

The Making of an Artist

By Liz Mitchell





Creativity, passion and technical skill are the three elements required of an artist, according to Aki Kato, and technical skill is the least of these.

An accomplished painter and craftsman, Aki's current role is that of mentor and best friend to Lynn Bonge. Aki grew up in Japan where he enjoyed his passion for art, then moved to the states after high school to study art specializing in Eastern and Renaissance styles and earned his degree in oil painting. His long term goal is simply to paint and to make a modest living, and he is most content while helping and sharing himself with others. Lynn has had no art lessons, but grew up with an artistic family and taught herself everything she does today. Her first work was in folk art, then she began painting on furniture and began working with oils about three years ago.

Lynn and Aki met in the late 1990s working at Habersham Plantation, a high end Georgia company which sells hand-painted pieces. Leaving to pursue a business of her own, Lynn and her husband Bruce knew Aki was the perfect complement to their team.

"He had never compromised quality," Lynn said, "He was the best."

The exquisite designs on furniture often feature the rooster which was one of their first popular statements. Lynn described one of their special techniques: "The special finish process of catalyzed acrylic finish, which Bruce developed, is a low sheen which brings out intensity of colors while softening the art and it is almost impervious to liquids."

From their wholesale hand painted furniture business first located in Henderson, NC for several years, Camden Field at Home then was transformed into a retail shop in Beaufort, SC. Then they found that the store took all of their time away from their art. "It was a joy, but there was a compromise," she said.

"She had to sacrifice her creativity in order to support the other artists, and we did not have time to do what we actually love," Aki said. Although closing their shop, Aki continues to paint furniture and murals and to support Lynn's continuing exploration of her technique. She also does oils on canvas, paints on tiles or murals on a wall when the notion presents itself.

Featured in more than 50 or 60 publications and with her folk art exhibited in museums, both artists quietly continue to perfect their style while

genuinely loving their art. "Aki is my encourager. He has been the greatest influence on my art," Lynn said, "and we have such a respect for each other's ability with no thought of competition. "Now I just want to do the art for art's sake," Lynn said. "I want to see what I can do and to see how far I can go. God has given me the passion and the creativity, plus the opportunity to enjoy that, and now I can develop my skill. I love beauty and beautiful things."

"The artist has God-given talent, and the craftsman can develop skill by practicing. I feel closer to the craftsman," Aki said, "and Lynn needs the place to be whatever she wants to be." "It gives me such pleasure," she said, "and I want to leave something for my precious grandchildren."

Camden Field was named for one of her granddaughters. Madison, the other granddaughter, had one of their collections developed for her. Also Aki developed Jordan's River Line for Lynn's grandson Jordan.

Lynn has illustrated two children's books and has plans to write and illustrate one of her own. It already has a title and a fully developed theme: Henry of the Lowcountry, a story which will personify exploits of her lovable Labrador who occupies a large spot in her living room and in her enormous warm heart.

Currently renovating a home in Beaufort's downtown historic district, Lynn and Bruce envision creating a studio which can be home to a variety of future projects.

One of their dreams is to find a few pre-teen children who have some artistic ability and interest but who might be on the fringes and would never have avenues for training in the field.

"Art is a way of communicating, and we would love to be able to help children who might otherwise be thought of as throw-aways for lack of opportunity," Lynn said.

Meeting Lynn and Aki is an introduction to their world of artistic passion, as they bubble with telling of their love for their work as well as for their world of family and friends.

The tale of these artists has woven through many lives and promises to continue brushing living color on anything they may touch. ■

