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Minnie Evans exhibit draws crowd to museum

by Patricia E. Matson

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Staff photo by Andrew Sherman

Minnie Evans Clauson autographs a book of artwork created by her grandmother Sunday, Oct. 3, during "An Afternoon with Minnie Evans" at the Wrightsville Beach Museum.

"An Afternoon with Minnie Evans" drew more than 170 people to the Wrightsville Beach Museum on Sunday. Executive director Madeline Flagler said attendees included a broad spectrum of people from Wrightsville Beach and Wilmington, along with relatives of the internationally known local artist. She said it had been simple to put the show together because there was so much community enthusiasm for Evans' work.

Collector and author Christian Daniel related some of Evans' history. In 1935 Evans said she heard a commandment from God to "draw or die." She drew some doodles, and kept acting on her compulsion to draw with crayons and later paint with oils.

When she became the gatekeeper at Airlie Gardens, she had time to draw more. Her work had a theme: eyes and faces surrounded by leafy patterns. With Airlie came more use of natural elements such as flowers and butterflies. Later, the book of "Revelations" inspired her with more religious elements, symbols and landscapes.

Daniel spoke of the colors, details and incredible symmetry of Evans' work. It had been labeled as folk art, naive art, untrained art and outsider art, but he said, "I don't think it's any less amazing what she did than what Picasso did."

Daniel said Evans was estimated to have completed about 1,000 pieces, but it was unknown how many had survived. He brought most of his collection, about 50 drawings, to the show. Other people brought about a dozen more.

Evans' granddaughter, Minnie Evans Clauson, said she was proud of her namesake. She recalled seeing paintbrushes everywhere at Evans' house, with stacks of drawings leaned against the wall.

"I remember thinking how funny looking they were," she said.

Clauson didn't remember her grandmother ever baking a cake or other domestic things. She told of intense discussions between Evans and her husband. He wanted her to stop with the constant art, and she said, "I can't. I am special, and God tells me how to draw."

Daniel and Flagler both told how Evans would sometimes awaken and immediately start drawing in a trance-like state.

Anne Brennan of the Cameron Art Museum talked about the Minnie Evans Study Center there and asked to hear more stories from the collectors and the audience.

"I've heard things today I never knew before," she said. She added that Evans wasn't afraid of the mysteries of life.

Judy Mixon told how her fifth-grade students thought Evans' work was cool and enjoyed arguing about interpreting it.

"The fact that it's in crayon makes it relatable," she explained.

Clauson said the exhibit was just wonderful.

Flagler said, "We're excited that local art seems to really excite people and really connects to the community."