

Donation to Holy Cross of The Life of Christ Dioramas

The Life of Christ is a series of 19 dioramas, created in the 1970s, by Calgary artists Don and Honey Ray. Each diorama depicts Jesus Christ's life through a specific scene taken from the Bible. Last week Rosemary Brown (daughter-in-law) of Don and Honey Ray donated this series of dioramas to Holy Cross.

Exhibition History

After the Life of Christ dioramas were completed in 1977, they were displayed at the Hudson Bay in Edmonton from December 5th to 24th, 1977. The next showing occurred at Easter of 1978, in North Hill Shopping Centre in Calgary. There were also intermittent presentations of the dioramas at the Anglican Parish of Holy Cross over the years.

Background of the Creators

Don and Honey Ray were visual and performing artists who emigrated to Canada with their young son Donald Iain in the early 1950s.

Don apprenticed as a blacksmith in England in the 1920s. He taught himself how to trick and fancy rope and performed on stage as Buck Colorado. He met Honey in the early 30s when he was hiring young women to help promote the sale of a small lasso he called the "looperoo" that he had designed for children. Honey, descended from a long line of vaudeville performers (including Will Evans, a silent film star and stage hall comedian) and was a dancer, artist and costume designer. Soon, she and Don performed trick and fancy roping and a variety of skits.

During the war they worked for a model soldier maker in London. Later in Manchester, they branched out to create a variety of side shows, while continuing their performances. Along the way Don taught himself knife-throwing around a human target (Honey) and he began wood carving.

After emigrating to Canada, they performed their roping and knife-throwing to audiences throughout Canada. They also did two tours with Wilkie's Circus in South Africa. After working in Eastern Canada for several years, Don and Honey decided to head to Vancouver in the early 60s but on the way, they fell in love with Calgary and Alberta and decided to make their home here.

While continuing to perform in rodeos and shows, Don took up wood carving in earnest creating beautiful birds which Honey painted. They also began making dioramas of all sizes and subject matter. Their work soon caught the attention of George Devlin who hired Don and Honey as the original master artists of Miniature World which opened in Victoria, BC in 1971.

Upon their return to Calgary, they embarked on the creation of two series of dioramas, The Life of Christ and Our Canadian Heritage. Don and Honey continued carving and making small dioramas and birds until Don's passing in 1996. Honey died in 2006. A memorial scholarship on both their names was established at ACAD, now the Alberta University of the Arts.

Methods and Material Used

To create "The Life of Christ" diorama series, each diorama was planned, sketched and researched for many months before commencing work.

Don did the carving and construction, and Honey would do the painting, artwork and research. Wood was the primary material used. The basic structure was made of plywood. Balsa wood was used to line walls and ceilings. Materials were often burned to create age, shape and effect. Pine is the backbone of many figurines and jelutong was used to create precise details.

All types of other materials were also used such as leather (including soft chamois to stiff), dried leaves, grasses, dried flowers, twigs, driftwood, flint and rocks, sculptor clay, and oil paints. Flowers, scenery, buildings, boats, furniture and many other things were carved, sewn, and modelled from scratch.

Don used an assortment of hand tools such as exacto knives, small saws, chisels, and simple holding devices for carving. He used machines only for the diorama cases, shadow boxes and rough forms.

Honey painted the pieces with artist's oil paints and decorated them. Some of the miniature costumes were made and sewn in cloth (which had miniature patterns made first), often made of soft chamois or tissue.

The only exception to the above was in the dioramas depicting "The Last Supper" (Scene 1 and 2) where the brass glasses, tankards, bowls, plates, etc. used were taken from the artists' private collection – they were antiques.

Displaying the Dioramas

The dioramas could be rotated for display in the Narthex, similar to the Archives items in the glass cabinets.