Artwork from the Heart

By Dixie Simon

Staff Writer

Wimberly's artwork comes from the heart

Mademoiselle carefully surveys her image in a hand-held mirror. Wreaths of turkey feathers, wreath her shoulders and a new chapeau, cocked to one side, frames the lovely features of her face. She is pleased. The new hat she just purchased from Breaux's Store in Church Point will be a fitting complement to nature's handiwork.

Tony Wimberly depicted this charming tableau as part of a mural he completed in September for his hometown bank in Church Point.

A photograph taken in the 1920's in front of Albert Breaux's General Merchandise Store in Church Point inspired the work. It pictures the storefront, its proprietor, his family, store clerks and an unnamed traveling salesman.

As Wimberly sketched a drawing for his mural from the photo, a story unfolded in his imagination and he discussed it with his mother, Bessie McBride Wimberly.

He could see a train arriving in Church Point during the era, carrying passengers and freight from the industrial North. He imagined a salesman (then called "drummers") stepping down from the train with his suitcase (a "grip") and into the dusty streets of the little town. His first stop: the local livery stable to rent a horse-drawn hack for carrying his goods to the town's merchants.

Mrs. Wimberly, now 93, clerked in Albert Breaux's store in the '20s, and is pictured in the photograph. She recalled for her son how such traveling salesmen delivered ribbons, fabrics, and hat forms to the store, where the proprietor's wife, Lucia, a milliner, fashioned them into fine hats for the ladies of Church Point.

Wimberly's captivating mural of Church Point's Main Street is the result of combining these two stories. He says of his artistry and interpretive imagination, "My artwork is drawn from my heart and my past."

For many years, Wimberly, 52, made his living as a finish carpenter, using his artistic talent only to produce a second income.

In 1970's that part-time work had him painting portraits in New Orleans' French Quarter. With 250 portraits for sale on consignment in local galleries, he remembers telling wife, Brenda, "I never want to see a face again!"

In 1981 they moved back to Church Point and fate intervened when Wimberly broke his thumb on a carpentry job. He started producing artwork full time to supply the gift shop he and his wife opened.

He created the first Buggy Festival poster in 1983 and donated it to the celebration. Following that, he was commissioned to do the festival poster in 1984 and 1985.

Wimberly since then has created a steady succession of paintings, pen and ink drawings, and murals for homes and businesses, nearly all depicting the people, places and symbols of his Cajun heritage.

Wimberly freely admits that the symbolism and storytelling properties of his artwork are the result of his admiration for famed artist Norman Rockwell. Rockwell's work often depicted fictional vignettes of Americana, as do Wimberly's.

Wimberly calls it "Cajun realism," and adds, "I always include a little romance in my work."

He often places hidden characters there, too, "so people keep finding (new) things in my paintings," he says. "I want the audience and the musicians to come together as one, art was created."

Especially when painting murals, Wimberly is frequently subjected to the participation of his Curbside audiences. "They tell me what they want to see in the painting," he says, "- cats, squirrels, a dog on a rope."

He remembers how five Cajun accordion players showed up and serenaded while he painted a larger-than-life sized accordion into his first Church Point mural.

That mural, by the way, is a reminiscence of Wimberly's own childhood.

The five-panel work on the Farmers State Bank Civic Building, begins with himself as a boy, reading a book about his Cajun heritage. It moves on as the boy, slightly older, plays with other children in a wagon, his mother on the porch of a small frame house. It is then seen in the back of a buggy, and sitting in church with his dog - "All things I did as a child," he recalls.

The boy grows up and becomes an artist, but is symbolically shown in the mural as a musician. The reason, Wimberly explains, "is because there are more musicians within a 12-mile radius of Church Point than anywhere else in the state." The reason, Wimberly explains, "is because there are more musicians within a 12-mile radius of Church Point than anywhere else in the state."

A scroll reading "Dream to touch the stars, Live to touch your dreams" completes the piece.

It represents one of Wimberly's earliest childhood memories. He wanted to paint a mural on the wall of that building.

"I need the freedom to choose (what I paint), because when work is done from the heart, it is most successful."

Tony Wimberly