

Artistic Foundations

Architect-turned-painter William James finds inspiration in historic Mobile.

text by KATHIE FARNELL



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William James was faithful to his high school dream of becoming a professional artist, though his journey back to painting was a long and winding one. After more than 40 years as a successful architect, he became a full-time artist.

His career choice came in handy when William took to the easel; his meticulously rendered portraits of Mobile's homes and churches owe something to his architectural training. "I've always been interested in historic architecture. I did a lot of sketching and studies of old buildings," he says.

His background has also enabled him to overcome one challenge facing any artist who attempts to paint Mobile's historic homes: ebullient, overgrown gardens that swallow the house. "In some cases, I find that the landscaping has completely covered the house. When that happens, I take photos from different angles, then spread them out on my drafting board. My architectural training helps me lay out photos in perspective."

When William decided to pursue art, he opted to work in watercolor. "I was exposed to it in college and liked how the paper, water and pigment work together. Watercolor allows me to refine my love of color."

Brick and mortar isn't William's only subject. His works also feature landscapes, activities along the Gulf Coast, yachts – and a variety of fish, coursing powerfully through the ocean's depths. It was a progression. "Buildings and landscapes came first; I paint fish because of the color and action and the way the watercolor blends when you paint fish in water."

William doesn't play favorites. "I'll do a house portrait or a historic building that is very refined and hard-lined. Then, I'll do some fish to loosen up. Right now, I'm concentrating on landscapes. They are all different in approach."

Time was the major challenge when William began to consider becoming a full-time artist. His wife, Wendy, says, "I encouraged him to paint for years because I saw his potential, but he never had the opportunity."

The couple's days were filled with running the bed-and-breakfast that they operate out of their historic home, the Kate Shepard House on Monterey Place. He was also busy serving as a member of the Architectural Review Board, specializing in historic rehabilitation management.

When he decided to make the plunge back into art, William took an extreme approach to his time crunch. He began getting up at 4 a.m. to spend predawn hours in his home studio. He didn't have to look far for inspiration. He's painted his own stately Victorian home more than once.

For William, the best part of his career in art is the opportunity to learn by doing. "I thought, 'I'll give it a year, and see if I figure out how to do it.' I'm still discovering. It's a constant process."

And what does Wendy like most about William's new career? She doesn't hesitate: "Getting to say 'I told you so.'"

where to purchase

William James' paintings are sold at a number of local galleries. Rebecca Rossler, of Inside Up, says, "William is so original – an architect-turned-painter. Clients admire the way he depicts scenes around Mobile, like the oaks. Right now we have one of his paintings of Bienville Square fountain. We all love it."

Inside Up

7 N. Conception St. 438-6788.

Ashland Gallery

2321 Old Shell Road. 479-3548.

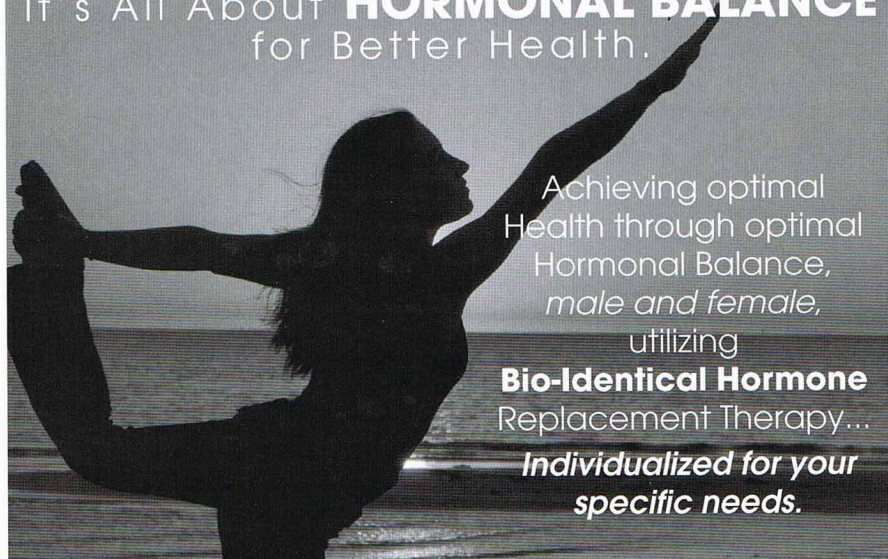
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