



Ellicott City's Artistic Historian

By JudyColbert • Photography By Isabel Schaefer of Steady & Sway

Wiley Purkey's artistic talents provide us with a visual history of Old Ellicott City that delights our memory cells and restores what Mother Nature and time have tried to abolish with deluges and conflagrations. You may not realize you've seen his work, but if you know the mural by the visitor center, then you know his art.

You can see 50 of Purkey's recent creations in an exhibit called, "A Brush with History," at the Columbia Art Center, 6100 Foreland Garth, Columbia, as part of the city's Sestercentennial celebration. The exhibit opens September 15, several days after he turns 69, and runs through October 7, with a special artist's reception on Sunday, September 18, from 1 to 3 p.m. He's been featured in numerous shows, including at least ten solo shows, the first one in 1974 when he was 21. He also has participated in countless street art festivals and group shows at galleries.

Purkey's "Fanciful works are infused with his own experiences and memories," says the Old 250 Ellicott City committee in describing his works. He's been painting in the Historic District of Ellicott City for more than fifty years.

Born and raised in the Ellicott City Historic District, he was

barely 13 when his imagination was ignited by the colorful album cover and interior art of the Beatles' Sgt. Pepper album and he bought an oil painting set at Olin's Art Shop on Main Street. He and Ellicott City and their journey together are inseparable. His area family history is even older. "My grandparents sold vegetables from a horse-drawn cart here."

He won a prize in a city-sponsored show 50 years ago, during its Bicentennial celebration, so he figured an exhibit of 50 commemorative paintings would be appropriate for this year's show. Prints have been made of the paintings and are available in two sizes, 16"x 16" and 12" x 12", on archival rag paper.

You'll find some themes running and not running through his work, other than the general subject. One, he says he doesn't have a favorite color, but he uses, "A lot of orange because that's his wife's Claudia's favorite." He admits he liked red as a child, but, "I didn't know any better, and then I liked purple until it was taken over by some football team." Two, there are few people included because the city and its buildings are the subjects, and he tends to conflate the years with a memory from one decade and a thought from another. Adding people would mean

clothing and that would pinpoint a fairly exact moment in time. There may be students in a painting of the Patapsco Female Institute, but that existed from 1837 through 1891.

History is depicted, as in his painting of the Ellicott Theater where the marquee has "The Goddess" as the feature movie. The 1958 film, with Kim Stanley, was shot in Ellicott City. The Howard



was the 1976 Maryland state teacher of the year," says Purkey. While oils are his favorite medium when he paints outdoor scenes. Purkey loves working with watercolors for architecture because "You can get into every little detail. Oil painting is too time-consuming." He's also adept at egg tempera, oil pastels, and most kinds of drawing materials. He has recently turned some attention to making constructions out of re-purposed materials. He works with acrylics when teaching classes. "I teach at the Ellicott City B & O station the first Thursday of each month,



Art Show Poster Designer Wiley Purkey

Wiley Purkey wins Best Art Depiction of Ellicott City in 1973. His design was featured on the poster celebrating Ellicott City's Bi-Centennial.

House, he says, "Is portrayed with two stories of wrought iron railing although the second story was removed during the War."

"I don't think I have natural talent, although I will admit to a natural ability. I'm glad I started with oils because it's one of the hardest disciplines to learn. I'm glad I learned then instead of waiting until I was older. When you're young, your work looks undisciplined but when you get older you learn the shortcuts needed for successful painting."

"When I was 16, I became interested in painting Ellicott City. I started with pen and ink drawings that sold at Olin's for \$1." He says he's totally self-taught, but he did receive inspiration from an art teacher, Morris B. Green, at Howard High School. "He taught me how to desire to learn and challenge myself and be excited about art. He taught me a yearning to learn. Claudia had him, too, a few years later." Claudia, his wife of 37 years, also went into art, in the commercial world as a graphic artist. "Green

Ellicott City Art Show: Entry RULES And Form

Date: Sunday, June 3, 1973 10:00 to 5:00 PM
 Place: North & South Sides of Main Street in "Historic" Ellicott City, Maryland
 Original works in all media: painting, drawing, graphics, photography, collage, sculpture and crafts. All work must be ENTIRELY executed by the exhibitor. (NOTE: All works in the Crafts Div. must be handcrafted, in true sense of art.)
 Approximately 5500 prizes will be awarded to professional and non-professional artists. Included are "Best Work Depicting Ellicott City".
 Regulations: Each artist must devise his own method of display-peg board, chicken wire, etc. Displays must not obstruct the sidewalks or other displays. No dealers or salesmen of articles made by others. Displays must be in place by 10:00 AM for judging.
 In case of bad weather, the Festival will be postponed to June 10, 1973. For verification--call 465-6236 the day of the Show.
 Mail entry form and donation of \$3.00--Roger D. Marino, 8382 Court Avenue, Ellicott City, Maryland 21043. Checks should be made payable to "ELLICOTT CITY ART FESTIVAL". (Please include a self-addressed envelope, w/stamp, to receive space number.)

ELLICOTT CITY ART FESTIVAL
 ENTRY FORM--Spring 1973
 I agree to abide by the regulations as outlined above.
 Signature: _____
 Address: _____
 Telephone: _____
 Check one: Professional Artists SPACE NO. _____

through Howard County and on Tuesday and Thursday afternoon at the South Carroll Senior and Community Center. You can join the latter if you're 60 or older."

He worked in the art gallery and picture framing business for 35 years, accumulating an immense knowledge of art history and techniques. Almost as interesting as Purkey's paintings are the materials he uses for framing. You'll see children's building blocks, croquet

mallets, Lincoln logs, closet poles, and reclaimed lumber, among other materials. He's also illustrated nine books, six of which he wrote. "I do all illustrations on an Apple iPad. Computer animation is an extraordinary tool. I don't think I could draw on the iPad the way I do if I hadn't learned the old-fashioned way." Andrew Wyeth is a favorite Purkey painter, in part, he says, "Because the subject matters, Chadds Ford and Ellicott City so much alike." He also favors Claude Monet, Van Gogh and the



A sneak peak of Wiley Purkey's paintings featured in "A Brush with History"



Edward Hopper street scenes. The Sykesville resident grows an active garden with flowers and vegetables (need any tomatoes?). They're eaten and used for subject matter. Winter is his favorite season, with snow on the ground. "Even when I dress for the occasion, standing on cardboard to keep me isolated from the cold ground, the cold sucks the heat out of you."

Purkey's artistic history can be found at the B & O station, and on his Etsy.com store. You'll find paintings, pillow covers, scarves, and books. The items are reasonably priced, he says, so everyone

can enjoy them. "Continuing forward, anything that is not a print or book," says Purkey, "Will be discontinued after current inventory is sold. I will not be reprinting any scarves, coloring books, pillows, or mugs, so get them while you can."

"A Brush with History," is at the Columbia Art Center, 6100 Foreland Garth, Columbia, on Monday and Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and 4:30 to 8 p.m.; Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and on Saturday from 10 a.m. to noon.