

# Telling Stories in Art

By JENNIFER MCGHEE SILER, *Adelphean* Editor

**M**other-of-pearl buttons, sheets of lead, stone, wood, found objects and artist made paper. On the surface these objects don't appear to have much in common. But, for Marilyn Terry Lanfear, Δ—Texas-Austin, they become beautiful works of art that tell a family story.

She was always drawing and painting, and she always knew she wanted to be an artist, but she didn't know what that meant since no one else in her family enjoyed that profession. "I majored in interior design for a practical use of my ability, but I never worked in that career," said Marilyn. While she raised four children who grew up to become a children's clothes designer with her own company, a geologist, a ballet dancer, and a lawyer—Marilyn did watercolors. When the children were older, she returned to the classroom and received her B.F.A. and M.F.A. and did the local artwork scene.

From her beginning in watercolors, Marilyn's art has grown in size and medium and she is continually learning new skills. "After all, if I'm going to solder lead to make children's clothes, then I need to be skilled in that area," she remarked. At the same time, Marilyn is extremely knowledgeable about a variety of antique collectibles. She visits antique shops to explore the items for a variety of still life collections, like "Grandmother's Library Table with Photographs" an antique table filled with old photographs in equally old frames.

And, there is the still life collection in progress that includes all types of measuring devices from a one-and-a-half inch diameter compass to a World War I artillery officer's slide rule. "I like to learn things. I spend time in antique shops trying to fig-

ure out what items were used for. Sometimes I know and sometimes I just have to wonder about it, but we can learn something through these collections," she said. For instance, with her poison bottle collection she learned that these bottles have ridges and bumps in their design so that people would know immediately that they had a poisonous substance just by the feel of the container.

Her artist statement describes her philosophy in these words: "I am a visual storyteller who translates personal family stories into a common mythology of family generational connections. I use wood, stones, paper, buttons—the concept determines the media. I use objects of material culture—cast iron beds, cook tables and cotton gin weights. I use words—embroidered on

towels, burned into chairs and stenciled on window shades. I use whatever is needed to tell my story. Subtle elements like the pattern of wallpaper, the use of traditional milk paint, or folded clothes rendered in stone, load the images with irony and symbolism not repeated in the oral tradition. I am a visual storyteller. Narrative is the moving force of my visual language with the history of my Texas family as the core."

As stated above, Marilyn's particular place in her art centers around her family and memories from her childhood. "I come from a long line of storytellers, and I truly believe that stories about ordinary people are worth remembering," she said. "There is a moral and something to learn from stories. Details are important in stories and place names and actual names lend authenticity. I want to evoke other people's stories with my stories. After all, someone has to keep the story."

Originally, the incorporation of storytelling into



Marilyn Terry Lanfear, Δ—Texas-Austin, celebrates the display of her most recent button tapestry.