



## Denise Morris Curt

### The Connecticut Limner

**LIMN** (lim), V.T. *Archaic*. 1. to represent in drawing or painting. 2. to portray in words; describe. (late ME *lymne*, var. of ME *lumine* to illuminate (manuscripts), aph. var. of *enlumine* — MF *enlumner* — L *inluminare* to embellish, lit., light up; see ILLUMINATE)

— *The Random House Dictionary*

Denise Morris Curt is a pioneer in reviving a fascinating genre of painting — limning. Limning is an archaic art form attributed to New England folk artists of the 17th and 18th centuries and, further back, to 11th century illuminators of Medieval Europe. The early Colonial portrait limners worked in the tradition of sign painters — flat figures with a sense of sharp outline and focused detail.

Since 1957 Curt has been experimenting and perfecting her paint recipes to achieve the vibrance and brilliance of the 11th century illuminated manuscripts. The results of her research can be seen in her Milford studio, a charming 18th century stable once used as a cobbler shop. The walls are bedecked with limnings of legendary creatures, goddesses, unicorns, centaurs, angels; and old sailing vessels — galleons, frigates, whalers and clippers.

Limners often worked on wood and Curt hunts for historic wood panels from New England homes, ships and furniture. She also has a passion for painting on musical stringed instruments (usually deactivated) such as the violin, cello and guitar. The elegant patina of the instruments is a fine medium for works like her delicately limned portraits, "Persephone," the goddess of Spring, and the "Angel of Joy."

Manufactured paints, oils, acrylics and casein do not withstand the porosity changes in wood. Thus her search for paint recipes.

Sweet milk curds and sour milk are the base for all her paints. Varnishes must be boiled and consist of beeswax, gum copal, various oils and preservatives. Some of her recipes come from medieval days — her lapis lazuli is gem dust ground with milk curd. Some come from early America — frankincense yellow is an innovation based on a 17th century coachpainter's recipe.

Red clay from Guilford is a basic ingredient for dragon's blood red and all bold colors are outlined with black inks made from burnt grape leaves. Secondary colors are also exotic in extraction. Emerald quartz dust and vinegar boiled in copper kettles produces pale and deep greens. Ground shellfish creates regal purple.

For her portrait, "Angel of Joy," Curt concocted the following: "the angel's hair is melted frankincense, sweet milk, chromate of potash, tempera, applied hot. Her gown of vermillion is sulphur, milk curd and North Guilford clay; the wings are Sieneese soil; Brazilian amethyst and emerald particles from Argentinian rhodochrosite particles provide the orange coloration. The black outlining is Connecticut grapevine charred and the brown shading is Greek grapevine."

Curt is recognized all over the world for her limnings — examples can be found in Europe, South America and nearly every state in the U.S. Noted collectors include Leonard Bernstein, the late J. Paul Getty, the Paul Mellons, Blanca Ossario and Vincent Price.

Curt also helps other artists bring their work to the public's attention. She co-ordinates "Meet the Artist" shows in shopping centers and on town greens, for which she takes no commission. She feels strongly that many artists are too subjective and sensitive about their own works and, consequently, find the role of merchandising awkward or painful.

—*Price Berrien*

