



David Wiggins with a framed mural he created for the Farley Garrison House on Frisky Hill in Gilmanton which is owned by Doug Towle. (Roger Amsden/for The Laconia Daily Sun)

Gilmanton-based muralist follows in tradition of 19th Century folk art masters

By ROGER AMSDEN
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GILMANTON — Following in the same tradition of the itinerant artists of the early 19th century, David B. Wiggins has carved out a reputation over the last 40 years as one of the nation's premiere folk art muralists.

A self-taught artist who pokes fun at scholarly artistic categories, Wiggins prefers to call his work "Non-Academic Art" rather than folk art, and says that the early practitioners of the art, like Rufus Porter and Moses Eaton, blazed new trails for land-

scape murals by breaking with European tradition.

"Instead of following a very clearly defined tradition, they established their own unique way of representing the world, using their own imaginations. Academics used to look down on folk art as something primitive and unpolished. But now there are lots of books documenting how people like Porter and Eaton were the pioneers in creating a new art form. People used to tear out and cover over folk art murals. But now they're in demand everywhere," says Wiggins, noting that a folk art tavern sign was

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recently sold at an auction for a half million dollars.

Wiggins has traveled extensively as an itinerant artist, living in people's homes for weeks at a time while crafting his murals, in recent years teaming up with his daughter, Christina, who lives on Nantucket Island, off from Cape Cod.

He's traveled to Memphis, Chicago and Texas for his projects, and to homes all over New England. His work has been featured in Decorators Showcase, Classic American Homes, Antiques and Arts Week and on Martha Stewart.com.

Locally he's done projects for Doug Towle at the Four Corners Brick House and at the Farley Garrison House atop Frisky Hill, a 1665 saltbox, originally from Billerica, Mass., and painstakingly restored by Towle to museum quality, as well as at the Smith Meetinghouse, the Col. Laflam house in Sanbornton and at the General John Stark House in Manchester.

His work is so well known across New England that while being interviewed at the Four Corners Brick House recently, where he painted murals of Gilmanton in an upstairs bedroom, he was recognized by Joanne Corrigan of Chester, NH, who told him "I've been a fan of yours ever since I took architecture in college."

She said that she recognized him because her daughter and Wiggins' daughter had taken ballet lessons together for years and that he had worked on a stairway for a friend of hers many years ago.

"What he does completes a home," said Corrigan.

Wiggins says that he was raised in Sanbornton, where his father and uncle ran the well-known Wiggins Brothers antiques in Sanbornton Square and that his father had once owned the Lane Tavern building, which he later transferred at a bargain rate to the Sanbornton Historical Society.

Somewhat of an indifferent student who was very much his own person and was always getting into trouble, Wiggins ended up going to private school, the Rudolph Steiner School in Wilton, now the High Mowing School, thanks to the generosity of a wealthy aunt.

"I was focused on the arts and creativity," says Wiggins, who says that he was encouraged by a German teacher at the school who was an artist to pursue art as a career.

"That's when I started painting seriously, doing abstract art," says Wiggins, who traveled to Europe after graduating from the Steiner school, supporting himself by painting commercially, including murals in Greek taverns, while bouncing from London to Italy and Greece and meeting his future wife in London.

After his marriage in London in 1965 Wiggins returned to the United States and went into the antiques business with his father and uncle in Sanbornton, where he also worked with them restoring old houses.

"We found old murals underneath the wallpaper in many homes. They were wonderful, freely done and no one knew who had done them. I started to restore them because I couldn't stand to see them destroyed. And I used every technique I could find to make them look old, milk paint and burlap, whatever would retain that original look," says Wiggins.

It wasn't long before Wiggins's restoration work earned him a well deserved reputation for its authenticity and he began receiving offers for original work.

Unlike many muralists, Wiggins doesn't work from a preconceived idea of what the details of the finished work should look like, instead creating the elements as he goes along.

"I just go to the wall and start painting. It's all improvisation. I can't work any other way. If someone gives me a picture of what they want, I have other people who work in an illustrative style do the mural," says Wiggins.

He will soon turn 70, but he's lost none of his enthusiasm for the art form he has perfected. Some of his latest work is in the form of large, bordered murals which can be hung on the wall of an older home and will create the look and feel of a wall mural while still allowing the original features of the home to remain intact.

Wiggins lived in an older home in Gilmanton until 1974 before selling it and moving back to Sanbornton so that his children could attend the Sant Bani School and the middle 1990s moved to Nantucket, where he bought a home that he later resold at a handsome profit. He then moved to Montpelier, Vermont, where he lived and worked for several years before moving back to Gilmanton, where he set up his own studio on Rte. 140, just east of Gilmanton Corners.

He continues to work on the large hanging murals, which he says must look like they've been around for a long time and should even include elements that appear to be the result of having been painted years ago and exposed to the natural aging process of an older home.

His knowledge of the early days of the antique and restoration business of the mid 1960s to the present make him much in demand as a speaker on the antiques circuit, where his many first hand stories of old-time antiques and antiquities dealers draw those interested in the fascinating history of the business.