Art as a family affair: Mother, father and son have upcoming exhibits

From 1917, Elissa Derby's collection of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles artwork can be seen in the George Wurster Smith Museum in Springfield through Sept 3. Blanche Cyboile Derby of Northampton, who is working on the project, said, "I use the materials in conjunction with the museum's collection of Japanese art and Samurai weapons, the Derby Museum."...most it was in private collections, not in museums." And, he notes, "so much of tribal art...items in his collection like wood figures from Ghana and Nigeria, masks from Zaire and Congo D' Ivoire...put me in touch with the spirit world. (Those artists) didn't make art for the sake of art—it was to build a connection to the spirit world.

The local angle
Some local connections helped spur the Derby's exhibition this fall. Heather Hastel, the vice president and director of art at Springfield Museums, worked at Charles Derby's store when she was attending Smith College in the late 1970s. Last year, while checking out a yard sale at the Derby house, Hastel, who lives in Hadley, looked at some of Blanche Derby's drawings and invited her to submit them for an exhibit.

Hastel also became aware of Elissa Derby's Ninja Turtle collection and admired, with curator Zoila Cortez, to use the materials in conjunction with the museum's collection of Japanese art and Samurai weapons, the Derby Museum. "It's been great working with her," said Charles Derby, who noted that some of his art collection was also displayed at an exhibit at the Springfield Museums in the mid-1990s.

His upcoming UMass exhibit traces its origin to a visit he had about five years ago from the former director of an Omo museum. Once that woman had viewed Derby's tribal art collection, she got in touch with her friend Loretta Yawes, director of the UMCA, who came to look at Derby's pieces and later arranged the September exhibit.

Four UMass graduate students will curate the show, including Yawes; the students have all visited the Derby home to select African art pieces.

"I'm really honored the university wants to exhibit part of my collection," said Derby. "As a family, I think we're all pretty happy we can share what we do with the community." Steve Pfeifer can be reached at spfeifer@necore.com.

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