



Miller's Motif

By Dianne Stallings – Vamonos Staff Writer

Artist Linda Miller's house is hard to see from the highway, tucked into a field of wild flowers and hidden by a bend in the dirt road leading to the entrance.

Visitors are greeted by a small herd of dogs-the latest a Great Pyrenees named Copita recently acquired from the local humane society-assorted chickens and roosters, and if they're lucky, by an Angora goat named Miss Lily, the most famous of Miller's menagerie.

Step through the door of the house Miller and assorted friends and artisans have built over the years since she moved to San Patricio, and there's no doubt an artist is in residence.

A massive 19-by-36 foot grand dining hall is flanked by a 7-by-10 foot window framed by carved 1881 beams and set off by a 12-foot dining table accented with candlesticks of varying sizes and shapes.

"I'm nearly finished after a year and a half," Miller said of the addition that ties together under roof her home and studio. Although she originally planned to use the grand hall as a gallery, "People said it would be a crime to hang paintings on these walls," Miller said.

The walls are Styrofoam poured with concrete which allowed the foundation and walls to go up in six days-but they look like turn-of-the century plaster.

The grand scale creates a startling contrast to Miller's studio and her work on canvas-where she paints the nests of hummingbirds, intricate beaded Native American bags, flowers, ballet shoes, birds and other animals. From any angle in her studio, a still life could be captured. Delicate eggs, nests, feathers and all sorts of other unusual pieces she has found over the years are displayed in a casual, but artful arrangement, illuminated by the light from a picture window that looks out at the world that captivates Miller's creative energy and imagination.

For instance: A common thread of "old world" atmosphere in her living style, her painting style and her personal style of hospitality ties everything together.

Miller resides in the heart of a colony of artists who have settled from Hondo Valley to Glencoe over the last few decades, following the lead of the late Peter Hurd and his wife, the late Henriette Wyeth.

As Miller often notes, her timing in life seems fine-tuned to her needs.

- One of the collectors of her work just happened to be available when she needed help with the walls and traded labor for some of her art work.
- A cousin was able to save five loads of brick from the old mercantile store in the Texas town where her family homesteaded. Miller used the bricks in her entryway.
- When she needed someone to plaster the large fireplace in the grand hall, Miller ran into a young man she taught the craft 13 years earlier and he helped her. The fireplace mantle is graced by an angel wing given to her by John Meigs. Its mate was owned by Henriette Wyeth and now sits on the mantle of the Wyeth's daughter, who also is an artist in San Patricio.



- The concrete for a round wall in the hallway leading from her home to the studio was left over from a bridge construction project. Miller was able to trade for a 300-pound sunburst pattern copper door set that was one of three removed from The Inn of the Mountain Gods when it was renovated for handicap access. The set hangs from 200-pound timbers.
- Much of the wood accents in the addition came from an 1881 log house in Roswell that was torn down 10 years ago and saved by Miller.

Although the construction project has monopolized a great deal of her time for the past year, Miller also has been busy at the easel. Some of her more recent subjects have been Native American beaded bags and beaded ceremonial dresses, and true to her fascination with animals, a sassy red rooster, who seems to know he will be immortalized in Miller's art.

She is finishing up a painting for Jackie Spencer, benefactor of the Spencer Theater for the Performing Arts, and is preparing to begin a series on santos, old statues of saints acquired in Mexico by her brother in trade for some spurs.

Born in Snyder, Texas, Miller's pioneer family always produced at least one artistic member per generation. Her brother is a poet and her mother an innovative seamstress.

Miller's talent was recognized early by her mother, and teachers. She received her first formal training the summer of her 14th year when her great aunt brought her to Lincoln County to train with Katherine Hale Travis, who normally accepted no students younger than 16.

She started with oils, then pastels, dry paint and engraving.

Her first subjects were still lifes. The Travis training concentrated on portraits.

But much of Miller's focus seemed to be on birds and their nests, partly because the eggs and nests were unlikely painting subjects.

"I would climb up in trees and draw baby hawks while the mother was diving down at me," she said during an earlier interview.

In 1964, Miller had her first show. The forward was written by Hurd and Wyeth. Her works sold out in 45 minutes. But she was reluctant to take advantage of the immediate commercial possibilities on the local market. Instead, she chose to continue studying and honing her art in preparation of what she hoped would be broader recognition someday.

Eight years later in 1972, while viewing polo game, oil man Robert O. Anderson invited her to stay at one of the houses in his Diamond A Ranch, because of her interest in art and horses-she has since raised and raced several equines.

"I thought I would never paint flowers, but Henriette encouraged me," Miller said. "I'm so critical of my work. I'm my worst enemy."

Although she is surrounded by her animals and friends nearby, Miller said, "People never realize how much an artist gives up. Painting is never easy. It's hours and hours of hard work."

For Miller, each painting starts different. She has no formula for approach.



"I never know the secret" she said. "Each one is like I'm a new painter."

And that suits her just fine. She bores easily and keeps multiple projects going at the same time, even varying the medium from oil to watercolor to sketching.

One of her newest enterprises is a children's book written by Miss Lily, in which her "fleecy" friend explains how different animals entered Miller's life and became her models.

Her bonds with animals are long lasting, Miller said, recalling a hawk she found in a windstorm, apparently stunned. She scooped it up and put it in her cap. The next morning, the bird appeared alert. She donned a leather glove and as she released it, told the hawk not to forget her. To this day, it still returns.

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