Lafayette Artist Paints Historical Account Of The Acadians' Expulsion, Settlement Of Acadiana

EXPLAINING HIS WORK - Robert Dafford, a Lafayette artist who is documenting the events of the Acadian's expulsion from Nova Scotia and settlement of Acadiana, explains the steps he took to research his paintings while looking at a print of one of the paintings. (Staff photo by G.G. Sievel)

Robert Dafford, a 32-year-old Lafayette artist, hopes to provide a pictorial account of the Acadian's expulsion from Nova Scotia and settlement of Acadiana. He photographed areas which the Acadian's left in order to record detail, light and color. After returning to Lafayette, he uses the pictures as reminders of what he saw and begins painting.

While in Caraquet, the painter spent a great deal of time at the city's Acadian Village.

Operating Cajun Town

"There is a wealth of information there," he said. "It is an operating Cajun town. The people are dressed in period costumes, raise sheep, shear the sheep and make their own utensils and everything else. I was able to see the lifestyle and to get a feeling of the laws and dress and language." But while conducting his research, Dafford found only one painting of the expulsion. It was painted by Henry Beau in 1898 and showed Evangeline and her family and a cliff in Acadie.

"One painting was all I found dealing with the exile," Dafford said. "We should have a record of who Cajuns are and how we're different from other people in the world. That's really what I'm trying to do-to provide a record." Because he is interested in creating images as accurately as possible, Dafford uses a painting technique similar to the one used by the old masters because that is the style which was in vogue at the time of the expulsion. But instead of using oil paints, he uses acrylics applied in a way which looks a lot like oil. "I used a style which was appropriate to the period, so the paintings look as if a painter of the time followed the Cajuns and reported on their activities," the artist said. "Using acrylics instead of oil paints allows the paintings to be more impervious to weather and that is important in this area."

Dramatic Realism

Dafford described his paintings as "dramatic realism." The events he paints are "dramatized a little more than realism in terms of action.

The artist's first set of 12 paintings, which is complete, tells about a range of the Cajuns' experiences from leaving Nova Scotia to arriving by boat to Louisiana. Two of these paintings are hanging at the Acadian Village and the rest have been sold to individuals.

Dafford had 1,000 prints of each of the paintings made.

His primary reason for reproducing the paintings "so as many people can have something that will have meaning to them." His secondary reason for selling the prints is to help finance his research and painting.

Dafford's prints are used by the City of Lafayette, CODEPIL and TIRAA as gifts to visiting dignitaries from throughout the United States, as well as Belgium, Quebec and France.

He plans to compile the story of the Cajun's expulsion with illustrations for the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition.

Second And Third Series

Dafford has also started working on another series of 12 paintings which will show the Cajuns settling Acadiana from 1760 until 1900. Although he has not begun work on the first 12 paintings in his series, the artist plans to paint places and things which show that the Cajun culture is still alive in the area.

Dafford is also interested in painting "the Cajun lifestyle," he smiled. "I eat rice, talk with an accent and dance the Cajun two-step. I was raised here and it's home."

"My greatest fear when I started the series was that the Cajuns here would say 'This guy is not one of us. He's just painting our past to make money off of us.' But that's not how it happened. My work has been accepted by the people here."

Although Dafford has spent a large amount of time on his Cajun series, he is an artist who paints not only the experiences of the Acadians. He also paints murals; designs commemorative posters, including the 1982 Festival de Musique Acadienne, the 1982 Crawfish Festival and the 1981 Festival de Grand Coteau posters; designs stage sets for Musica South Dance Company of which his wife Cindy Whipp is a member; and works with stained glass.

Dafford works in a studio in his home located at 1000 Street and the Lafayette Little Theatre. He is also in the process of renovating the building.

He admits that his lifestyle is "not normal." Because he works when he feels like it, he puts many hours into his art which is also his passion.

"My schedule is unsynchronized," Dafford said. "I live on a different schedule from most people so I can view the world differently. An artist is something that you are, not what you do.

He added, good-naturedly, "and I am an artist."