

Did you draw this? : Artist tries to track down unknown creators of pictures she replicated through mosaics

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A horse with a coat of stars. A seven-legged spider. A crab sporting a rainbow shell. And a bat with big green eyes.

Santa Barbara artist Betsy Gallery stumbled upon these marking pen-on-paper children's artwork and five others at a State Street thrift shop back in the 1980s and took them home for 50 cents each.

Now she's hosting an exhibition hoping to find the people behind the drawings.

"I love them," said the 71-year-old. "I thought they were so wonderful that I wanted to find out who the original artists are."

"I figured if we had an art exhibit, maybe some of the publicity will catch someone's eyes, maybe someone in the class or the teacher or one of the kids will recognize his or her first name, and that will spark the memory of having done that drawing."

The 9-inch-square pieces have spoken to Ms. Gallery often over the past couple of decades. In 1994, she silk-screened the images onto an apron. Most recently, she reproduced each one in mosaic form, some double the size of the original, cutting the smalti (glass mosaic tiles) herself.

But telling her who the creators are is another story. Eight of the nine signed only their first names.

In an effort to fill in the blanks, the mosaics and the originals are included in "While We Teach We Learn: Eight Artists Inspired by Their Students," an exhibit that started April 26 with a reception and runs through May 25 at Art From Scrap Gallery, 302 E. Cota St. in Santa Barbara. The exhibit also features two sketches by students Ms. Gallery taught in Africa and the mosaics she made of them.

In addition to Ms. Gallery, seven other Santa Barbara artists are featured in the exhibit that explores how students inspire art teachers.

Ms. Gallery, an Alameda native, teaches mosaics at Santa Barbara School of Mosaic Art and to students at area elementary schools through the Incredible Children's Art Network. She earned her bachelor's degree in English in 1963 at Marquette University in Milwaukee, master's in teaching in 1967 at the University of Chicago and master's in clinical art therapy in 1983 at Loyola Marymount University.

She said the mystery kids' drawings captivated her. "They were so free and creative and beautiful. It reminded me of what Picasso said: We as adults have to learn to draw as children. They're so spontaneous, and they're not constrained by any standards imposed by the world like the sky has to be blue and the grass has to be green."

Judging by the quality of the pictures, the mystery kids were probably third-graders, Ms. Gallery said, adding that she thinks the kids went to a Santa Barbara school.

"Can you imagine something you did in third grade all of sudden being in an art show?" Ms. Gallery said with a big grin. "(Approximately) 25 years later!"

Ms. Gallery did Internet research to try to find the one person who signed her full name, but couldn't track her down: Nicole Barrett, are you out there?

Ms. Barrett, whoever or wherever she is, drew what Ms. Gallery called a "perky" chicken. "This is one of the most charming; it's so delightful."

Ms. Gallery decided against trying to call local schools to find the kids because neither they nor the teacher, who by now likely is retired, would be there. Instead, she contacted Mary Price, curator at the Art From Scrap Gallery, who agreed to display the mosaics and drawings in an exhibit to bring attention to them.

Ms. Gallery talked about what made the drawings special.

Valentino — Ms. Gallery said she thinks he misspelled his name when he wrote "Valetino" — drew a smiling, yellow lion. "He (the lion) is just so happy and full of life and ready to meet the world. His tail is up just like a cat when a cat's happy."

Lynn drew a red and yellow horse covered with stars and featuring what might be unicorn horns. Ms. Gallery called it a sophisticated design.

Brooke thought outside the beach for her crab that has a rainbow of colors: lines of red, purple, orange, yellow and green. "We (adults) are more restrained by reality," Ms. Gallery said, summarizing the girl's approach as "This is my crab, and I'll do it my way."

Alexia drew the spider, which Ms. Gallery considers to be wonderfully mischievous. "It's just like a kid with a big head and big eyes."

Two of the kids drew dogs. Peter's picture is of an apparent dachshund, and Ms. Gallery called it adorable. Amy drew a dog with short ears and spots, and Ms. Gallery said it might be a breed the girl invented. "It (the head) is cocked, like it's communicating with the viewer. That obviously is a happy dog. He got his bone."

Ms. Gallery likes the original approach in Carmen's drawing of a bat, which she called advanced in its simplicity. Instead of emphasizing wings, the child drew the entire bat as one big face but kept the angles and points usually associated with the mammal. Ms. Gallery liked its sense of mystery — especially the big, green eyes. "They should be threatening, but they're not because they're so fun."

Kristen emphasized the ears on her elephant by coloring them a deep red. It also features distinct tusks. "It's very nice with good details," Ms. Gallery said.



Ms. Gallery hammers smalti, glass tiles used in her mosaics.

STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

To create the mosaics, Ms. Gallery photocopied each drawing and used it as a guide. She placed the drawing under her glass mosaic tiles — smalti that Ms. Gallery cut up with a hammer. She matched the tiles of various colors to the drawing.

After she assembled and glued the tiles together, she removed the photocopy. She glued the finished work to a wedi tiling board.

It took her 20 hours to create each one. Ms. Gallery faced the challenge of translating art from one medium into another, but succeeded in accurately reproducing the kids' drawings.

Ms. Gallery said it wasn't difficult.

She emphasized the same details as the kids, such as the dark lines in Nicole Barrett's chicken and the various shades of brown and sketch-like quality in Amy's dog.

"For the stars on (Lynn's) horse, I got those (beads) at a local bead shop. There was no way to make stars quite that tiny (from smalti)," Ms. Gallery said.

She captured details such as Alexia's uneven black coloring of her spider and the little smile on Brooke's crab. She said she tried to duplicate the colors as closely as possible, but couldn't always get the exact shade.

Ms. Gallery said that if she can track down the students and their teacher, she would like to host a reception for them in the Art From Scrap gallery, where they can see the drawings on display.

Anyone with information on the artists is asked to contact Ms. Gallery at 963-2878 or bgallery@cox.net.

"All we need is one person who remembers."

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AFRICAN ART

Betsy Gallery is displaying elaborate, 1964 crayon drawings by two of her 15-year-old African students as part of "While We Teach We Learn: Eight Artists Inspired by Their Students," an exhibit at the Art from Scrap Gallery, 302 E. Cota St. The Santa Barbara artist also created mosaics based on their art.

"I asked them to draw something from their tribal life," said Ms. Gallery, who taught the students in 1964 when she was a Peace Corps volunteer in Nkongsamba, Cameroon.

Beatrice Kwendi depicted some kind of ritual, and Beatrice Mephre drew a headdress, Ms. Gallery said.

The precise medium of the drawings is crayon-resist, in which a crayon drawing is on an inked-color background. The wax from the crayon resists the ink, and the crayon stands out over it. Ms. Gallery re-inked the background for the headdress.

She is trying to track down Ms. Kwendi and Ms. Mephre, who would be in their 60s today. She wrote the Peace Corps about them late last year but hasn't heard back. "They're trying to find if they can locate those two artists."

FYI

"While We Teach We Learn: Eight Artists Inspired by Their Students," an exhibit of works by area artists plus drawings by nine unknown kids and two African students, runs through May 25 at the Art From Scrap Gallery, 302 E. Cota St. Artists are Betsy Gallery, Katie Acheson, Magda Barnes, Angela Lang, Sophie Friedman, Carissa Moline, Patti Post and Dug Uyesaka. Five of the artists have been regular classroom educators in the Santa Barbara-based Incredible Children's Art Network, and Ms. Gallery has taught mosaics at area elementary schools through iCAN.

The gallery is open 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursday; and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday. For more information, call Mary Price, gallery curator, at 884-0459, ext. 15, or go to www.exploreecology.org. (Art From Scrap is part of Explore Ecology, a nonprofit stressing education programs and art.)

Ms. Gallery, one of the exhibit's artists, is trying to track down the kids who created the nine drawings that inspired her mosaics. If you have information, contact Ms. Gallery at 963-2878 or bgallery@cox.net.