

people, places & events RoundUp



Berks County



Piecing History Together

Artist turns barn wood into historic mosaics

Text and photographs by Chrysa Smith

COLONIAL HISTORY COMES TO LIFE IN A Bucks County barn when Murrie Gayman, a classically trained artist, takes remnants of oddly shaped and colored barn planks and turns them into barn-wood mosaics that depict moments in local history. His art com-

bines many of the elements that Gayman is passionate about—drawing, painting, woodworking, folk art, history and set design.

His foray into barn-wood mosaics began several years ago, when he and his wife were looking for colonial-style

kitchen cabinets to complement their 18th century Bucks County farmhouse.

“I couldn’t find a colonial refrigerator,” Gayman jokes. Chaya, his wife of 47 years, chimes in, “Or a colonial cabinet for the washer and dryer.”

He made the cabinets himself, and then drawing on his background in interior design, wallpaper design and furniture making, the artist began playing with wood—carving and sculpting it—and wondering what else, besides home décor, he could do with this familiar



Chaya Gayman adds black paint to the edge of a barn-wood piece so that it “pops” out of the mural. The mosaic is pieced together out of hundreds of pieces of cut wood, similar to a jigsaw puzzle.



Murrie Gayman created this replica of Washington’s Crossing the Delaware for a Bucks County bed and breakfast. Gayman’s barn-wood mosaics combine many of the elements that the artist is passionate about—drawing, painting, woodworking, folk art, history and set design.

“canvas.” His life-size mosaics were the result.

Gayman’s first historic mosaic was an 8-foot by 16-foot depiction of the Council of War, an event that occurred in August 1777 when French Nobleman Marquis de Lafayette, Count Casimir Pulaski, George Washington and others camped out at Warwick Township’s historic Moland House for nearly two weeks prior to the battles of Brandywine and Germantown.

“The mural is composed of hundreds of pieces of recycled, antique barn wood, cut and inlaid to form a wood mosaic, like a giant picture puzzle,” says Gayman.

He also has created a scene of north-east Pennsylvania’s Endless Mountains to grace the Pennsylvania Tourist

Commission’s new welcome center in Susquehanna County, and he has depicted Bucks County’s rural past for a mosaic hanging in the lobby of the First National Bank of Newtown in Warminster, Bucks County.

His latest creations are a brightly colored replica of Washington’s Crossing the Delaware, which he made for a Bucks County bed and breakfast, and a 4-foot by 24-foot mosaic depicting the Lenape Indian Walking Purchase—a 1737 deal between the Native American tribe and the Penn family that led to a questionable loss of land for the Lenape.

Gayman begins his life-size artwork with careful historical research and a sketch of the design. Then he gathers the barn wood that would work best for the

image. Although he used to find the wood himself from old barns that were being torn down, today he buys his barn wood from a country storeowner in the Endless Mountains who sells the salvaged boards.

“Most of the wood is pine; some is poplar,” explains Gayman. “It comes from all over the eastern seaboard.”

He likes to use the wood in its harvested state, whether it’s painted, faded or peeling, and he tries to add as little fresh paint as possible. The wood’s grain is used in the mosaic to show direction and texture, and he looks at color and texture to determine the most appropriate application for each piece of wood. Faces and hands are best created from finer wood, clothing from rougher pieces. Sometimes, he will remove the weathered top layer of a board to provide yet another range of color and texture.

Gayman uses a band saw to cut out the wood pieces and then employs a planer to smooth and flatten the wood. His wife, Chaya, adds black paint to the sides of each wood piece to make them “pop” when they are set in place. Once all the pieces are cut and fitted, the life-size puzzle is pinned in place one last time before the entire masterpiece is taken apart and trucked to the installation site. Working side by side, Murrie and Chaya then piece together the finished product.

Gayman doesn’t restrict his work to historical canvases, but he likes when he can work in public spaces. “That way, I can go visit my art and bring others to see it,” he says.

For more information on the artist and his work, email Gayman at greeneside@comcast.net. ▼

Contributor Chrysa Smith lives in Bucks County.