

If ever a more talented and more down-to-earth wildlife watercolorist ever lived, Sallie Middleton would give them a run for their money. Her paintings show more detail in one brush stroke than the naked human eye can see at first glance. She'll be showing some of her prints at The Village Studio in Dillsboro Saturday, Oct. 14 from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

"Sallie is going to be here to show her work and to share stories about her artwork and inspirations on art," said Lou Ann Smith, owner of The Village Studio.

While all of the prints on display at The Village Studio were once originals, they are now giclées, which is a high resolution digital image printed by state-of-the-art inkjet printers. "But the pigments and inks are so close to the original, sometimes it's hard to tell they are just prints," Smith said.

Sallie Middleton grew up in the Asheville area and was captivated by all that nature had to offer. She often walked with her father in the woods to observe the lush forests around her. It was then that she learned to appreciate the art that is nature and the importance of capturing it everyday.

Middleton starts with a pencil sketch before meticulously using watercolors to make her paintings come to life. "I begin with some drawing with pencil. The under-painting happens next. This is usually very bright. The final result is obtained with a combination of over-painting, or modeling and brush drawing," said Middleton.

And though her first painting sold for a mere \$10, some of her original paintings run in the market for a few thousand.

But money isn't why Mrs. Middleton paints.

"Most people don't see because they aren't looking," said Middleton. "They could be looking miles away and never notice the spot they're standing on is just as beautiful. I hope [my paintings] make people aware so that they will know to look in order to see."

Mrs. Middleton's paintings have sold to all parts of the United States, but one painting she's particularly proud of hangs over the mantel of William Amherst Vanderbilt Cecil's house, grandson of George Vanderbilt and the current owner of the Biltmore House.

And if you look very closely, you may even be able to find the blue feather, something she hides in nearly every painting. The feather first appeared in "Owl in the Apple Tree," but it was her sister who first suggested she include the feather in every painting.

One day while she was working on "Chipmunks in August," her sister said to her, "You know Sallie, I've been thinking. You should put a blue feather in every painting of yours." Sallie didn't give it much thought until she returned the next day.

"Just as I began to paint, a blue jay feather fell down at my feet and I felt it was meant to be," she said.

Besides, children like her paintings so they can find the feather. "It's kind of like an Easter egg hunt but with feathers," she said. Mrs. Middleton also likes to hid fairies in a few of her paintings. "They're so small, they can sometimes hardly be found," she said.

Every one of her paintings has a story to tell, and quite a few of them are about her own pets. She finds that by living with her subjects, she can get to know them in such a way to capture their every mood. Rosemary, Sallie's pet raccoon and the model for "Raccoon," once gave her one heck of a time.

Rosemary often confiscated Sallie's pencils and watercolors, but it was when Rosemary grabbed Sallie's razor blade she knew she was in for trouble. Before she could catch her, Rosemary scurried up Sallie's curtains and wouldn't come down, still holding the razor blade, threatening every strand of her curtains.

"I tried to get her down. I even bribed her with bananas and nuts," said Sallie. "I took my paintings outside after that."

While a few prints for sale will already be framed, like "Thistle," "Young Red Fox," and "Indigo Bunting," LouAnn Smith, who is also a certified framer, will be framing any of the others for an additional fee after the show and during normal store hours.

The Village Studio, 130 Front Street, is across from the train station in Dillsboro and next to Shirley's Boutique. For more information, please call (828) 586-4060.

If you go...

When: Oct. 14, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Where: The Village Studio, 130 Front Street, Dillsboro

Information: Call (828) 586-4020