

Creative Living

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Fred and Dody Simper pause for a moment in his studio in their new home north of Leland.

Three-acre work of art takes shape

By Corinne Abelt
staff writer

IT TOOK FRED AND Dody Simper 37 years to complete their six-acre painting in West Bloomfield. Now, they're doing a second major work — a three-acre painting on high ground with Lake Michigan on the west and Lake Leelanau on the east.

That's the way this husband and wife team of artists think — the world's their easel and all activities are creative. After seriously considering retiring to a site on the Pacific Ocean near Carmel, Calif., they chose instead this corner of Michigan, a mile north of Leland on the Leelanau Peninsula.

Dody designed their "painting" is a home built last spring under careful supervision.

The couple had been collecting antiques, especially architectural pieces, for more than 25 years. They moved several garages full of the stuff up north and Dody incorporated much of it into her basic plan — turn of the century (and before) newel posts, balusters, church doors, roof supports or corbels, sinks, stoves and lots of furniture.

A sizable collection of furniture and treasures from their long-time

summer home on Bois Blanc Island was merged with that from their southern home.

"Most people go to smaller houses — when we retired we went to bigger," said Dody. "It works for our kind of life."

THEIR KIND OF LIFE includes studios for each with a floor between. "Fred likes to be high and look out," she said. "What we love are rolling hills and water — Lake Michigan and Lake Leelanau. I like to be secluded, I need absolute silence. We like to see each other's work, but we don't like to hear each other's brush strokes."

So his studio, where he turns out beautiful nature oriented watercolors, is on the second floor, facing west. It has white walls and dark woodwork (his preference), door walls leading to a deck with a magnificent view of woods and water.

"I look out the window a lot," he said with a smile, "the pattern of aspens is like looking at a painting."

Her studio is snuggled into the lower level. It faces east and around dawn or dusk, she may see deer grazing from her ground level windows. Her work table is an old, doubled over, wood-burning stove. It is beautifully restored with lots of interesting storage areas.



The Simpers have been collecting for years for their new house — fireplace, church doors, posts and balusters and furniture. It is all used in their new house. A painting by Dody Simper over the fireplace is flanked by two by her husbands. At left is their view of Lake Michigan from their private dock in the woods.

The house, which Dody describes as "beauty on a budget," is basically a three-story square, built into the side of a hill, with a board and batten exterior and front and rear decks on two levels, with magnificent views of the lakes and countryside.

There are gas burning fireplaces in the living room and master bedroom directly above and a free standing one in the library. The mantels are supported by carved-wood, antique corbels. Beautifully-carved, antique church doors form two walls of the library. Behind the free-standing stove is a floor-to-ceiling mural of woods and blue sky, which Fred painted.

THE BALUSTERS and elaborate posts of the center stairway were stored in West Bloomfield before being called into action. While she designed all the architectural elements into her plan, the actual fitting was done by their two young builders from Suttons Bay, Jeff Haenlein and Eric Miller. They said it was a work of art in itself.

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Fred Simper

The church doors had to be cut to fit (they had square nails), and some new balusters had to be cut and turned to match the old ones. They found a local resident who wanted to help with that.

Dodie wanted the deck off the living room to have a swooping curve on the outer edge. Haenlein and Miller weren't sure it could be done and then did it.

"They said it looked like a grand piano," Dody said. "In buying all this crap there was never a decision," Dody said while standing in the living room. "We both always went for the same thing. And there was no problem in doing this house, we always agreed."

The home with the white walls, dark woodwork, and beautifully-arranged artifacts and antiques has become a great setting for their art. Each has an outstanding work in the dining room. An arrangement of their paintings is on the fireplace wall of the living room. While they work in completely different styles, approaches and media, all go well together, because of the eclectic nature of the house.

"The DNR (Department of Natural Resources) told us where to put the house," said Fred, "they don't want people building on erosion-risk property."

Consequently, their house is well back from the end of the cliff overlooking Lake Michigan. But, to save fully the site, they built a separate square deck about 50 yards through the woods that can easily accommodate a half dozen chairs and a table. Here they can sit with a beautiful view of the lake through the bushes and trees.

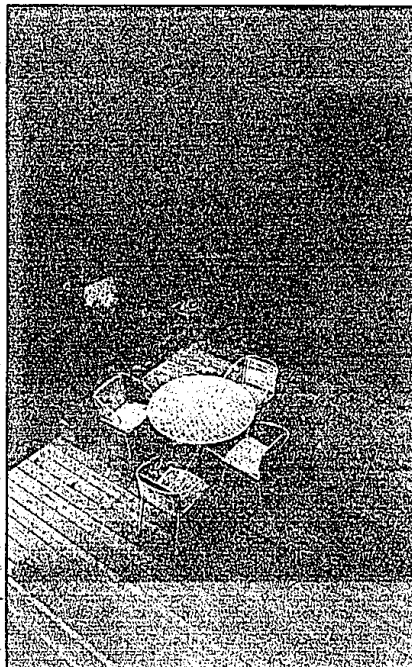
FROM THE CLIFF, 135 feet above the narrow beach, the Manitou Islands can be seen straight ahead. To the east are the Fox Islands, to the west is Whaleback Point, and beyond is the Manitou Passage. The colors in the water change almost hourly, from as apple green as the Caribbean and as azure as the Mediterranean to shades of slate gray and off white.

"We both love gray weather, you can see color better," Dody said. "Sun is overrated."

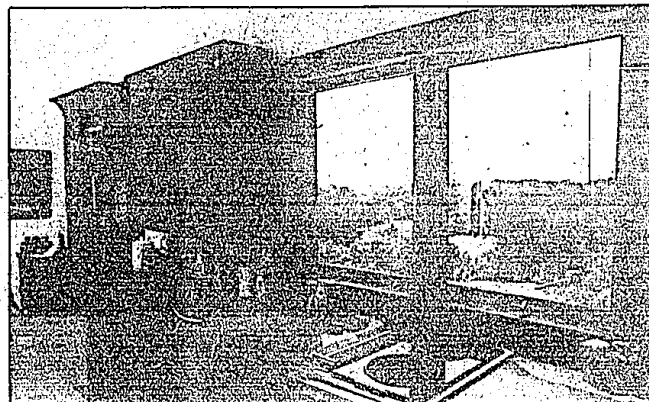
As they sat together on the hidden dock with a magnificent view and a breeze rustling the leaves of the island of quaking aspen behind them, Dody said, "We think Michigan's the most beautiful place in the world. I love it better than any place I've ever been."

"We love winter," Fred said. "So many people don't like Michigan winter, but the rolling hills with snow are made to order."

But then, so was the house — and so is the setting and the lifestyle which they nourish with loving care.



View from the dock off the master bedroom to the dock off the living room below gives an idea of the feeling of space that is so much a part of this lifestyle.



While the kitchen is modern in function, it has a timeless look. At the end of the row of cabinets is an antique Hoosier cabinet that's been in Simper kitchens for years and years.