

Artist Biography: George Merritt Milton
(July 11, 1918-June 19, 2005)

Born in Marianna, Florida, on July 11, 1918, George Merritt Milton discovered his love of art at an early age. Milton's kindergarten teacher encouraged him to develop his artistic talent; later, as a mature artist, he honored her through a series of interpretations of the Dutch Masters, rendered in wax colored crayon. Milton's childhood inspired many of his later works. He grew up "in a house along 'Silk Stocking Row' in a genteel setting of career housewives, manicured lawns and servant staffs."¹ A direct descendent of John Milton, Florida governor during the Civil War, Milton's southern upbringing influenced him, but did not completely define him. He enjoyed exploring other cultures and historical periods, finding inspiration in his travels and research.

Artist, professor, art historian, southern gentleman, and wit, Milton is one of the primary artists featured in the permanent collection of the LeMoyne Center for the Visual Arts. A professor in the Florida State University Department of Anthropology, Milton was a prominent member of the Tallahassee community of artists and intellectuals. When a group of Tallahassee community leaders founded the LeMoyne in 1963, it was the only gallery in Tallahassee not directly affiliated with a university.² Milton maintained an important relationship with the LeMoyne from its foundation until his death in 2005. It was a relationship which would prove fruitful for both Milton and the LeMoyne.

Milton's experiences as a young man shaped his passion for travel, history, and culture, and education. Like many of his cohort in the WWII generation, Milton voluntarily joined the service out of a sense of duty and honor. He explained, "I didn't want to be walking around in a sport coat when everybody I know was in uniform."³ After his service in the Air Force, Milton attended the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C. in 1946. His studies then brought him

to Florida State University, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Painting and Art History in 1953 and a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1954.⁴ While completing his graduate work, Milton studied with the famed German-born artist Karl Zerbe.

A professor in the Florida State University Department of Anthropology during the 1960s and 1970s, Milton was one of the earliest affiliate artists of the LeMoyne Art Foundation. Also the curator of the FSU Museum, he taught courses in museum techniques and the cultural development of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Meso-America, and South America. In addition, he taught night classes at the LeMoyne in design, composition, and painting. In 1964, Milton earned the distinction of having the first one-man show at LeMoyne. Milton would go on to have the most one-man exhibitions of any artist at LeMoyne. He also enjoyed one-man exhibitions at galleries around the state, as well as regional and national juried group exhibitions. Even though Milton retired from Florida State University in 1980, his career as an artist was far from over. The same year, he earned a second BA in Creative Writing, and he continued to create artwork for the next twenty years.⁵

A brief survey of Milton's one-man exhibitions at LeMoyne reveals how versatile and prolific he was as an artist. Following Milton's first solo show, the LeMoyne exhibited Milton's series "Clowns and Other People" in the summer of 1972. He found inspiration in his childhood memories of circus friends—the circus had wintered in Marianna when Milton was growing up.⁶ A favorite series of Milton fans, "Renaissance People" appeared in 1977. Another popular series for art-lovers young and old, Milton's wax crayon interpretations of the Dutch masterworks first appeared at LeMoyne in the fall of 1982.⁷ Milton asked himself the inspirational question, "If the Dutch and Flemish masters of the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries had learned about colored crayons from Miss Gussie Davis, my kindergarten teacher, 1922-23, what might the results have

been?” LeMoyne first hosted “Magic Realism” in the fall of 1984, and then again to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the organization in 1988.⁸ Milton used the term “magic realism” to refer to the way that he drew from his past and his mind’s eye, rather than using models.⁹ In the spring of 1992, the LeMoyne exhibited Milton’s “Doves with People,” which reflected the artist’s fascination with the symbolic birds. First opening at the LeMoyne in April of 1993, Milton donated his popular “New Testament” series to the LeMoyne to be a traveling exhibit.¹⁰ Three years later, Milton followed this biblical-inspired series with another—“Paintings from the Pentateuch.”

As an artist and anthropology professor, travel was essential to Milton’s work. He traveled to Europe many times to study the collections of ancient artifacts at the British Museum and other major institutions. He undertook surveys of museums, galleries, and archeological sites in the Europe, the Middle East, Central America, and South America. He spent time in England meticulously researching a series of works on Virginia Woolf and her turn-of-the-century Bloomsbury Set (artists, writers, and intellectuals).¹¹ Milton donated 50 miniature acrylic paintings and a large set of books, papers, photographs, maps, and brochures he collected while researching the Bloomsbury Set to Florida State University’s Strozier Library in the early 1980s.

Known for his demeanor as a southern gentleman, Milton also had a reputation for his engaging sense of humor. Of his accent, Milton quipped that it “sounds like I eat magnolias and Spanish moss for breakfast.”¹² Students and friends reveled in his storytelling abilities. In Milton’s obituary, journalist Mark Hinson quoted Nancy Smith Fichter, FSU Dance Department founder and long-time friend: “He had such a purity of spirit, yet he also had an outrageous wit, and they both worked together somehow.”¹³

Indeed, Milton was a deeply spiritual man, which his work often revealed. At one point, he thought it might be time to hang up his hat as an artist. Milton picked up his easel to take it out of his room, when a gentle, yet firm voice spoke to him, asking, “Are you going to put God’s gift in the garage?”¹⁴ He soon found the motivation to begin work on his New Testament series of paintings. As his series “Doves with People” exemplifies, Milton frequently used spiritually symbolic images of doves in his work. “Doves are symbolic of love, peace, and the Holy Spirit,” he explained. “That’s what they signify to me, and that’s what I believe that people need...”¹⁵

As Milton neared the end of his life, he continued to think of LeMoyne and its future—he asked that contributions be made to LeMoyne in his memory.¹⁶ In an act of great generosity, Milton and his sister Elizabeth bequeathed their estate to LeMoyne. Milton’s legacy continues through the permanent collection at LeMoyne. Over the years, LeMoyne acquired several of his pieces, and he is one of the core artists in the collection. The relationship between Milton and LeMoyne benefited not only the artist and the organization, but the Tallahassee community, who will continue to enjoy the work of George Merritt Milton for years to come.

By Kathaleen Boche
Department of History
Florida State University

¹ “The Artist,” foam board poster for exhibit, LeMoyne Records.

² Mark Hinson, “Painted into a Corner: Recession Rattles LeMoyne and Others,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, May 16, 2010, 1; “History and Facilities,” LeMoyne Center for the Visual Arts website, accessed May 20, 2011, www.lemoyne.org.

³ David Ball, “What I Know Now: Art from the Heart.” Tallahassee (Magazine?) Nov.-Dec 2004, vol. 26, no. 6.

⁴ George Merritt Milton, “Vita,” George Milton File, LeMoyne Records.

⁵ George Merritt Milton, “Vita,” George Milton File, LeMoyne Records.

⁶ “George Milton-Magic Realism,” typed manuscript, George Milton File, LeMoyne Records.

⁷ Postcard Advertisement, “George Milton: Reaction Paintings, Works in Crayon Based on the Dutch Masterworks,” October 15-November 12, 1982, George Milton File, LeMoyne Records.

⁸ “Magic Realism: Paintings by George Milton,” Sept 21-Oct. 10, 1984, Postcard advertisement, George Milton File, LeMoyne Center for the Visual Arts Records; “George Milton: 1963-1988,” *LeNews*, July 1988, Newsletters File, LeMoyne Records.

⁹ “George Milton-Magic Realism,” typed manuscript, George Milton File, LeMoyne Records.

¹⁰ Jose Patino, "Artist's Paintings Fall into Place: CJC displays Milton's work in September," *Jacksonville County Floridian*, Aug. 26, 1993.

¹¹ Mary Ann Lindly, "Bohemian Portraits Bring Era to Life," *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 14th, 1983.

¹² "Talking Art by George," *Tallahassee Democrat*, April 24th, 1992.

¹³ Mark Hinson, "Obituary: George Milton, renowned artist and gentleman, dies." *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 19, 2005.

¹⁴ David Ball. "What I Know Now: Art from the Heart." *Tallahassee (Magazine?)* Nov.-Dec 2004, vol. 26, no. 6

¹⁵ "Doves with People: Paintings by George Milton" mailer/brochure, April 3-May 3, 1992, George Milton File, LeMoyné Records.

¹⁶ Mark Hinson, "Obituary: George Milton, renowned artist and gentleman, dies." *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 19, 2005.