

The colors of nature

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Artist Sallie Ellington Middleton doesn't like talking to reporters. A Middleton aide, Rey Waters, said the artist usually is short and to the point during interviews, rarely indulging in chit-chat.

But Saturday morning at Camden & Moss Gallery, Middleton was a lively spark with just the slightest touch of the curmudgeon.

"Don't make me look tacky," Middleton, 79, warned a reporter after an interview.

Saturday, Middleton signed pieces of her art for patrons at the Nash Street gallery. By 10 a.m., more than 50 fans of the artist had come to peruse her work and speak with Middleton.

While Middleton discussed her art, gallery patrons strolled by lauding her work. Snippets of overheard comments included praise of the details and colors. Bob and Susan Bass, owners of Western Sizzlin', clutched a painting of flowers and multi-hued butterflies.

"The colors are just gorgeous; they pop right off the paper," Bob Bass said.

After getting Middleton to sign the painting, they told her it would be placed in a prominent spot in the restaurant.

"We're really going to enjoy this," he said.

Since she was 2 years old, Middleton has been drawing. At first she drew princesses in bejeweled ball gowns, but soon her love of nature took over.

Her father bought her some heavy drawing paper and artist pencils to indulge her budding talents. The talent ran in her family.

"My uncle trained in Paris, more in architecture, but he was still an artist, and my mother went to art school in New York before she stopped. She said there were already too many bad artists in the world," Middleton said.

Middleton, a product of Asheville and Charleston, S.C., said she's been fortunate to live

all her life surrounded by pristine forests and natural beauty.

"It was my world -- the things that grow and the creatures who live there," Middleton said.

Middleton's work revolves around nature. Most of her paintings feature wildlife and plants. Her subject matter isn't unique, but Middleton's preferred medium is.

"I'd been told it was impossible to do my work in watercolors, but I found out about it too late," she said. Most artists who paint natural subjects use oil-based paints, but that's a type of paint Middleton said she doesn't like.

"Oils are too heavy, and for things that are living, water colors express what I truly want to say," she said.

One problem with water colors is that something white can't be painted, she said. If white water color paint is used, everything turns out with a misty appearance. For that reason, Middleton uses the white of the paper for her color and paints around it -- very carefully.

"With water colors, there's no room for mistakes. If you make a mistake, you've ruined your painting and have to start all over," she said.

Middleton she hasn't been able to paint for about 10 years because her hands are no longer steady enough to handle a paint brush. However, she continues to keep nature in her life.

"Like Agatha Christie, I garden," she said. "This keeps me in the sun and around nature. It's still flower worship."

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