

NEWS > NEWS OBITUARIES

Delores A. 'Dee' Herget, practitioner of Baltimore tradition of window screen painting, dies



Delores A. "Dee" Herget was featured in the documentary "The Screen Painters."



By **FREDERICK N. RASMUSSEN** | frasmussen@baltsun.com

UPDATED: February 18, 2024 at 10:57 a.m.

Delores A. “Dee” Herget, a prolific practitioner of the Baltimore folk art tradition of painting colorful window screens, died Feb. 11 of complications from dementia at Caring Home Assisted Living in Essex. She was 89.

“She was an original. Her bold style derived from the original William Oktavec ‘Red Bungalow’ is unmistakable,” wrote Elaine Eff, co-founder with Ms. Herget of the Painted Screen Society in 1985, in an email referring to the artist who invented screen painting.

“She painted, she demonstrated for governors and kindergartners, taught tirelessly, traveling as far as San Francisco to share her gift,” Ms. Eff wrote.

Delores Ann Amrhein, who was known as Dee, was born in Baltimore to Bernard Amrhein, a metalworker at the old Glenn L. Martin Co. in Middle River, and Mildred Frebert, a homemaker.

The family lived for a time in Inglewood, California, where her father continued working in the aviation industry. Shortly before her mother’s death in 1942, they returned to Baltimore.

Her father married Edith Stewart, a teacher, and settled in Gardenville. Her stepmother introduced Ms. Herget to the world of art and classical music.

She attended city public schools until dropping out and eloping at 16 when she married Cliff Gordy, who was in the Air Force.

The couple divorced and she returned to Baltimore with their two children and took a job in City Hall as a switchboard operator listening to constituents’ complaints.

In 1969 she married Carl Herget, a city police officer, and moved to Highlandtown. He died last year.

In 1975, she resigned from her job after losing her hearing.

“It really depressed me,” she told the old Sunday Sun Magazine in 1978. “I thought to myself, ‘Well, here I am, washed up at 40.’”

Ms. Herget was thinking about how to reinvent herself and sitting on her sofa one evening came up with an idea. “Suddenly it struck me. ‘Hey I’ll learn how to paint window screens,’” she told the magazine.

Seeking to refocus her life, she enrolled at Baltimore City Community College to study art.

One of her teachers was the well-known Baltimore screen painter Ben Richardson, Ms. Eff said.

“I didn’t want to make handicrafts and I didn’t want to do all the things that everybody does, because I am different,” she told Ms. Eff, author of “The Painted Screens of Baltimore: An Urban Folk Art Revealed.”

“Everything I do, I do quickly, so screen painting is nice because I can do that [quickly],” she said.

Ms. Herget eventually opened Dee’s Screen Art on East Fayette Street. She and her husband later moved to a bungalow on Sue Creek in Essex, where she lived and painted for the remainder of her life.

The origins of screen painting are rooted in Baltimore’s dreadfully hot summers in pre-air-conditioning days when rowhouse residents opened windows for a breeze but at the expense of losing their privacy.

The first artist to come up with the idea in the early 1900s of a painted screen was William Oktavec, who took his inspiration from a greeting card.

East Baltimore artists began painting screens with elaborate pastoral scenes that allowed homeowners to look out and for those on sidewalks and streets not to be able to see inside homes.

The painted screen quickly caught on and would be practiced in coming years by artists such as Johnny Eck, Albert Oktavec and Tom Lipka.

Most artists focused on painting screens with rural red bungalows with swans floating by in streams while Ms. Herget included urban imagery in her work.

“I’ll never be a Van Gogh,” she told *The Evening Sun* in 1982. “I taught myself to do it, and I guess you could say I’ve come a long way baby.”

“She cultivated her own style, never scrimping on paint. Her colors and style of house, tree, sky and swans are unmistakable,” Ms. Eff wrote in her email.

“She always signed her work. She [toed] the line of tradition, thinking it blasphemous to depart too far from Oktavec’s ‘Red Bungalow,’” she wrote. “She enjoyed depicting herself, a flamboyant red-head often scrubbing rowhouse steps or adding a friend or patron’s name to a storefront.”

Ms. Herget was featured in [“The Screen Painters,”](#) a 1988 documentary directed by Ms. Eff.

Plans for a memorial gathering are incomplete.

She is survived by a daughter, Kim Gordy, of Dundalk; two stepdaughters, Marlen Gordy, of Cecil County, and Michele Gordy, of Essex; two brothers, John Amrhein, of Timonium, and Tom Amrhein, of Haverford, Pennsylvania; and two grandchildren; She was predeceased by two sons, Steven Gordy and Keith Gordy, and a daughter, Judith Gordy.

Originally Published: February 15, 2024 at 5:00 a.m.

2024 > February > 15