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Wisconsin News

Zipper artist Donna Petrell sews up legacy

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This
 folk art has TEETH

By Andy Rathbun
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Artists have always found ways to make art with common, unconventional materials. The everyday items may be mundane to most, but to the artist, they are the building blocks of beauty.

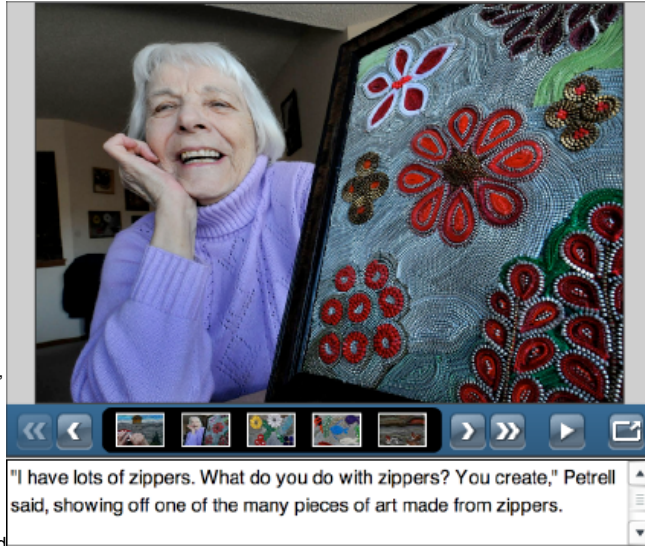
Take, for example, the zipper.

Hudson, Wis., artist Donna Petrell decided more than two decades ago the zipper would be her medium. First learning of its potential from an arts and crafts book, she began making images, and over the years, she learned to create colorful and impressionist works that have sold across the country.

It's unlike anything gallery director Barb Kelley has come across in her 24 years in the business.

"When they brought it in, I was just amazed at the intricacy," said Kelley, of Kelley Frame & Fine Art Galleries in Hudson.

Kelley first saw the zipper art when it came through her store for a reframing. Today, Petrell's first art show opens at the



"I have lots of zippers. What do you do with zippers? You create," Petrell said, showing off one of the many pieces of art made from zippers.

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gallery. Petrell, 81, recently suffered a heart attack, and the gallery show has served as inspiration in her recovery, daughter Janet Petrell said.

"I really feel like she's a unique American artist," said Janet Petrell, who likens her mother to Grandma Moses, the American folk artist who rose to fame after learning to paint in her 70s.

Like Grandma Moses, Donna Petrell had embroidered before finding her calling. She never considered herself talented with art until the zippers came along.

These days, she spends

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much of her time making art on a small table in front of the large bay window of her senior living apartment. Next to the table are bags of zippers, all separated by color. They come from pants, shirts and jackets. And they come from friends, family members and strangers. Petrell has never ordered a zipper.

"She's from the Depression era, where they reused objects all the time, so she likes the idea of finding new uses for the zippers," said her daughter, a clinical researcher, who has gathered many of the zippers from her colleagues.

"My daughter is very good with telling people to give me zippers," said Petrell. "There's no point in throwing them away."

Some of the frames for Petrell's art also are made from recycled materials. Her husband, Phil Petrell, who died in 2004, brought home cabinet doors. The backs of the artwork are made from a variety of items, including old wood paneling.

Before Petrell can begin gluing the zippers to base material, they must first be separated from their cloth backing. It's the most time-consuming part of the process, which can take anywhere from a day to weeks to complete, depending on the size and complexity of the project.

And while zippers come in many colors, the selection can be limited. Petrell is currently out of sky blue, so she can't make anything that requires a daytime sky. She has other colors, such as silver and black, in abundance.

"I like doing cats because I get a lot of black zippers," said Petrell, pointing out a portrait of her daughter's black cat.

Petrell said the first thing most people do when they see her art is touch it. And unlike most artwork, touching is encouraged.

"They're multileveled — there's a depth to them," said Kelley. "People can do that with a brushstroke and whatnot, but to use something premade to create these images is just amazing."

Andy Rathbun can be reached at 651-228-2121.

If You Go

What: Donna Petrell's art show featuring intricate designs made from zippers.

When: 5 to 9 p.m. today

Where: Kelley Frame & Fine Art Galleries, 512 Second St., Hudson, Wis.

Online: zipperworks.home.att.net



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