

3RD ANNUAL SOUTHERN ISSUE

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AUGUST 2012 \$4.95

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CAROLINA CULTURE

North Carolina's literature, music, art, and theater

They're old friends now. Dennis Quaintance (left) has been buying Chip Holton's art for 20 years.



ARTIST

The Hotel Artist

Twenty years ago, a painter and hotelier from Greensboro met. The result: A lifelong friendship and 800 works of art.

BY SARAH PERRY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOEY AND JESSICA SEAWELL

THE SKETCHES on the backs of the chairs at Printworks Bistro in Greensboro are a dull, muted charcoal. They are of flowers of no particular kind — just flowers from an artist's mind — and the simplicity of the lines reminds you of Matisse.

You'd think the sketches were reproductions, maybe. Mass-produced prints.

But they're all original, and they're all different. They're all signed at the bottom, right-hand corner in neat, cursive letters: Chip Holton.

On a Wednesday night at Printworks, you'll find Holton wearing a black T-shirt, dark Wrangler jeans, and hiking boots. He stands at the bar with a glass of red wine, and his silver hair blends in with the crowd. You'd think he was just another man.

Around the hotel, around Greensboro, around North Carolina, Holton's art blends in. You've probably never noticed it. It's on the walls of libraries, restaurants, museums. He has a portfolio so vast and diverse, he has a hard time defining himself. He once thought about hiring an agent but couldn't figure out



1 Chip Holton's art is everywhere — even on the backs of the chairs at Printworks Bistro. 2 For Holton, everything he sees in the hotel is a potential subject — 3 even himself.

how to tell the agent what he did. He's created sketches, landscapes, watercolors, portraits, murals, sculptures. He's built houses, designed buildings. Now, he is the artist-in-residence for Quaintance-Weaver Hotels, a company that owns two luxury hotels in Greensboro. Holton's art appears in the lobbies and elevators, on the ceilings and walls. When owner Dennis Quaintance needs art, Holton is there. "I don't have to call 1-800-get-art-from-China," Quaintance says. "I've got Chip."

And it's here, at Proximity Hotel, where Holton found his focus. Not focus in style, not focus in medium, but a driving focus that forced him to finish sometimes five, 10 sketches a day. He put so much of himself into those hotel paintings that, when he finished them in 2006, he didn't know what else to do.

But he was just getting started.

Floundering

When Holton was a child growing up in Lexington, sometimes he wouldn't eat. He rode his bike around his house instead. But every time he passed his mother, she fed him a bite of cereal. Around and around he went, stopping at every lap for just a moment.

His mother was an artist; she taught her son how to draw. There are few moments in his life Holton remembers focusing with such intent as he did when he was a child, sitting on the floor, drawing for hours. In high school, his teachers took his pencil away, so he could concentrate in class.

He wanted to be an architect, but after a few classes at North Carolina State University, he says he "developed an extreme allergy" to math. He settled on philosophy instead.

After graduating, he moved to

Greensboro to study art at UNCG. While creating his thesis, a series of portraits, he found the concentration he'd had as a child. He spent hours painting without interruption.

But then he graduated, moved to Italy, and drew only when the muse hit. When he came back home to North Carolina, he thought he'd build houses for a living. When the second house he built took too long to sell, he was done with that, too. He went on to build artificial rocks and waterfalls for a zoo and every year, moved on to something else.

Then, he met Dennis Quaintance.

Finding his focus

Quaintance first heard of Holton and his art from a mutual friend, Don Rives. Quaintance was building the first Lucky 32 restaurant in 1989, and he wanted

"He's something outside of ordinary." — Dennis Quaintance



Holton spent four months on this oil painting at Green Valley Grill in Greensboro.

some art for the entrance. Rives warned Quaintance of Holton's forgetful nature and the tendency to work only when he was inspired. "You'll have to manage him," Rives told him.

Quaintance wanted to hire Holton. He had two thoughts: *I hope I can afford him, and I hope I don't kill him.*

But Holton finished the painting. Quaintance gave him more work. Over time, the two became friends.

In 2006, as Quaintance was building Proximity Hotel, he hired Holton to create all the artwork for the guest rooms and the lobby. Quaintance set up a building for Holton to work in. And he asked Holton to produce 500 pieces by the end of the summer. Five hundred.

Each day, Holton came to work. He sat in front of his easel, and he sketched and sketched and sketched. Sometimes, he sketched two pieces in an hour. He'd take a break and bike around the building, only stopping for a moment to see if all the art blended together. If the lines were right, if the themes were similar.

Quaintance checked on Holton's progress about once a week. Sometimes, he dropped by just to watch Holton work.

The arrangement gave Holton a structure for the first time. He had an office, a boss, a deadline. Trust. "It's easy to be productive when somebody believes in you," Holton says.

'Outside of ordinary'

When Holton finished the art for Proximity, Quaintance decided Holton should paint for his other hotel, the O.Henry Hotel in Greensboro. It is different than Proximity, a cleanly designed hotel that is one of the greenest in the nation. The O.Henry is old-world, classic, traditional.

This time, Quaintance gave his friend a title: artist-in-residence. And anything else Quaintance needs, Holton is there. When Quaintance has an idea for a building or a room, Holton sketches. "When I use him to help me imagine things and put them on paper, it's incredible," Quaintance says. "He's something outside of ordinary."

Since his days at Proximity, Holton has been on time, focused. He doesn't forget meetings, his car doesn't break down (for the most part), and he meets his deadlines. He's finished

nearly 800 drawings, paintings, and sculptures for Quaintance. They fill Quaintance's hotels, restaurants, and home. They blend in with the furniture and the people.

The artist stands out

The paintings in the hall at O.Henry Hotel in Greensboro are bright, cheerful watercolors. They are of a particular kind of flower — roses from a cloister garden in the early morning hours.

They have such a distinct feel and touch, you know they're original. Each one is signed in the bottom, right-hand corner in neat, cursive letters: Chip Holton.

You'll find Holton in the lobby of the O.Henry Hotel in a starched, white, linen shirt with "Chip Holton, artist-in-residence" embroidered in black letters on the upper, left side. He wears dark Wrangler jeans and hiking boots.

As he stretches another piece of masking tape over the canvas, securing it to the rolling board on which he paints, guests glance his way. He stands out.

Holton runs his fingers over the canvas as he tears the tape and smooths it over the edges. He smiles and reaches for his brushes, focused and ready to create another piece of art.

Sarah Perry is an associate editor at Our State magazine. Her most recent story was "Building Film" (June 2012).

Proximity Hotel

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