



## San Patricio Artist Paints from the Soul

*"Oh, for the touch of a vanished hand and the sound of a voice that is still."*  
Alfred Lord Tennyson

When the visitors arrived, the artist was having a conversation with a beaded, elk skin Indian dress. It had been going on for months.

Indeed, it began in Justiceberg, Texas, when San Patricio artist Linda Miller unearthed the Sioux dress in her cousin Riley's closet. It had been a gift to his daughter and was carefully preserved.

"I wish it could talk to me," the daughter had said.

"It will talk to me," the artist said.

Miller took the dress home to San Patricio and her studio, Doe Canyon.

After tramping around the banks of the Hondo River, she found what her soul sought. Amid the willows and walnut trees sat a five-foot, three-inch by five-foot burl log. Miller strapped the hollow of the log onto her shoulder and lugged it up to her studio, stopping a few times to gather the energy to proceed.

Miller set the log in the corner of her studio nearest the window. She lifted the heavy, elk skin dress and pressed it on the log. The dress settled itself against the log's curves.

On the wooden floor beneath the log and the dress, Miller laid stalks of sacred sage tied by sinew and blessed by H. Jayne Nauman, a friend of Miller's who is close to the Sioux and told her that when something is taken from the earth, something else must be returned.

One by one Miller added, and sometimes took away, articles that a Sioux woman would have taken with her to winter camp--a worn pair of moccasins, an acorn squash and some Sioux turnips, a pair of parfleches, a tepee bag and some sweet-smelling sage.

Then she laid down a dead raven that she had found under the log where the bird had crawled to die, and scattered some dirt from her beloved Hondo Valley.

Miller stepped back and began working.

July turned to August and August to September. October swept into November and November eased into December. January stretched into February and February crept into March. The dress talked.

"First I heard the sound of the elk," Miller said.

"It occurred to me that the elk had a heart and the woman who wore the dress had a heart, and so there was more than one spirit running through the dress. Both were strong, wise spirits; each important to his/her group.



"But they were different. The elk had physical strength, the woman a strength of character. The dress is a very heavy dress for a woman to wear. But to the elk, it would have weighed nothing."

Miller walked over to the dress and stroked it. She continued its story.

"I saw a large male elk. A proud animal. The leader of his her. He was brought down by one bullet-- at the top of the dress you can see the small, round patch of buffalo hide which covers the bullet hole. I think the elk gave up his life easily; perhaps he felt that his life wasn't coming to an end." Miller paused for a moment. "Maybe things never die; the spirit never dies."

She slid her fingers down the dress and began running them through the short fringe which decorated the hem.

"And then I heard how the dress sounded as a woman," Miller said with a grin. "It sounded like swishing. You know, like a dancer's costume. The woman walked, and as she moved the fringe moved against her legs and swished."

Miller's fingers released the fringe, and her eyes looked at the painting.

"The woman who wore this dress had great stature and influence in her tribe. She was a woman of mature age who loved the earth and was a decision-maker. She was meticulous, exacting and detailed." Miller smiled slyly.

"I think she and I have a lot in common. When I finish with the painting, I want to try the dress on."

That day is coming. The painting will be unveiled Sunday, March 14, during a retrospective of Miller's art at Bank of the Southwest in Roswell.

But the work is slow and painstaking. It requires faithfulness to detail and a dedication of purpose.

"Some Southwest painters project a transparency onto the canvas and paint the reflection," Miller explained. "I don't. That's not art."

When Miller began the painting, she mixed her palette of raw umber and raw sienna and, using a three-inch brush, covered the entire linen canvas. Then she started with the top of the dress.

"I put the paint on and then carefully scrape it all off. I drug more paint on layer by layer and scratched through it back down to the canvas until I finally achieved the texture of the elk skin--the blood vessels, the shading, the scraping of the woman's flint as she worked the hide."

Miller's talent lies in the details: in knowing when to be faithful to each strand of fringe, each perfectly counted bead, and when to paint broadly with just a suggestion of what lies there.

"People aren't stupid," she said in her direct manner.

"You don't have to show them everything. They can finish the story. That's what makes them part of the painting."



When it comes to her world, however, Miller pays attention to every detail.

"Everything I have surrounding me is important," she said. "We may consider things weeds, but then we understand."

Miller's understanding characterizes her vision as an artist. She is a painter of things; singular things, not a mass. Simple things that she invests with emotional detail. Harrowing things whose struggle she recognizes.

She chronicles life's silent toil and its resounding hurrahs--her mother's wedding dress thrown over a brown, wooden chair; a dead robin in the snow, a used anvil; a dove perched on a branch laden with apple blossoms; a two-year old colt; a bird's nest made of barbed wire and twigs.

"Hondo Light," a retrospective of Miller's paintings, pastels and drypoints will open Sunday, March 14, at Bank of the Southwest in Roswell. The public is invited to meet Miller during and open house from 2 to 4 p.m. on Sunday at the bank on 226 North Main Street.

Straightforward and forceful in personality, Linda Miller brings a delicate, old-master touch to her paintings.

Sequestered from the world that speeds by on nearby U.S. 70, Miller spends her days surrounded by her art and her pets in the San Patricio house that she designed and, in large part, constructed.

The studio, an intriguing collection of oddities and treasures arranged in perfect compositions, with an imposing cathedral-shaped window, large fireplace and natural wood floor, took three months to build. The house took five years.

A man she knew from the Ruidoso Downs racetrack asked her to keep some horses for him and ended up building her fireplace. Another man looking for apples turned out to be a plasterer from Roswell and lent her a scaffold and recipe for the plaster material.

Some of the wood for the studio came from a church in Roswell, trees cut in Alto provided the beams, the fir was left over from construction on the Inn of the Mountain Gods and her rolled glass picture window was formed from six sections of turn-of-the-century French doors.

"There's a Chinese theory that if you are in tune with life, things will come to you that you need," Miller said.

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