



The Minnie Evans Sculpture Garden and Bottle Chapel

Dan Hardison

Bright colors, mythical animals, religious symbols, and a natural garden setting – words that could describe the artwork of visionary folk artist Minnie Evans. It can also describe the Minnie Evans Sculpture Garden and Bottle Chapel, a memorial installation at Airlie Gardens in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Gatekeeper/Artist

Minnie Evans was a self-taught African-American artist known for her works depicting a world based on her dreams and visions. Born in 1892, her family moved to Wilmington from Pender County, North Carolina, during her early childhood. Evans left school after the sixth grade to work, married at the age of sixteen, and would raise three sons.

“My whole life has been dreams. Some times day visions,” Evans said, “They would take advantage of me. No one taught me to paint. It came to me.” It was on Good Friday 1935 that Evans said she heard God’s voice tell her to draw. She began creating drawings with wax crayons and colored pencils – later using oil painting as well. Her work was filled with vivid plants, animals, piercing eyes representing the all-seeing eye of God, angels and demons. A member of the AME Church, her work was filled with religious symbolism. Of her work she said, “This art that I have put out has come from the nations I suppose might have been destroyed before the flood... No one knows anything about them, but God has given it to me to bring them back into the world.”

For twenty-five years from 1949 to 1974, Evans worked as the gatekeeper at Airlie Gardens in Wilmington. This setting undoubtedly influenced the plants and flowers incorporated in her art. Sitting in her little wooden gatehouse collecting admissions, she would often work on her drawings during slow periods.

Evans never aspired to be an artist nor sell her artwork. It was not until 1960 that an out-of-state art scholar visiting the gardens discovered what *Newsweek* magazine would later describe as “breathtakingly gifted”. Her first art exhibit was held in 1961. Evans died in 1987 at the age of 95 and is today considered one of America’s most important visionary artists.

A Historic Garden

Airlie Gardens began as a private garden for a



wealthy industrialist in 1901. German landscape architect Rudolf Topel was commissioned in 1906 to transform the stretch of land along salt marshes into a formal garden incorporating European and Southern garden styles with an emphasis on azaleas and camellias. The gardens were opened to the public in 1948, but remained in private ownership until its purchase by New Hanover County in 1999. Today Airlie Gardens consists of 67 acres of the original 155-acre estate. Among the time worn trees draped in Spanish moss you will find walking trails, themed gardens, 10 acres of freshwater lakes, and a 450 year-old live oak.

A Memorial

In August 2004, the Minnie Evans Sculpture Garden and Bottle Chapel was dedicated in honor of Minnie Evans. The centerpiece is a bottle house conceived and created by local artist Virginia Wright-Frierson. Primarily a painter and illustrator, Frierson was commissioned in 2000 to paint a large ceiling mural for Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, as a memorial for the tragic shooting that occurred there.

The bottle house was constructed as a 16-foot high roofless outdoor chapel built out of bottles of various sizes, shapes, and color. The bottles were arranged to create images and symbols found in the work of Minnie Evans.



Just inside the entrance to the sculpture garden, a bas-relief sculpture featuring Minnie Evans in the window of her gatehouse was created by Hiroshi Sueyoshi. Two angel sculptures by Dumay Gorham sits to either side of the Bottle Chapel. At the center of the Bottle Chapel is a copper tree by Karen Crouch filled with metal birds created by Michael Van Hout. Brooks Koff, assisted by local schoolchildren, created mosaic tiles used in the walls and walks surrounding the Bottle Chapel. There is also a fountain created by Sueyoshi featuring images from Minnie Evans' paintings just outside the Bottle Chapel.

Minnie Evans never thought of her work as art, yet her work has been shown internationally including the Whitney Museum of American Art and is today in numerous collections including the Smithsonian Museum of American Art. Her life and work has also been captured in a book and a documentary film.

The Minnie Evans Sculpture Garden and Bottle Chapel pays tribute to a woman who merely followed the command given her – to draw. “I have dreams of the thing,” she said, “and I feel God gave me this mission to do this.”

All photos by Dan Hardison



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