

Art of enchantment at Norfolk's Ravenwood

WHEN SIDEWALK STROLLERS open the door to Ravenwood they discover an even deeper mystery than the intriguing name owner Gale Jones gave to this art gallery and custom framing shop more than 25 years ago. How can so many businesses fit so neatly in this cozy little store in downtown Norfolk?

His gift boutique of psychedelic T-shirts, decorative plates, glasses and ornaments share space with samples of specialty frames crafted by Jones, surrounded by the gallery's parade of pottery and prints. The wall of wonders features his own pencil portraits of cowboys and Indians, including his Western drawing of "Old Jake." He's the cowboy Jones rescued from a box of discarded photos in an antique store in Arkansas when he spotted a spider running across Old Jake's picture.

"I thought, He's got too interesting of a face to throw away," Jones said. "That man has gone through a lot of things in his years."

The back of the store used to be Jones' studio, which years ago he moved to a

spare bedroom at his Norfolk home, but that leaves more room to display some of his caricatures as well as the watercolors and acrylic paintings from his pioneering woven technique.

A textile mill would be needed to weave all of Jones' life journeys inside one of his frames. The striking drawings of American Indian chiefs were done when he was literally a starving young artist on the boardwalk at Lake of the Ozarks in the the Missouri. Tourists paid him two bucks to draw their pictures, and he paid his rent at a motel with monthly portraits of the great chiefs he drew for the owners, who were Osage tribal members.

Perhaps his most beloved piece was of his dear dachshund, Baxter. The little guy warmed the hearts of customers and delighted their children by playfully hiding a corncob squeaker. When he wasn't chomping on Jones' acrylic paint tubes, Baxter helped him get through 30 months of four dialysis treatments a day, which led to a 2001 double transplant of a kidney

and the pancreas.

Jones has shown his art from coast to coast, but the paintings he treasures most are from Neligh in Antelope County, where he first was drawn to art as a child, watching a woman paint a spectacular mural inside the town's jailhouse museum. One of the paintings he will never sell is a woven watercolor of an elderly Neligh woman named Jesse.

She was an old friend of the Jones family, and the painting at the Ravenwood gallery shows her on a parlor sofa with incredible woven details of a gold wristwatch, her eyeglasses, his mother's doily, and even the texture of Jesse's upper arm. Jones described Jesse as a hearty woman of pioneer stock, but he couldn't get her to sit still to take a picture for the painting. Finally, she got up and said she needed to get some perfume.

"So she went into the bedroom and got her perfume on," Jones said. "We got the picture."

One of the few oil paintings by Jones is what he considers to be his proudest moment as an artist. It was a request from another family friend, Ron Helmer, who wanted a painting of the farmhouse he grew up in north of Neligh. The house had been gone for decades, and all Helmer had left were his memories and some faded black-and-white photos. Jones sketched and sketched, but each time, Helmer shook his head "no." The barn wasn't right, or the chicken coop needed to be closer to home, and that catalpa tree had to be tilted.

Jones still chokes up with emotion when he talks of bringing his dear friend the finished oil painting.

Helmer told him that for the first since he was a boy, he was home again.

"There was no other way for him to see his house again except through an artist's vision," Jones said.

There's no telling what you'll find when the door opens to Ravenwood.

- Matthew Spencer



"Baxter in Blue - Hide and Go Squeak," by Norfolk artist Gale Jones.