

Art Is Where You Find It

By Rhoda Alben-Aronson, In Arts



For many years, a highlight of my Memorial and Labor Day weekends in New York City was the renowned art show that centered on Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village and spread to the surrounding streets and avenues. Artisans and artists of every stripe gathered, crowding any space, no matter how small, to display their inspirations and canvases. It was exhilarating, and New York at its very best.

The New York University campus was located in that area, so the addition of all those young people added even more energy to the scene. Until NYU began an unrelenting campaign in that neighborhood, to expand the physical imprint of its campus, and deny the sponsors of the show the space they needed, it was

block after block of interesting, colorful, imaginative, impressive, and avant-guard artwork. There were vendors selling handmade jewelry, glass, furniture, and decorative pieces of an astonishing number of metal compositions, such as gold, silver, titanium, copper, and pewter.

Every time I went, I seemed to be drawn to the very same table. A woman was selling her personally handcrafted enameled pieces: copper fused with bright colors that could be worn as jewelry or displayed on a wall or shelf. Something resonated in me: I greatly admired the work but, for some reason, never bought anything.

However, on this day there was a small handwritten sign which was casually propped on that table that simply said: "Classes Given" and I swear my heart leapt! I immediately asked, "Where can I sign up?"

Thus began a fascinating time of my life. I would go to her studio every week for class with other students in "the Village," and I learned how to paint with enamel, to fire in a kiln, and to tap into a creativity that I really never seriously explored before.

Enameling is an aged art form, presumably originating in ancient Greece around the Sixth Century BC. The Greek artworks were exported to Russia and Asia Minor and, eventually, to other parts of the world by the Celtic and Roman tribes.

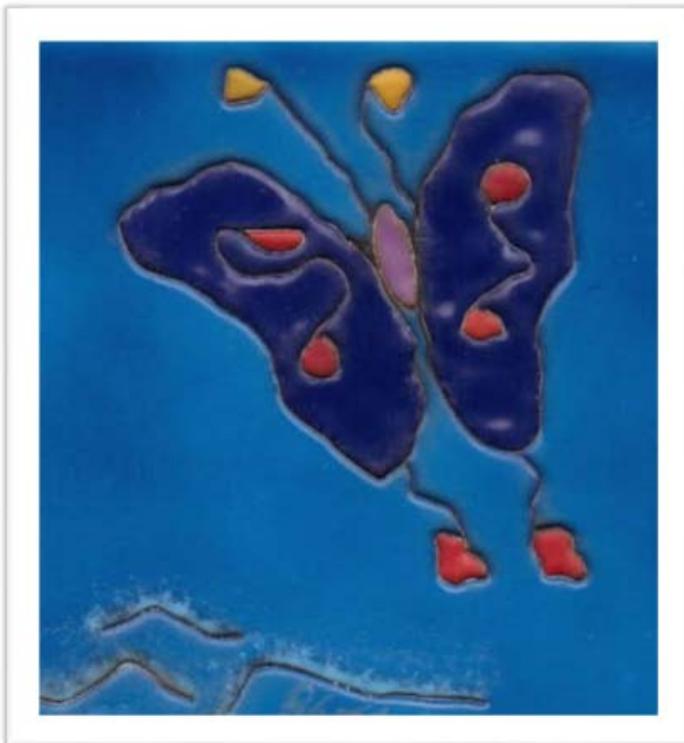
It is a process in which colored glass is ground to a very fine consistency. Then it is fused on to a metal, precious or otherwise, at very high heat. Unlike the artist who

applies oils, watercolors, or acrylics to a canvas, the enamellist must fuse the colors in a kiln and the work and design are affected by the degree of heat and the timing of that process. It is intricate and demanding. Sometimes there are happy accidents: but rarely!



Rhoda's Jewelry Box Cover

The oldest form of enameling is Cloisonné, (Kloi-za-nay), in which the surface decoration of different colors of enamel is divided by thin strips of metal in order to hold them separate. This is necessary because when the enamels are fused, and thus in a liquid or flowing form, they would otherwise blend.



Rhoda's Butterfly Cloissone

For several years I attended classes, improved my skills and produced a fair amount of intricate wall decorations, gifts and mementos for friends and relatives. I was much fulfilled. Then I decided that unless I was willing to commit to more time, effort and money---like the purchase of my own kiln and other necessary equipment---I had gone as far I wanted to go with enameling. I became an art observer once again and this led to another serendipitous encounter.

One of the premier art shows on the East Coast is the Outdoor Art Festival held one weekend every summer in Mystic, Connecticut... a lovely small town on the Long Island Sound. The festival is huge and crowded, and since it draws visitors from the entire New England region, and beyond, reservations must be booked months in advance. But I was lucky. I have extended family living there and they welcomed me any time. The Festival was not unlike the Washington Square show, in that it took over the entire main street of town and most of the surrounding roads. My family lived just one block beyond the limit of the defined Festival area, so I could easily go back and forth at my own pleasure. And indeed it was delightful to see the happy faces standing behind tables stocked with colorful wares. However, one person stood out from all the rest!

There she was, beautiful in a long flowing gown, wearing a floppy, wide brimmed hat, sipping goodness knows what from a large silver goblet, standing under an old, magnificent copper beech tree, with a welcoming smile!



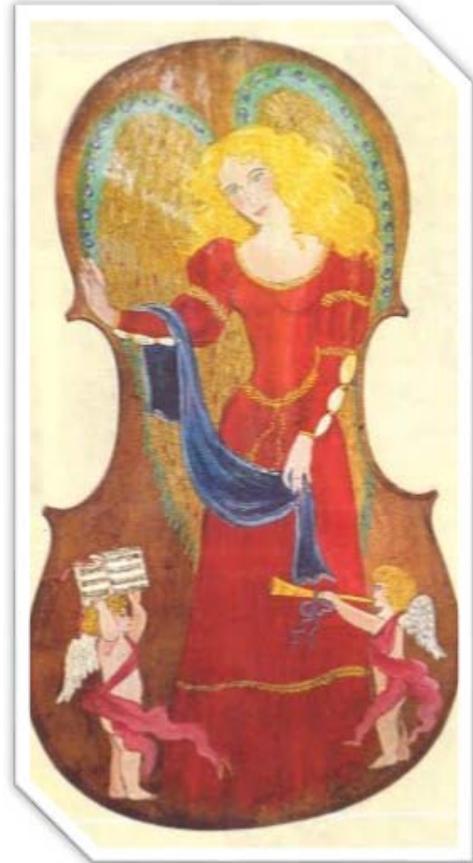
Rhoda with Denise

I had to pass her every time I went to the show, and I felt I had to stop at her table each time, just to chat or buy something. She is Denise Morris Curt, "The Connecticut

Limner"- a true Renaissance woman who employs the ancient art of limning ("to illuminate, to embellish with gold or bright colors to lay on color") - much as it was used in the 11th century by European illuminators, learned monks, and scribes, and later in the 17th and 18th centuries by artists to create merchants' signs or portraits.

The favorite base for much of her creations is wood. Musical instruments that can no longer be used for their original purpose are sent to her by music conductors throughout the country so that she can give them a "new song." Pieces of wooden panels rescued from old homes, ships, and mills also find new life as the medium for her artistic expression. Denise says, "I love old wood, I believe it should live on, taking on new meaning by giving esthetic pleasure and serving as a constant reminder of the past."

Because commercially manufactured paints do not withstand the changes in wood as it expands and contracts, she mixes her own paints according to formulas dating back to the 1700's, that she has updated. Denise uses sweet milk, curds, sour milk, clay soil, and even jewels, to achieve the vibrant colors her work necessitates. She is the only American limner using jewel dust technique, so her portraits, which she calls, "Instant Ancestors" look as if they were created in Colonial times.

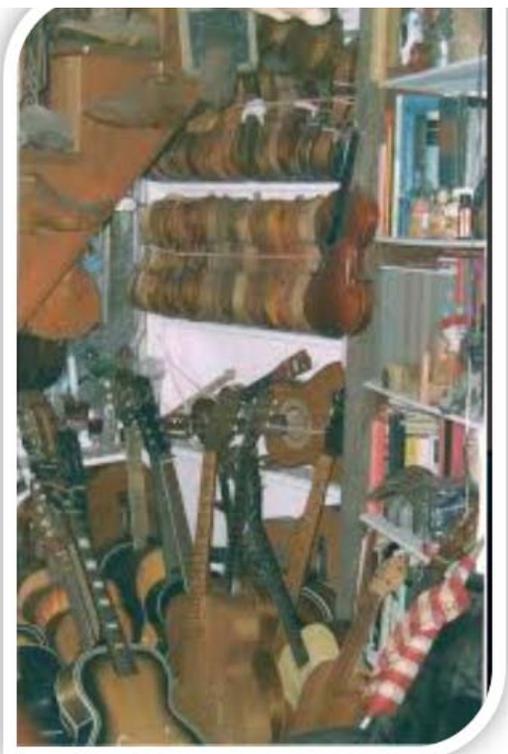


Denise Violin

Denise studied at Yale, then under Renaissance master limner Gabriel Luchetti, so she is eminently familiar with rare and ancient materials. Even her varnishes are handcrafted from white lead, linseed oil, bees' wax, and either gum copal or turpentine.



Denise's Mirror



Denise's Room of Instruments

She is, by any measure, an extraordinary woman, not only as a member of "Who's Who of American Women," but a force who has brought her sharp intellect to positions she has held: Commissioner of The Connecticut Commission on the Arts; gallery director; Corporate Art Consultant; art juror; consultant to statewide civic organizations; fashion and interior designer; art restorer; historian and lecturer. Since our first meeting, almost forty years ago, I have seen her use her keen artist's eye to become a photographer extraordinaire, traveling frequently to Europe, Scandinavia, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, India, Tahiti, Bali, China, Singapore, and Haiti among other places, to expand her, and thus, our horizons.

Denise has provided a unique platform for artists in a venue that she directs, "Meet the Artists and Artisans," on the Village Green in Milford, as well as juried shows in other Connecticut towns. She shares her talent, enthusiasm, and expertise for these shows which are reminiscent of people gathering at the center of Colonial towns to share ideas, wares, and gossip. To visit her shows is special-- to be welcomed into her home is life altering!

She has restored an 18th century carriage house, which once served as the first cobbler shop in Southern Connecticut, and transformed it into her "Angel Bower." The name stems from her favorite subject--angels that glimmer with her jeweled paints as they surround you with warmth and color. The second floor of her "Bower" is home to many of those old stringed instruments, which hang from the ceiling or are tucked into corners, waiting for a second

life. You have entered a world filled with her passions and preferences. It is like nothing you have ever seen before.

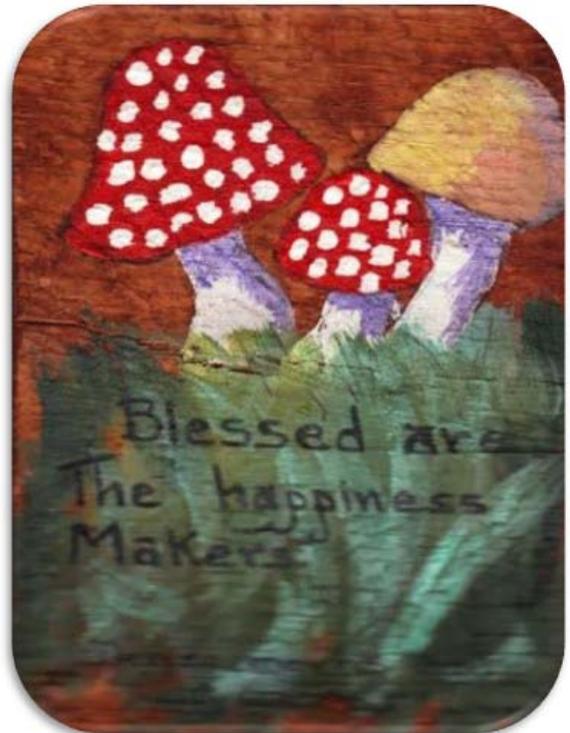
Her energy excites you, her intelligence informs, and the breadth of her talent is exceptional. It is no wonder that her works are in collections throughout America and Europe, including those of J. Paul Getty, Paul Mellon, Leonard Bernstein, and Vincent Price to name just a few.

You don't have to be A Mellon or Getty to own one of Denise Curt's creations. Her wonderful outlook on life, is expressed simply and beautifully on one of my prized possessions. It is a simple 4x5 inch wood block from an 1873 Niantic Connecticut Smoke House that she has converted into a "guidepost" for daily living.

It consists of a rendering of brightly colored mushrooms, reaching to the sun, with the inscription "Blessed are The happiness Makers."

Thank you, Denise, and I'll never forget the day my serendipitous journey through the world of art took me to Mystic, Connecticut.

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Denise's Woodblock