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Middleton's art still captivates

Wildlife artist shares her vision of the world

by Arnold Wengrow, Citizen-Times Correspondent

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ASHEVILLE — Sallie Ellington Middleton, the noted wildlife artist, depicts feathers, fur, flowers and foliage with scientific precision. But if Middleton's work is realistic, it is magical realism.

As a child, Middleton took nature walks in Chunn's Cove with her father, a lawyer and businessman, who told her to look for the Red Leaf Fairy. Wherever she looked, the fairy had just flown away.

Her storyteller father inspired Middleton to see the world closely with both eyes and imagination. In her detailed adult observations of nature, the artist is still looking for the Red Leaf Fairy.

"My reason for painting," Middleton said recently at the Chunn's Cove home where she spent her early childhood, "was to show people what the world looks like, how minute it is and what they were missing because they weren't looking."

Middleton used the past tense as she talked; at age 79 she hasn't painted in 12 years. "My hands are crude," she said, "and my eyes are fuzzy."

But there is nothing fuzzy about Middleton's vision of her art. She painted what she wanted, how she wanted, ignoring artistic fashions.

Some said her work was overly literal. Why she didn't use a more Impressionistic style? "I can do impressions," she said, "but I don't want to do impressions."

For paintings that took weeks or months to complete, why did she use watercolor, a medium for rapid brushwork that allows no corrections?

"I've been told that watercolor can't be used the way I use it," she said, "but nobody mentioned it soon enough."

An enchanted cottage

Middleton's house was designed by her uncle, Douglas D. Ellington, the architect of City Hall, First Baptist Church and other local landmarks. Built with stone and timber salvaged from other projects, it's an enchanted cottage and a fairy-tale castle.

Middleton returned here in 1968 at age 40 with her youngest daughter, age 2, when she and her husband, Abbott Middleton of Charleston, "parted company," as she put it.

And then "every kind of magic began to happen," Middleton said.

As a child, Middleton learned to paint from her uncle, a skilled watercolorist. In Charleston, she painted wildlife scenes for enjoyment. Could painting support herself and her daughter?

Middleton tells the story in a Charleston accent as velvety and sweetly tart as a lemon custard pie. She got her answer, she said, one summer afternoon when a storm was brewing. She was worried about how to manage.

"I said, 'God, you either get me out of this mess or let the lightning come through and strike me dead!'

“Boom! That grill was struck, I saw it. The lightning shot right across me, hit that radiator, jumped to the iron risers there on the stairs. Blip, blip, blip, I watched it going up the stairs and it blew out the light over my bed.”

The message, she said, was “continue to paint.”

Middleton’s oldest daughter, Sallie Middleton Parker, remembers her mother didn’t just wait for lightning to strike. Visiting from college in Boston, Parker brought home a copy of American Artist magazine, which features realist work.

“To my surprise,” Parker said, her mother “looked so grateful and amazed. She took that magazine like it was a lifeline. The next thing I knew, she had sent them photographs and they published an article on her.”

Collectible prints

Painting as slowly as she did, Middleton knew she would have to sell prints of her work. “Never in this world could I have lived off originals,” she said.

A gallery in Lexington, Ky., began issuing signed prints in editions of 2,500. They were a hit with collectors, according to Butch Ochsenreiter, owner of Village Galleries in Biltmore Village, which sold her work. He’d have waiting lists for the next Sallie Middleton print.

They had “a sense of wonder and fantasy,” he said, “that was not part of other wildlife pictures.”

For Betty Gilman of Asheville, who collected 118 Middleton prints, “the detail and authenticity” of the artist’s work was astonishing. One picture of wood ducks, Gillman recalled, had “thousands and thousands and thousands of duckweed, which are about big as the head of a straight pin.”

The last mile

Middleton’s final prints were a series of 12 called “The Months,” issued three or four at a time over a year. Did she know these would be the last?

“I don’t guess I said it but I did know it,” she said, showing a visitor the small original paintings. “I wasn’t sure I’d make it through, but you see how utterly simple they are. When you’ve walked the last mile, you’ll know it before you start.”

Arnold Wengrow is an Asheville arts writer and a contributing editor of Theatre Design and Technology magazine.

Where to find Sallie Middleton prints

Although Sallie Middleton is no longer creating new works, collectors buy and sell her prints in what is known as the “secondary market” through galleries, auction houses and on the Internet. Prices vary considerably. Some local galleries and the gift shop at the N.C. Arboretum have selections available.

A new company in High Point, Sallie Middleton Art, recently acquired a large stock of prints, some never released to the public, and is offering previously unseen prints and well-known editions. The next newly released print, “Water Lily,” will be introduced Saturday at a reception for the artist at Mansfield Plantation, Georgetown, S.C.

On the Net: www.salliemiddletonart.net, www.salliemiddleton.com