

SPEAKING OF PEOPLE

The sun of art shines bright on a Kentucky primitive



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Horses race on a boldly curved reddish-orange track in Pamela Miles' recent painting of Keeneland Race Course at Lexington. In the foreground, trees shimmer vividly with pink blossoms. A road winds around in the background to a horse barn.

Someone mentioned to the artist that there is no way a Keeneland visitor could view all those elements from one vantage point. Mrs. Miles knows that. "I just change things to be the way I like them to look," she says. "That's the fun of being a primitive painter, I guess."

Her painting of Louisville's Locust Grove is more realistic — up to a point. The outbuildings are in their proper places. Gen. George Rogers Clark, who lived at the home for nine years, is resting on the porch. But "Locust Grove Long Ago" is still Mrs. Miles' own idea of how the historic home would have looked in the early years of the 19th century. She confesses it's "probably a very idealistic and romantic approach."

On the lawn, children are playing with hoops. A farm employee pulls a horse-drawn apple-filled wagon down a lane. In the garden are "man-eating cabbages," says the artist with a laugh, although she has seen some that big. "It's just a fault of my lack of proportion." To a viewer, the giant vegetables are part of the charm of her primitive style.

In recent months, Mrs. Miles, a Louisville-area resident, has been producing paintings for an exhibit at Actors Theatre. She will be in a group show opening May 10 in the theater's Starving Artist restaurant.

Another new painting, a composition of farm buildings and rolling hills, depicts a horse farm that exists only in Mrs. Miles' mind. She likes to paint rural scenes because

living. "I just try to leave out the junk and leave in the things I like to see. I think people find it restful to look at a country vista."

One landscape is based on an 1840 photograph of a riverside section of Cincinnati that no longer exists. She added a boat, the U.S. Ohio Belle, which was an actual steamboat.

Her style is similar to most primitives who ignore perspective and proportion. But having studied art history, "I am not unaware of the principles that make good art," she says. "I simply was never trained to paint or draw."

At New Trier High School in Winnetka, Ill., the Wilmette, Ill., native took ceramics, mosaics and silk-screen. As a speech major at Northwestern University, she studied collage, but took nary a drawing class. "I seem to lack an innate sense of perspective and proportion that would make me a good academic artist." She relies on photographs for details of her imaginary scenes. "If I paint a dog, I have to look at a picture of a dog."

Mrs. Miles' art involvement started about 20 years ago after her older son was born. While housebound with an infant, she had a yen to do something creative and turned to collage. On a visit to Washington, D.C., she was captivated by the primitive art she saw. When she found the paintings were beyond her budget, she began doing her own.

She laughs now at the memory of her ignorance about the properties of paint. She first used casein paint on wood, which dried and flaked off. She soon switched to acrylic paint, which dries quickly and is durable.

Her mother-in-law sent her a book on the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, and Mrs. Miles started copying the pictures on small pieces of pine. Then she moved on to bigger pieces of plywood and then to canvas stretched over plywood. "Finally someone showed me how to stretch canvas on a stretcher."

After a while, a friend suggested she start selling her paintings, noting "they are taking over your

the late 1960s had a one-person show at the Lake Forest Academy.

Her floral paintings always have originated in her own imagination, but as recently as seven years ago she was adapting old engravings into paintings. Some time after she moved here with her family in 1977, Carol Swearingen, owner of Swearingen Gallery, urged her to do her own thing and offered the prospect of a show. "I started painting whatever I felt like painting, which were several flower paintings, some tropical-inspired paintings and five or six landscapes. I think she sold all the landscapes and tropicals the first day. I was in shock. I couldn't believe it."

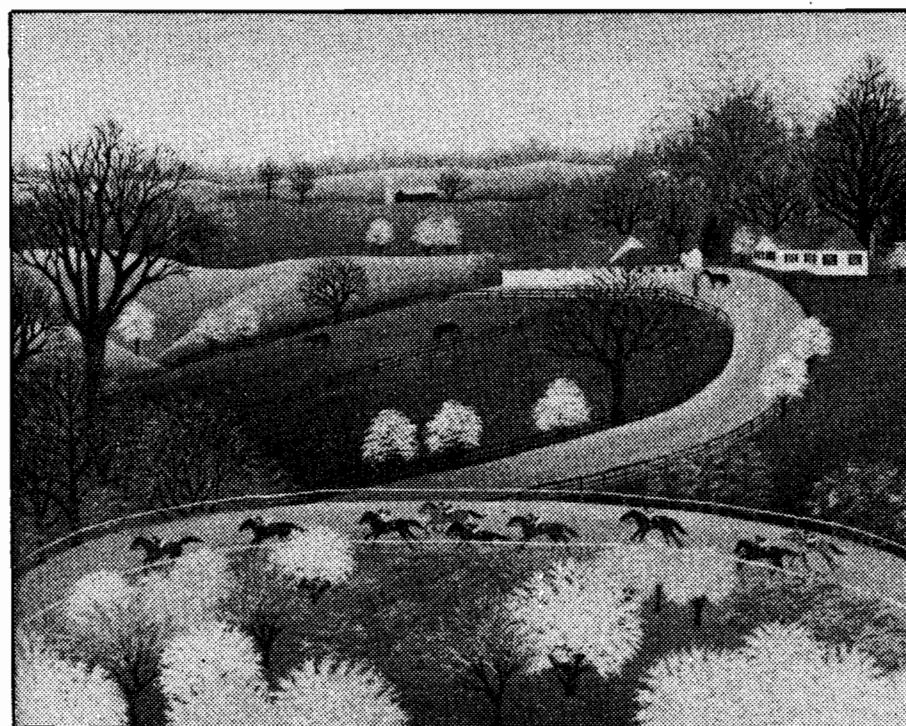
After that 1980 show Mrs. Miles was "emboldened" to send slides to a New York folk-art gallery, which now also sells her work. These days she starts a piece by drawing her ideas in a sketchbook and after roughly transferring the sketch to a canvas, "I just start painting. I feel I've come a long way."

Mrs. Miles, who is on the board of Historic Homes Foundation Inc., which operates Locust Grove, began painting the museum house last spring. Lois Mateus, commissioner of the Kentucky Arts Department, asked her for a painting for the Kentucky Room of Celanese House, a decorators show house in New York City, and the Locust Grove scene has been there since fall.

The president of Celanese Corp. asked to buy it, as did several local people with ties to Locust Grove, but the artist decided to keep the painting rather than make a choice of a buyer. Besides, she has not kept one of her paintings since 1978. "I've been selling mine, unlike Picasso who squirreled away many works."

A limited edition of 500 lithographs, \$20 each, has been made of the painting, and all proceeds of the sale will go to Locust Grove. Citizens Fidelity Bank & Trust Co. paid for the printing cost. Posters (\$8) and note cards (75 cents) of the painting are also being sold for benefit of the home in its gift shop.

Last winter, a California firm produced four of Mrs. Miles' floral



Pamela Miles works on a new creation in the basement of her home. At left, her painting of action at Keeneland Race Course at Lexington.

Staff Photos
by
Robert Steinau

two weeks, but some, like Locust Grove, take longer. She has been asked to have a show in New York but it will be quite some time before she has enough work ready. Since

nity boards and turned down some small volunteer chores in order to have painting time.

She finds it gratifying "to do something you create yourself. Just

other people enjoy. "It's like giving a gift to people."

Mrs. Miles also loves to cook, but it's more satisfying to create a more permanent product. "And to be in