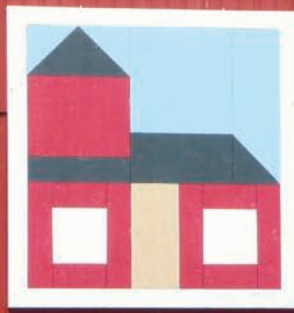


The Barn Art of Miami County

by MARY QUINLEY

One Ohio county's quest to connect its rural towns led to a painted quilt trail!



Ohio Schoolhouse block on a barn in Piqua, chosen in honor of the owners' son, who became assistant principal in a Piqua school.

Ribbons of corn, soybeans, and wheat surrounded Myrle Briggs' driveway in Covington, Ohio, one day last summer, just shy of her circa-1902 white barn. The barn itself was worth noting due to a partially painted Weathervane quilt block pattern gracing the structure's front side. Setting up a scaffold and hauling brushes, paint, and other art supplies from his van was 55-year-old artist Jose Rafael Santoyo of Villa Madero, Mexico. No passing fancy, Santoyo's painted quilt blocks, such as the one on Briggs' barn, can be found throughout Ohio's Miami County and are part of a project largely funded by the Miami County Visitors & Convention Bureau.

Myrle and her sister Janet Wright (of Troy, Ohio), the owners of the property, chose the Weathervane pattern because they "like traditional geometric designs" and also because they felt nostalgic about the disappearance of a weathervane that had been mounted on the barn some years ago.

The Artist at Work

Santoyo stood on a platform, holding a can of paint in his left hand while meticulously brushing purple paint

with his right. Verbal communication was difficult because of the language barrier; however, I understood perfectly when he motioned for me to join him on the scaffold to get a closer look at his masterpiece. The Weathervane block was beautifully designed in turquoise, lavender, white, and dark purple hues, and when finally completed, it measured 8' x 8'.



Jose Rafael Santoyo stands on a scaffold while painting the Weathervane block on Myrle Briggs' barn.

Santoyo wasn't done however—he had a surprise for Myrle. Smiling, he explained, "She is a very nice lady. Someone had stolen her weathervane, so I painted one [on the barn], maybe 4' long, and used the purples that are in her quilt square." Myrle was thrilled! This permanent gift is located to the right of the Weathervane painting.

The Miami County Barn Project

Why barn art? "To connect the rural towns," explained Diana Thompson, executive director of the Miami County Visitors & Convention Bureau. "We wanted individuals to go to all the small towns and art was one way to do this."

Thompson, accompanied by two convention bureau board members, checked out the barn art in a neighboring Ohio county before getting the project underway in Miami in 2006. "It was something that the bureau wanted to do because it was a bicentennial year. It was a good time to kick it off," she says.



Joseph's Coat block on an 1800s barn in Covington, chosen because the barn's owners recalled that their grandmothers had pieced similar block designs.

Santoyo, who was painting murals on walls at El Sombrero Restaurant in Piqua for his friends Ruben Pelayo and Judy Rose seemed like an obvious choice to do the barn art. Not only is Rose El Sombrero's business manager, but she is also one of the barn project's organizers. "Raphael did not have a clue about quilts," said

Rose, who has enjoyed going to quilting bees since she was six years old. Santoyo interjected, "I did not understand what she was showing me, but Judy is very patient and brought out some quilts that her family had sewn together. Then she cut pieces out of paper and showed me how it was put together. I thought to myself, 'Why would a woman paint with cloth?' Then I thought, 'For the beauty of it!'"

Santoyo began working on the barn project in Miami County during the summer of 2006, using a trailer near Piqua for temporary housing. When winter arrived, he returned to Mexico, then came back to Ohio in the spring of 2007. By early October, the artist had finished almost four dozen paintings! His goal was to



Sunbonnet Sue block in Covington, in honor of the barn's owner, whose middle name is Sue and whose grandmothers both wore sunbonnets.

Photos by Mary Quinley

complete at least 54 quilt patterns, with a minimum of 47 painted on barns, before cold weather arrived.

Santoyo, who has now obtained permanent resident status, earns \$500 for each 7' to 15' square block that he paints. The majority of these are painted on barns, although some can be seen on other types of structures, such as the Laced Star block on the fairgrounds' horticultural building in Troy. In addition, for a fee of \$275, business owners can commission a 4' square for display in (or on) their buildings. Patterns are either painted directly on the structures or on wood squares that are then mounted on the buildings.

Barns on the Trail

To qualify for a barn painting, property owners must have "neat-looking barns that are visible from the road with a pull off," explained Thompson. The Miami County Visitors & Convention Bureau is the largest single sponsor of the project. Other sponsors include the Troy Foundation, Miami County Foundation, and individuals.

Judy Rose herself picks about six patterns from either a quilting magazine or from photos of quilts. She then shows them to the barn owners, who, in turn, choose the patterns they want. Santoyo, armed with a photo of the pattern, visits the barn and decides which colors to use.



Mariner's Compass block facing north on a mid-1800s barn in Troy.



Santoyo hard at work.

A combination of well-marked roads, an available brochure, detailed directions, and photos of the barns that are posted on the convention bureau's website (www.visitmiamicounty.org) enable anyone to set forth on the route. All of the painted barns are accessible for photo opportunities. Friendly folks are another plus.

Both the art itself and the county's weathered barns have proved to be something that visitors to Miami County really appreciate. Notes Thompson, "People will be able to enjoy these squares for many years to come."

For more information about Miami County's barn art, visit www.visitmiamicounty.org/barnquilts.html.

Mary Quinley is a freelance writer from the metro-Detroit area. ❖



Card Trick block on an 1827 barn in Troy, which was built by an Irishman who was one of the earliest settlers in the township.



(Above) Braced Star in Springcreek Township



(Left) Carpenter's Wheel block on a mid-1800s barn in Brown Township. Another part of the property was originally the site of a one-room schoolhouse.