjoy it as much."



RICK SMITH/photographer

Bill Thompson works on his painting in a class he teaches. A student, Josephine Miller of Livonia, is shown at left.



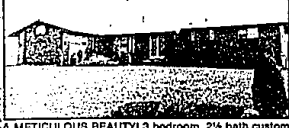
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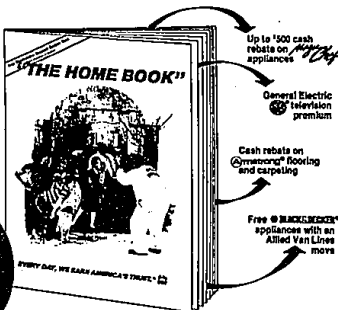


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