



Bird Life Inspires Painter to Lofty Heights

By Marilyn Watson

She seems to know where the bird nests are and walks right to them, those mysterious little swirls of twigs and string so skillfully hidden within the foliage of Hondo Valley trees.

The nest builders seem to know where she is, too, and they descend in mighty droves onto her property near San Patricio during their yearly migrations.

As a result, artist Linda Miller experiences the tragedies and triumphs of bird life in ways that will never touch most of us. And those experiences are what inspire her art.

Last spring, she watched as returning swallows fought feisty sparrows for repossession of their old mud homes under the eaves of her studio roof.

In the end, only seven stayed. "I'm glad some made it," she says. "Swallows bring good luck, you know."

Not that she really needs good luck. Miller's talent has brought her a long way, from her first success at the West Texas Museum in Lubbock, Texas.

Born into a pioneer West Texas ranching family, the lean, long-legged artist with the large blue eyes and slightly aquiline features remembers wondering, even as a tot, why the windows in her church were painted--light one time, dark another.

This signaled the beginning of a lifelong interest in light and color. Today, she enjoys the play of bright, jewel-like accents against subtle backgrounds.

The influence of famed San Patricio artist Henriette Wyeth on her work is clear. After their first meeting, Henriette became Miller's mentor, critiquing painting after painting.

"Henriette's generosity, sensibility and integrity are gifts of the highest order," Miller says.

In a broad sense, Miller is a romantic realist, with a lyrical style well-suited to her subject matter. She prefers oil as a medium, but often uses pastels for quick outdoor sketches.

At first glance, her painting strokes seem precise and carefully controlled. No heavy impasto, no wild improvisation. A closer look, however, reveals an underlying freedom of application--an exuberance that enhances her work far more than mere attention to detail ever could.

An overview of her work also reveals something else: an elusive, almost mystical quality that defies conventional analysis. Indeed, some gallery goers may feel they are visitors in an enchanted land, created by a wise being with the heart and soul of a child.



"I always stop at a certain point and leave part of my work unfinished," she says. "In fact, that's my whole theory of painting--leave something for the imagination. The real trick, of course, lies in knowing what to leave out."

Miller has never entered a competition. She sets her own high standards and prefers competing with herself, not others. "A painting is as good as it is," she says, "whether it's won 10 prizes or not."

These days, most of her in-progress paintings are presold to eager collectors while still on the easel, and her lithographs of a child's pull pony and an old fashioned Christmas tree have become well-established classics of their genre.

Miller, however, is pragmatic about the secret of her success--plenty of hard work. She even designed and built her home and studio, using the skills of itinerant laborers whenever they happened along.

She is especially proud of the studio, "put together," she says, "in much the same ways as a robin's nest--only mine is of adobe and bud, while theirs is of mud and twigs."

Inside the studio--a replica of Henriette Wyeth's, only larger--northern light filters through the panes of a massive antique window, falling across a diverse collection of objects--ballet shoes, antique dresses, seashells.

She takes a soft, felt bowler off the fireplace mantel and pops it on her head. With an impish grin, she strikes the brim with the edge of her hand and assumes a Cockney's pose.

"Someone once wrote that I wear many hats," Miller says. "I collect them, so I may as well wear them! This derby is one of my favorites."

She removes the hat and holds it for a moment, studying the inside of the crown. In the dim light, it bears a curious resemblance to a velvet bird's nest.

Miller's interest in birds goes back to the days of her youth. She was only 14 when she climbed a tree in Snyder and discovered the nest of a chicken hawk.

She remained in the tree long enough to draw two down-covered babies, despite some ferocious dives from their enraged mother.

In the years to follow, she made other studies, including a series of engravings that are now collectors' items. In 1973, she painted a dove's nest, her first in oil.

More than a decade later, she completed another oil, her romantic *Summer Nest*, a woven swirl of grass roots surrounded by lacy asparagus fern.

From these studies, Miller learned that each nest is unique, "as great as any architecture, as individual as any thumbprint."

Some of her bird paintings also affirm the importance of life, even as they acknowledge its fragility. For instance, a robin's fierce struggle for survival in a late, spring snowstorm turns into a triumphant affirmation of life in Miller's hands.



Her 1984 painting catches the essence of the bird. Only a frozen shell remains, yet frantic scratch marks in the snow offer mute testimony to a life force that fought against great odds for survival.

Miller pauses. The full-throated sound of a bird in a nearby tree reminds her of one last story.

"I've always been the great saver of lives, I guess. I once found a baby sparrow that had fallen out of its nest. Since I had a bird cage, I put the little fellow inside and left both cage and bird out in the yard.

"Suddenly, I heard some excited screeching. The parents had found their baby! And the mother and father kept right on feeding that bird, day after day, through the bars of the cage.

"Later, after the sparrow could fly, I turned it loose. Since that time, I've kept a bird cage around--just in case."

In a very real sense, an empty, waiting bird cage typifies Linda Miller's approach to art, as well as to life.

She continually leaves herself open to new experiences. She catches and nourishes them, turning them over and over in her heart for days, months, even years.

Then she sets them free by sending them into the world as beautiful works of art.

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