

A Modern Beatrix Potter Loved by Tiffany's and Hermes



by Ilene Dube

Sitting Pretty: Tim Martin, left, at work in his studio on a commission from Steinway Piano for its Millennial Piano; and 'Winters Bittersweet,' above. Photo of Tim Martin: Ricardo Barros

It is the most wonderful time of the year for those who love arts and craft shows. One of the best in the region is the Covered Bridge Artisans Studio Tour, Friday through Sunday, November 25 through 27. Just getting there is half the fun, driving through some of the prettiest countryside with fall foliage to rival Vermont's — just don't forget your GPS.

The self-guided tour takes you to six studios in the Lambertville-Stockton-Sergeantsville area, as well as a multi-artist exhibition at Ginny Naparano Cultural Arts Center at 522 Rosement-Ringoes Road in Sergeantsville.

Small farms, fields of sheep and horses, barns and chickens, and sunlit trees in the landscape inspire impressionistic paintings, stained glass, hand-dyed and handspun yarn, ceramics, sculpture and metal fabrication, as well as leather work and jewelry.

Inside each artist's studio, a spicy brew may be wafting from the kettle as you watch how the artwork is made and mingle with friendly artists. To say nothing of the fact that you can indulge in all this art gawking in the name of green holiday shopping.

The Covered Bridge Artisans Tour is a 17-year tradition, with a stable of artists. Karen and Geoff Caldwell have been crafting colorful windows and accessories for 35

years at Sunflower Glass Studio, adjacent to their 1872 gingerbread Victorian in Sergeantsville. Ceramic artist Phoebe Wiley produces majolica vessels from a piece of paradise at Long Lane Farm. Constance Bassett and David Cann produce paintings, sculpture, and home furnishings that reflect the region and its history. Katherine Hackl makes Arts &

Spending summers gardening with his grandmother on a farm in Ringoes developed artist Tim Martin's passion for all things floral.

Craft hand-crafted pottery by in her Swan Street Studio, where she also produced tile work for the Riverline and for Roosevelt Borough Hall's mural. At Prallsville Mill Ty Hodanish carries on the Impressionist tradition of the New Hope School with plein air paintings known for the way they capture color and light. The pottery of Sheila Coutin at her studio in Stockton is filled a menagerie of wildlife and floral detail.

New to the tour this year is Tim Martin, whose studio barn is a stone's throw from the eponymous covered bridge. Martin's work is as fantastical as the setting, with whimsical scenes of chairs, sofas, love seats, and pianos made up of flowers and set in a surreal natural woodland. Bears, bees, sheep, and other fauna populate this fantasy world.

If Martin's paintings of, say, a colt curled up on a divan made of leaves and calla lilies looks like something you might see at the Philadelphia Flower Show or in a department store window, you're spot on. The Garden Gallery featured his work at the 2006 and 2008 Philadelphia Flower shows; Tiffany & Co. has featured his artwork in its Fifth Avenue windows, and Paris-based, high-fashion luxury-goods manufacturer Hermes gave him all 10 windows last winter at its flagship store on the Rue de Faubourg Saint-Honore, as well as commissioning an 8-by-15-foot original for the main window, right across from Place de la Concorde. The lush scene is of an animal Christmas party, and all the animals are bearing gifts.

Daisy and Duff, "husband and wife" Lakeland terriers, greet me on a recent visit to the six-acre property where Martin and his wife, Janis Burenga, who runs a public relations firm, grow corn and winter wheat.

The couple bought the 1876 stone house in 1990, added on to it, and tore down a carriage house to build a barn, using reclaimed cabinets, repurposed beams, and other elements to give it a vintage look. The first floor has a conference room that also serves as gallery space for Martin's paintings, and offices for Burenga's firm. Martin and Burenga went to high school together, but didn't become sweethearts until years later, when she hired him to do logo work for her agency, then in Manhattan.

We climb a flight of stairs to Martin's studio on the upper level, with northern exposure from skylights and a cupola. There are floor-to-ceiling windows on the east, with views of the rolling countryside. Martin shows me the wooden paint box his father gave him when he was a boy — he still uses it.

Opening a drawer of his carefully organized cabinet, Martin brings out some of his preliminary sketches for the Hermes window. These sketches will be for sale, as well as everything from cards and his recent catalog to limited edition giclee prints and oil paintings.

"Everything is living in harmony," he says of the painting for Hermes. There is a painted elephant and a zebra with a lei of roses, and a carpet made of lily pads. In the background, an ornate gate leads to the kingdom. There is a mockingbird Martin says is a symbol of his father.

Martin's father loved mockingbirds and would commune with them. At his father's funeral, a mockingbird appeared on the steeple of the church, recounts the artist.

Born in Queens, New York, Martin lived in Rhode Island and Wisconsin but summered on his grandparents' farm in Ringoes. In high school, his parents bought the family farm and moved back to Ringoes. From his grandfather Martin learned to use the tractor and bring in hay, but from his grandmother, an avid gardener, he developed his passion for all things floral.

"We sat together on cold winter nights ordering seeds," he says. "On the next visit, I'd see them sprouting. She brought me through the process." Martin's grandmother worked as a nanny in New York City during the week, then came home to the farm on weekends and holidays, where she took in boarders. "It was a hard life. She was always cooking," Martin says. "She was a master chef."

Martin's father worked as a machinist in the Navy, and his mother, a homemaker, was often working on craft projects that inspired Martin's artistic pursuits. Spending a semester studying art and architecture in Florence, Italy, he graduated from the College of New Jersey in 1972 with a degree in art education and taught for a few years. His brothers were in the trades, so while transitioning to a full-time career as an artist, Martin worked in construction. "Digging foundations is character building," he says.

While renovating a house in Lambertville in the 1990s, Martin found a chair on the street, sanded it down and became fascinated with its shape, particularly its cabriole legs. "I decided the Victo-



Everything's Rosy: 'Goats and Roses' by Tim Martin.

Inside the Artist's Studio: Sheila Coutin, pictured at right in her Stockton studio, is among the artists featured in a multi-artist exhibition at the Ginny Naparano Cultural Arts Center in Sergeantsville in conjunction with the Covered Bridge Artisans' Tour. Tim Martin's studio (opposite page) is among six studios on the tour. Far right: A raku pot by Sheila Coutin.

rian chair would become a Victorian garden and the wingback became actual wings. Continuing the thought process, I saw the leg as a root form and wondered what the designer was looking at — tulips and other shapes in nature, or the bow of a tree, shell forms. These forms are repeated in all forms of organic life. My brain started to work like a flood, and I couldn't hold back the ideas."

Martin admits he is lucky to be married to someone who can market his artwork, who has the ability

and the connections to write letters that will get his paintings into prestigious venues. It was one of her letters that helped him get a commission for the Steinway Millennial piano. He had to have a hydraulic lift to get the baby grand into his studio, and then sand the finish off. "I spent the first two months just staring and wondering what I got myself into," he admits.

Every inch of the piano, inside and out, bench and all, is painted in a phantasmagorical floral scene, complete with a waterfall at the keyboard. Steinway tours the piano.

Paris-based, high-fashion luxury-goods manufacturer Hermes gave Tim Martin all 10 windows last winter at its flagship store on the Rue de Faubourg Saint-Honore.

Growing up in the 1950s, Martin struggled with dyslexia before anyone knew what it was. "My heart would pound when my turn would come in class to read a paragraph out loud," he says. "In the tale of the turtle and the hare, I was the turtle. Through the years, I learned it's made me who I am. I was doing incredible drawings, but sacrificed one part of development for another. My parents would guide me to work with my hands."

The experience made him an especially good teacher. "I was able to give the kids the help I never got."

Like Tim Martin — but with an entirely different medium — Sheila Coutin creates pottery inspired by wildlife — horses, birds, and fish. Some is intricately carved with floral detail, and other pieces are smooth vessels on which a figure or bird rests. Coutin, who has been on the tour for five years, is one of the 10 artists who will be part of the multi-artist exhibition. (Others are Susan Nadelson, hand-dyed handspun yarn; Dana Stewart, sculpture; Amy Turner, hand-dyed scarves and shawls with



beading or tapestry; Bernard Hohlfeld, turned wood; Dakota Moon jewelry; Maple Leather Co.; Martha Mulford Dreswick, wooden baskets; Fiona Scott, pottery and beaded necklaces; and Ron Dombrowski, wood decoys.)

The award-winning ceramic artist runs Sandbrook Pottery in Stockton, and teaches workshops to both children and adults. The studio is in a building that used to be the tractor shed for the 1930s house she has lived in for 28 years.

Pottery is a second career for Coutin, who discovered her passion for it after retiring from nursing in 2000. She studied with Beatrice Landolt in Hopewell and with Ann Tsubota at Raritan Valley Community College and continues to take workshops at Peters Valley Craft Center in Layton, NJ. She has

also studied painting with John Murdoch in Perkasie, PA.

Coutin, who is married to architect Pierre Coutin, grew up in England — she was born on the Isle of Wight — and lived on a houseboat with her family when she was six. "I've always been a sea person," she says, "whether as a sailor, a scuba diver, or canoeist." Her father taught sailing, and she helped with children's classes. Her mother was a homemaker.

After nursing school in London, Coutin came to the U.S. in 1960. Her love of the sea works its way into her ceramic work, which is both functional and sculptural.

Most of the work is medium-fired stoneware and when displayed in the garden will withstand the weather. She also likes working in Raku for its metallic luster.

"As a rather practical person, I've discovered through clay that I am drawn to fantasy," says Coutin. "I'm intrigued by the connectedness of natural and man-made things and the relationships possible between them. Flowers, wings, and water have become metaphors for my journey."

Covered Bridge Artisans' 17th Annual Holiday Studio Tour, Saturday and Sunday, November 25 and 26, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and Sunday, November 27, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The tour is self-guided through Lambertville, Stockton, and Sergeantsville. Multi-artist exhibition at Ginny Naparano Cultural Arts Center at 522 Rosement-Ringoes Road in Sergeantsville. Directions and map available online. www.coveredbridgeartisans.com

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3, 10, 17 Carriage Rides, 5-8PM

3, 4, 10, 11, 17, 18 Artisan Boutique at Toad Hall Shop

3, 4 Brunches at the Peacock Café

9 Opera NJ Performance, 7PM

10 Alex & Kaleidoscope Concert, 2PM

11 Holiday Tea Party (Peacock Café)

17 Pushcart Players Performance, 2:30PM

31 New Year's Eve at Rat's Restaurant

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