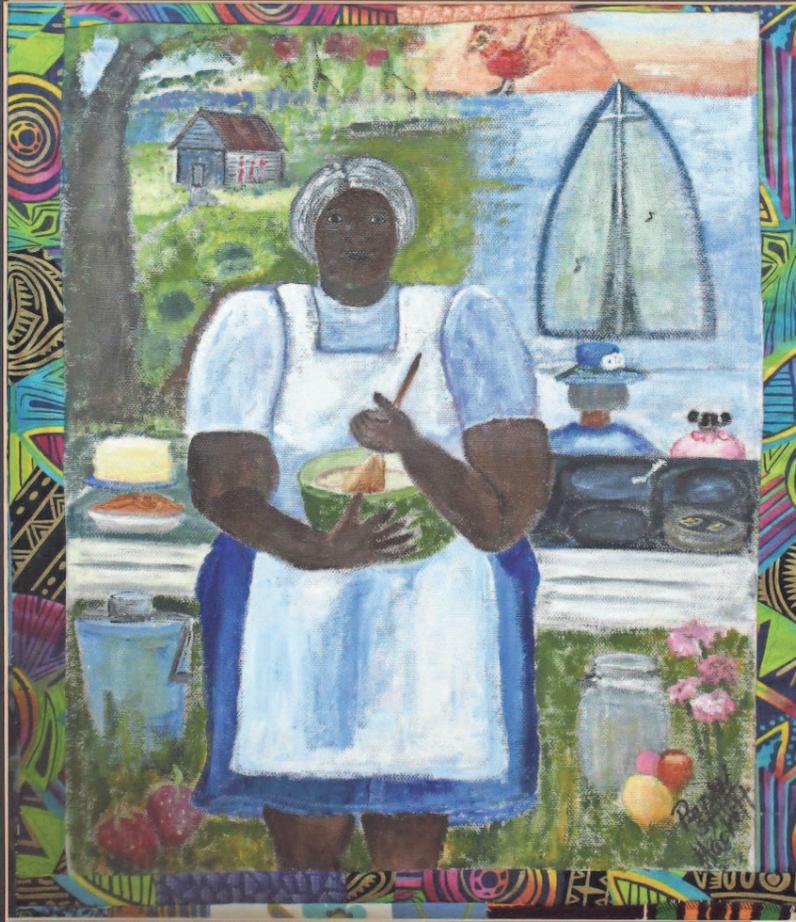


TLHLife



PAINTING MEMORIES

Penny Hackett's "Grandma Lizzie" is part of the "A Taste of the South" exhibit.
ROBERT COPPER

Southern stories spring to life on canvas

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

When artist Bernice "Penny" Hackett didn't have a yellow crayon, she went into her garden. The young Hackett plucked a blossom from the salad greens of the vegetable patch and rubbed it on her paper to complete her third grade homework assignment. Much like that yellow flower, Hackett's childhood memories growing up on a farm in Virginia remain the source from which her artwork blooms. Her work in Jefferson Arts Gallery's "A Taste of the South" reflects everything she loves about the region. She tells its stories through paint and fabric. **See HACKETT, Page 3C**

Hackett

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For Hackett, the south is mud oozing between her toes and the smell of a heavy rain. It's braiding grass and churning homemade strawberry ice cream under the cool shadow of a weeping willow tree.

"I think the [exhibit] title makes someone think of food, but the south has so much more," says Hackett. "The diversity, the trees, the wetlands, the egrets, the big oaks, the leaves, the buildings, the houses, the flowers, the animals. It's whatever that person perceives to be Southern to them."

Hackett's journey to art began in high school where she was encouraged to pursue the fine arts in college. She attended Norfolk State University and felt "green around the edges" when it came to learning the varied techniques. Painting was a natural fit, and she worked late into the evenings and early hours of the morning to practice and perfect her craft.

Professors supported her drive, showing her new brushstrokes to achieve greater shading, volume and texture. After graduation she returned to her hometown high school where she served as art teacher for 30 years. This full circle moment felt like a responsibility to instill students with the confidence she wished she'd had when entering the academic art world.

"When you're dealing with a student you have to be careful with your language because you never know what you might say that might hurt them later on in life," says Hackett. "You want students to be successful and you want them to exhibit their work."

Hackett's days were filled with lesson planning to avoid becoming stale in her instruction. She attended seminars and paged through magazines for new ideas. Hackett would even turn to her students for ideas.

"One student knew how to airbrush and taught me how to," recalls Hackett, always in awe of her classes' ingenuity and openness to new techniques.

When Hackett retired and moved to Monticello, she returned to her own paintbrush. It began gradually when her mother, now 93 years old, recounted tales from her rural upbringing. As Hackett listened on the phone, she sketched as she envisioned these scenes.

She drew her mother ironing her grandfather and uncle's shirts on an antique ironing board, filling an old soda bottle with water to dampen and steam the clothing. Hackett also spent time remembering growing up on her grandparents' farm in swirls of paint—milking cows, the hollyhocks that grew by the smokehouse, her grandmother's blue dress.

"My grandma loved to cook and she would offer anyone who came through her door homemade ice cream, cake, and pies," says Hackett. "In one of the paintings she has a big bowl in her hand and is stirring it with a wooden stick. She loved to can peaches and fruits and I have jars painted into the background to represent that."

Other multimedia works incorporate fabrics that relate to the subject at the center of the painting. Hackett collects handmade papers, twigs, feathers, seed-pods and other items to bring an authenticity to these scenes.

Walking through the Jefferson County farmer's market, she takes inspiration from big bundles of collar greens and children gazing at fruits and vegetables as if they were bright, shiny jewels. One painting incorporates these elements alongside a vine that grows up the side of the canvas. Though she admits that drawing the human figure has always been a challenge, she took advice she often gave to her students to overcome doubt.

"One eye might be a little larger or higher up than the other eye, but if we look at our bodies, nothing is perfectly set," says Hackett. "I had to tell myself 'it will



Hackett



Penny Hackett's "Farmers Market" is part of the Jefferson Arts Gallery's "A Taste of the South." She tells its stories through paint and fabric. PHOTOS BY ROBERT COPPER

If You Go

What: A Taste of the South

When: 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Wednesdays and Saturdays through Aug. 31, or by appointment

Where: Jefferson Arts Gallery, 575 W. Washington St., Monticello

Cost: Free admission

Contact: For more information, call 850-997-3311 or visit www.jeffersonartsgallery.com

be OK.' Once the art gallery members and people from the community started seeing it and liked what they were looking at, that helped build my confidence all the more."

Hackett works in her garage space for one to three weeks to complete each piece. Sometimes the paintings come to fruition on her kitchen counter. Every story is typed and hung alongside the paintings so viewers can both read and see an illustration of Hackett's memories.

When it comes to displaying and exhibiting the work, she loves to see viewers make connections from their own lives and childhoods. A Christmas-themed painting garnered many reactions at a recent solo exhibition, with people in the community approaching Hackett and sharing their own stories.

"When people would come to the gallery and walk through I could hear them say 'I can identify with this, this is me right here,'" says Hackett. "To have a community of people come to see your art and identify with what you have painted, that speaks volumes to me."

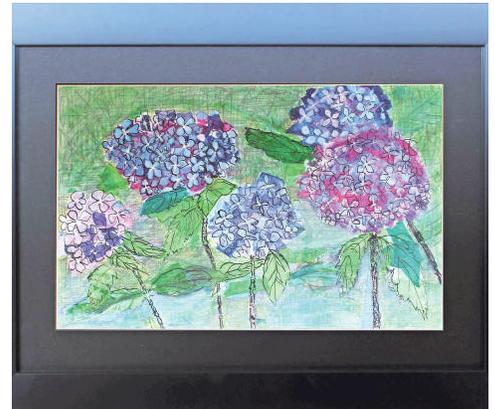
For Hackett, art shares life's wealth with every brushstroke. It's a message to future generations and a way of sparking joy in someone else's home if they choose to purchase a piece. The South runs deep within her works, and she implores attendees to "A Taste of the South" to see what the region means to them, then pick up a pencil, pen or brush.

"If you have some blackberries in your refrigerator and need the color purple, what's stopping you from rubbing some of that on your paper and drawing some lines around it to see what's going to happen?" asks Hackett.

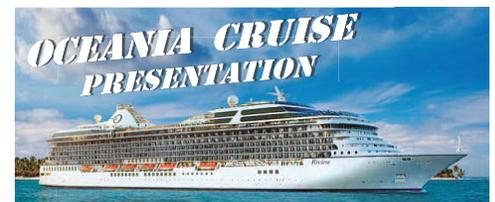
Amanda Sieradski is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



Tales of her mother's life inspire many of Penny Hackett's paintings, such as "Mamie Lee Ironing."



Artist Penny Hackett's hydrangeas are part of the "A Taste of the South" exhibit.



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