



SOUTHBURY MAKERS SPOTLIGHT

350TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL EDITION



David K. Merrill, painter and muralist

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SEDC Arts & Culture Subcommittee

If you have been to Southbury Town Hall in the last 40+ years, you have seen the large-scale mural that graces the stairwell near the ground floor entrance. In exquisite detail the mural depicts scenes of Southbury through the ages and seasons, carefully preserving the town's history in paint.

The artist is Southbury resident David K. Merrill. I recently sat down with him for a cup of coffee and a chat about his lifelong career in the arts. In addition to thousands of individual paintings, Merrill, 87, has also painted municipal murals for Newtown, Monroe and the surrounding areas.

The mural in Southbury's Town Hall was his very first. It came about from an encounter with a friend at a Christmas party in 1977.

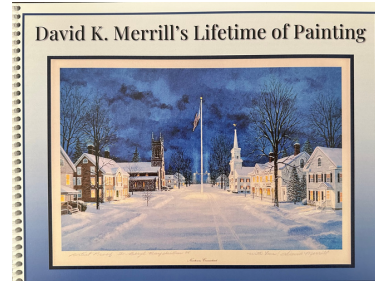
The new Town Hall building was recently completed, and a friend asked him if he'd be interested in painting a mural. "I had never done a mural before, but I would take on anything! So, I said 'Yes - I would love to!'"

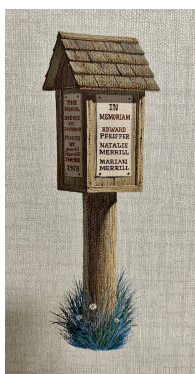
Merrill hoped to transform a nondescript stairwell into something beautiful. "I find that stairwells can be very interesting, because they are very boring, but you can really turn them into something special."

It took him 11 months to complete. "I started on January 2, 1978. I finished it in November 1978," says Merrill. "They gave me total freedom to pick and choose the subjects that I would use. They also gave me a key, so I could come and go as I pleased."

Merrill focused on historic subjects – local churches, barns, and homes. It was also important for him to include water, light, nature, and the changing seasons. He was inspired by locations like Kettletown State Park, Bullet Hill School, and the Ludorf Barn.

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Merrill is drawn to landscape painting by a lifelong appreciation of nature that began when he was a youngster on his uncle's farm in Monroe. "As a child, I would come home from school and my mom and dad would both still be working, so I would go into the woods and climb trees. I love trees," says Merrill. "I used to go up to the farm and see the animals and smell the hay and walk through the barns. Barns became a very important subject to me, you see." Along with the beauty of the New England landscape, Merrill also counts famous artists Andrew Wyeth and Winslow Homer as inspirations.

He briefly taught art at the Southbury Training School from 1963 – 1967, then turned to painting full-time as a means to support his wife and four children. "I made sure I worked 12 hours a day, painting. I made sure my children never went without a meal, never went in a cold house. They had everything they needed. It was a labor of love."

Merrill once went on a seven-year streak creating two paintings a week. He still paints today. "I am doing commission work; I like to do my own thing. I've got to pay the bills," he says.

I asked Mr. Merrill if he had a favorite of his. "There is a favorite, yes. It took me one month working ten hours a day," he says. Titled "The Birches", it pays tribute to his first wife who passed away at the age of 37 of Hodgkin's disease. "This is the first painting I did after her passing," says Merrill. The painting, now in a private collection, is a winter scene featuring a forest of birch trees. "(The two trees in the foreground) this is my wife and I. This (large central tree) is the maker of all things, and these four small trees to the right represent my children. There is so much of me in this painting."

Is there a least favorite painting? "Yes," he says with a chuckle. "It was something early on in my career. I worked it and I overworked it, and it wasn't right. I took it to the dump and threw it away, but then a man pulled it out and took it home with him."

Merrill offered some advice for young artists trying to make a name for themselves. "Find a subject that gives you the most pleasure to paint. That's very important, whatever it is, because you're going to do your best work and people will see your best." He continued, "I also learned the most when I had to struggle the most. I learned I had to solve the problem to make the painting work. As an artist you have to be satisfied with your work, you have to be happy."

He's not just a painter. At age 87, Merrill plans this summer to hike to the top of Mount Katahdin in Maine. The August 2nd hike is his way to honor his favorite baseball player Thurman Munson, who died on this date in 1979. He will be accompanied by his youngest son, daughter and nephew. "Whatever it takes," he says. "I am old, but I don't feel old. My spirit is so young."

Merrill will be giving a special talk about his mural at Southbury's Civic Day Event from 1-3pm on Saturday, March 11 at Town Hall. His book, "David K. Merrill's Lifetime of Painting" is also available for purchase at the Newtown Public Library, courtesy the Newtown Lions Club.

For more information about this month's maker, or if you are interested in being featured in an upcoming issue of the Southbury Makers Spotlight, contact us at edcsouthburymakers@gmail.com or visit www.southbury-ct.org/arts.