

Free Men of Color

Story by Judy Stanford

A little girl skips over the two turning ropes, her hands over her head, her braids flying. This is just one of the images hanging on the walls of Jennings' Zigler Museum through Feb. 20.

Two Louisiana African-American artists, Charles Simms Jr. and Eugene J. Martin, are featured in an exhibit called "Free Men of Color" in honor of Black History Month in February.

Charles Simms Jr.

The little girl jumping rope is the main character in Charles Simms Jr.'s "Double Dutch." Born and raised in New Orleans, Simms paints what he knows — the everyday images of life in The City.

Although the retired postal employee was an accomplished artist in grammar school and high school, he initially had no intention of making a living that way.

"I joined the United States Air Force and after spending \$10,000 training me as an aircraft mechanic, they found out I was an artist and sent me to Paris, France, to paint pictures on airplanes," Simms recalled.

After being discharged from the military, Simms went to work for the post office in New Orleans. "They paid \$10,000 to train me as a clerk, then found out I was an artist."

Before long, Simms was working as the resident postal artist for the New Orleans region, which covers Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

He spent his days and his money from the GI bill earning his degree in art from Southern University and his nights doing commercial art at the post office. He created designs for T-shirts, book covers and safety campaigns.

"I drew the eagle so many times I've lost count," he said.

In the meantime, Simms was also developing his own style on canvas.

"I moved from folk art in my younger years into being a romantic

artist, where you see everything beautifully. Then I got more serious. I found that the impressionist style suits my needs to say the things I say. I'm caught between impressionist and abstract."

Simms said he considers himself a regional artist. "I paint things that happen in New Orleans. I don't copy from photographs. All of my work is original."

The exhibit title comes from the name of one of Simms' paintings, a tongue-in-cheek look at three African-American house painters taking a lunch break.

The term "free men of color" dates back to before the Civil War and refers to people of African descent in the South who had somehow achieved freedom.

"The painting makes fun of that terminology," Simms said. "It's a play on words."

His paintings, from depictions of the flambeau carriers, those torch bearers who used to light the nighttime Zulu parade during Mardi Gras, to images of old jazz musicians in the French Quarter, all reflect his life in New Orleans.

"People say, 'Your paintings don't have flowers,'" Simms said. "I was raised in the housing projects. We didn't have flowers in the city."

Simms has never painted for profit, outside of his job at the post office. Instead, he paints for his own satisfaction, loaning his work to various museums and exhibits when he's asked.

"I have about 200 paintings," he said. "I just stick them under the bed."

Eugene J. Martin

Strong colors and playful images mark the work of Eugene J. Martin.

"I don't have a main theme to all my work," Martin said. "It's whimsical, warm and humorous."

Martin, who was born in 1938 in Washington, D.C., began his job history as a musician. "I played jazz and

What: "Free Men of Color"

When: Currently on exhibit from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday until Feb. 20

Where: The Zigler Museum in Jennings
Admission: \$2 for adults and \$1 for children
For information: Call 824-0114.

r'n'b — I played bass and slide trombone."

In 1959, Martin decided to find another line of work. "It wasn't quite fulfilling. There was too much conflict with the other musicians. I was not a peaceful, creative enterprise for me, so I decided to do full-time painting and forget the music."

Martin, who studied at the Cochran School of Art in Washington, D.C., came to live in Lafayette about three years ago, when his wife, Suzanne Frederic, landed an assistant professorship in biology at UL Lafayette.

Martin's early life was far from easy. His parents died when he was 5 years old.

"I lived in foster homes and ran away," he recalled. "I wasn't a kid that would stay where they put me. I was abused and took off."

At a young age, Martin gained a rare insight into the psyches of his foster parents.

"He felt the people who beat him were the victims, not him," explained Martin's Belgian-born wife.

"I understood their illness, their neuroses," he added. "I was just someone to take it out on. Physical pain, you can learn to ignore that. Psychological pain ... I felt sorry for them."

"I wasn't knocked into being neurotic."

It was the struggle of those early years that gave Martin his strength and his creativity, his wife said.

"His work is so rich," she said. "He never repeats himself. He never has a stumbling block like a lot of people. He has pure creative energy."

Although the images Martin creates are often playful, they're also complex.

"You have to feed on it," he said. "Take a few days — or a few weeks."



Excavated Gardening by Eugene Martin
Acrylic on rag paper



Charles Simms Jr.



"X-Ray Smith" by Eugene Martin
Mixed media on rag paper



Eugene J. Martin