



# Kentucky CRAFTED

*These artists get their inspiration from the world around them*

By Vickie Mitchell | Photos by David Stephenson

**L**onnie and Twyla Money, Warren May, LaVon Van Williams Jr., and Janice Harding Owens are all considered folk artists.

Money, May, and Williams are working from “a self-derived aesthetic,” one of the traits that define folk artists, said Adrian Swain, the longtime artistic director and curator of Morehead State University’s Kentucky Folk Art Center, who retired this fall.

“I think of a folk artist as somebody who is self-taught and who works according to an aesthetic that is their own.”

But there is more than one way to describe a folk artist.

“There are a lot of different definitions,” said Victoria A. Faoro, director of the Kentucky Artisans Center. “To the purist, it is someone who has not been trained in formal classes but was taught by another person, an art that was passed from one generation to the next.”

But she points out, there are also artists such as May, a maker of Kentucky dulcimers and Kentucky regional furniture, artists who “are continuing a tradition in the arts.”

No matter the definition, Kentucky is rich in self-taught artists, and the Kentucky Folk Art Center and the Kentucky Artisans Center are good places to get a look at the diverse work they produce.

“Here at the center we like to provide a broad range of what is being done in the state,” Faoro said. “We represent 700 artists in 100 counties, and we like to represent some who are folk artists.”

The Kentucky Folk Art Center “is a museum with a permanent collection approaching 1,500 pieces, most by self-taught artists from Kentucky,” said Swain.

Here is a look at these Kentucky artists, working in the folk tradition.

Warren May is preserving a Kentucky tradition with his exquisitely crafted dulcimers.

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## Twyla and Lonnie Money

Lonnie and Twyla Money live on a farm, which is no surprise to admirers of the boastful roosters, sneaky foxes, bashful opossums, and countless other creatures that Lonnie carves and Twyla paints.

Rural life is written all over the thousands of pieces they have produced since Lonnie's carvings first caught the eye of folk art collectors almost 40 years ago.

There's a story about each animal he carves, and it usually has its roots in the Moneys' life in East Bernstadt in southeastern Kentucky.

The red fox with the chicken in its mouth was inspired by the real thing, which ran across the road in front of Lonnie's car. The chicken was probably the property of a neighbor, who had just mentioned that his fat white hens were mysteriously disappearing.

A cow that sits back on its haunches? Lonnie and Twyla laugh. They once had a cow that would sit down. It was a Black Angus. Lonnie carved a sitting cow, and to make it funnier, he made it a Holstein dairy cow. Twyla painted it black and white with bright pink udders.

Long before it was fashionable, the Moneys used locally sourced materials.

Much of the wood they use is from trees on their farm. Lonnie saws the logs in his sawmill. When neighbors trim their maple trees, the Moneys also snap up the cut branches. Those branches will become "twig" roosters, one of the many varieties of carved chickens the Moneys make. Neighbors also donate turtle shells after they've scooped out the meat for soup. Tobacco sticks, remnants of the Moneys' days of tobacco farming, are fashioned into sleek lizards. Gourds that become animals' bodies are grown in a former tobacco field.

Ten years ago, the couple gave up farming and made art a full-time occupation. They work together, but apart: Lonnie in his barn; Twyla, next to it, in a mobile home that the couple bought cheap because it had been burned. They gutted it, repaired it, added a porch, and turned it into a nice showroom and paint studio.

It is just one example of how "being raised hard," as Lonnie says, has made the Moneys thrifty and inventive. "Being not real financially secure gives you a drive to succeed," he says.

They have been encouraged and nudged by others. Artist Moses Hamblin convinced Lonnie to do his first show in 1975 at Sue Bennett College. Art dealer Larry Hackley pushed Lonnie to paint his carvings.



Art is a team effort for the Moneys, with Lonnie carving and Twyla painting.



The Moneys' work has been shown in museums throughout the state and is sold in more than a dozen galleries, most in the Southeast, although their work can be found as far away as Eagle River, Alaska. Locally, Ann Tower Gallery in downtown Lexington sells the Moneys' art.  
606-843-7783  
www.moneysfolkart.com



There is usually a story about each of the animals Lonnie Money carves.



People liked the painted works, but Lonnie didn't like painting. So he enlisted Twyla. "I said, 'You are going to have to start painting,'" Lonnie said. "It took off after that."

"I didn't even like art in school," Twyla admits. It turns out she too had talent. With Twyla as painter, realism went out the window and Lonnie's carvings became colorful, funky chickens, roosters, and pigs. "I bring them alive," Twyla said.

"I, I mean 'we' do better when we don't try to imitate reality and do it our own way," said Lonnie.

Timing has been everything in the couple's art career. Lonnie's great grandfather, a master woodcarver who came to East Bernstadt from Switzerland, was not so lucky. No one was interested in his woodworking skills; he had to work in the mines.

"We were fortunate to be born in a time when there was a market for this," Lonnie said. But even if no one wanted his inanimate animals, Lonnie would not lay down his tools. "It is in me to carve," he said. "I'd be doing this if no one was buying it."

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## Warren A. May

The guitar, and not the dulcimer, first tugged at Warren May's heartstrings. "I wanted to play the guitar so badly," the Berea woodworker laments.

May stands in his sunny shop on Berea's College Square, a city block packed with arts and crafts shops and local restaurants. Pieces of a dulcimer, its wood from the oldest tulip poplar tree in the state, lie on his workbench, awaiting his touch.

Instead of becoming a guitarist, May became a noted maker of Kentucky dulcimers. In doing so, he has helped preserve Kentucky's official state musical instrument, so designated by the state legislature in 2001.

May's dulcimers have traveled far and wide; the Smithsonian once bought 100 to sell through its gift catalog; former Gov. Martha Layne Collins presented one of May's cherry dulcimers to leaders of Toyota when Kentucky was trying to lure the Japanese automaker to Georgetown in the 1980s.

May, a Carroll County native, didn't know much about dulcimers until he and his wife, Frankye, moved to Eastern Kentucky

after college to teach school. May had majored in industrial arts at Eastern Kentucky University.

"Everybody plays music in Eastern Kentucky," he said. His students would bring in old dulcimers; intrigued by the instrument, he made his first Kentucky dulcimer in 1972. The Kentucky dulcimer is noted for its hourglass shape.

About five years later the Mays decided to make the arts their livelihood. They moved to Berea and set up shop around the corner from where they are now. Frankye ran a gallery stocked with the work of 100 different artists and craftsmen; Warren made dulcimers in the back of the shop.

"This is our 36th year in Berea," said Warren May. "We were one of the first couples to come to Berea for crafts."

The current shop is full of light from a long wall of windows. Up front, May displays the furniture he makes. Toward the back, he builds and finishes his dulcimers as customers watch. He might pluck a tune on the four-string instrument, to show how easy it is to play.

With the help of two assistants, May makes his dulcimers from poplar, cherry, and walnut. The woods are air dried. "That makes for a more mellow sound," he said. Such wood is getting harder to find, but the Mays have been planting their own supply of trees — Frankye estimates between 800 and 1,000 total — for a number of years.

Each wood has a different tonal quality. Cherry is "bright and precise," said May; poplar is "most rustic." Walnut has a deep, warm tone. The wood is kept natural, treated only with a coat of oil and several layers of lacquer. Hummingbird shapes that are an option for the instrument's sound holes are a May trademark.

May delves into other woodworking projects, including two lines of solid wood, handcrafted furniture. One, his "Kentucky style" furniture, replicates sideboards, tables, and chests made by the state's early craftsmen. The pieces are elegant in their simplicity and solid in their construction. The other furniture line is carefree and contemporary. It includes a bowed desk that May calls the "adventure desk." Sitting at it feels like being in command of a space ship.

"You sit at it and you are ready to fly off for a great adventure," he said.

His furniture is beautiful, but in terms of business, dulcimers dominate.

"They are about 80 percent of the business," he said. Each instrument sold is numbered and signed, and the tally is quite impressive.

To date, May has made 17,000 dulcimers. "That's a dulcimer a day, for 41 years," he said.

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Warren May has made 17,000 dulcimers, most of them in his shop in Berea where he also creates furniture in the style of the state's early craftsmen.

## LaVon Van Williams Jr.

There's a party going on — dancing, singing, guitar playing, horn blowing — in a beige vinyl-sided house edged by a chain link fence on Lexington's Jefferson Street. But the neighbors never complain because they don't hear a thing.

The partiers are pieces of art: singers, musicians, and dancers coaxed from planks of wood with chisel and mallet by artist LaVon Van Williams Jr.

The happy clutter of art is gathered in the front room of the Jefferson Street house, Williams' studio. He works there early mornings and weekends when he is not working part-time at Morton Elementary School.

The room also serves as Williams' resource library. On one wall, bookshelves rise to the ceiling, heaped with books about great artists, but also about dance, fashion, and architecture. Sketch pads, filled with hundreds of Williams' drawings and ideas, are stacked among the books.

In the middle of it all, the 6-foot-6 Williams sits in a wooden chair. The former University of Kentucky basketball star is a quiet man and a keen observer.

His attention to detail and to movement is apparent in his reliefs of African Americans in familiar scenes. His art depicts the sorrow of funerals, the jubilation of a party, the deep notes of a well-played bass.

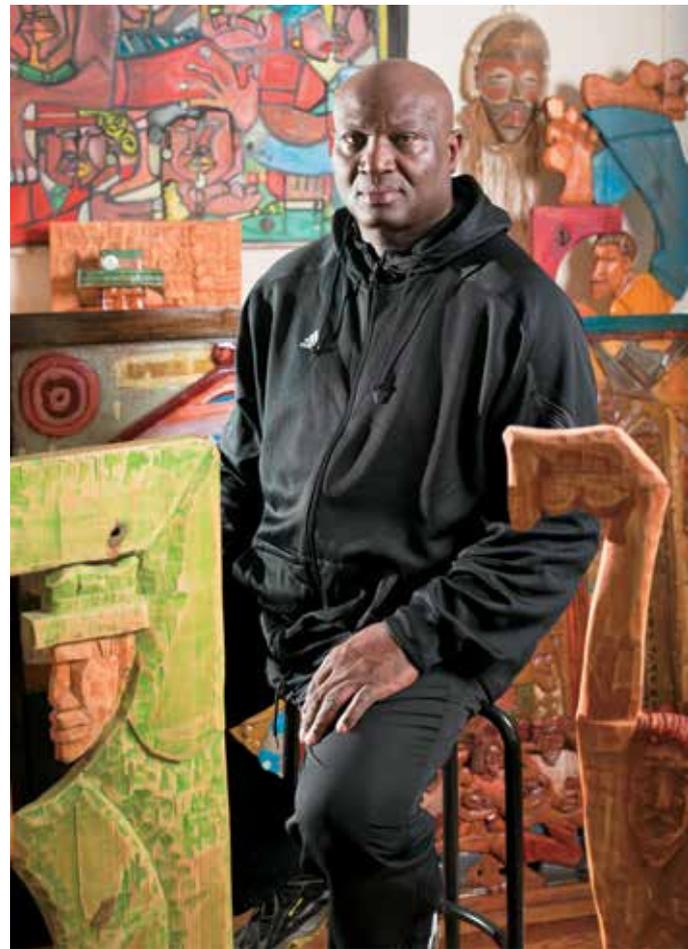
From the rough, waist-high table in the back yard where Williams likes to work, he can watch his neighbors walk by and see churchgoers dressed up in heels and hats arriving at a church across Jefferson. What he observes about people, from their gait to their fashion sense, works its way into his carvings. His art preserves black culture in a neighborhood that is quickly becoming gentrified.

As with other folk artists, life experience influences Williams' art. The snappy suits and the long, pointed dress shoes of his jazz players remind him of the dapper, older black men he'd see on childhood visits to Florida. He spent his time in a church pew, and those stained-glass windows and Lord's Supper paintings flavor his carvings.

His father listened to jazz records, and Williams developed a deep love of music. The oversized instruments played by musicians with long, large hands in his pieces emphasize music's importance to him.

When Williams was casting about, trying to figure out what to do with his life after years of playing basketball in international leagues, his mother offered the answer. "Do what you do best," she said. "Art."

Williams wasn't so



LaVon Van Williams embraced his love of art after a long career in professional basketball.

sure. His insecurity was verified when he caught other artists laughing at his work when he and his late brother Dave, also a wood carver, had their first gallery show in Denver

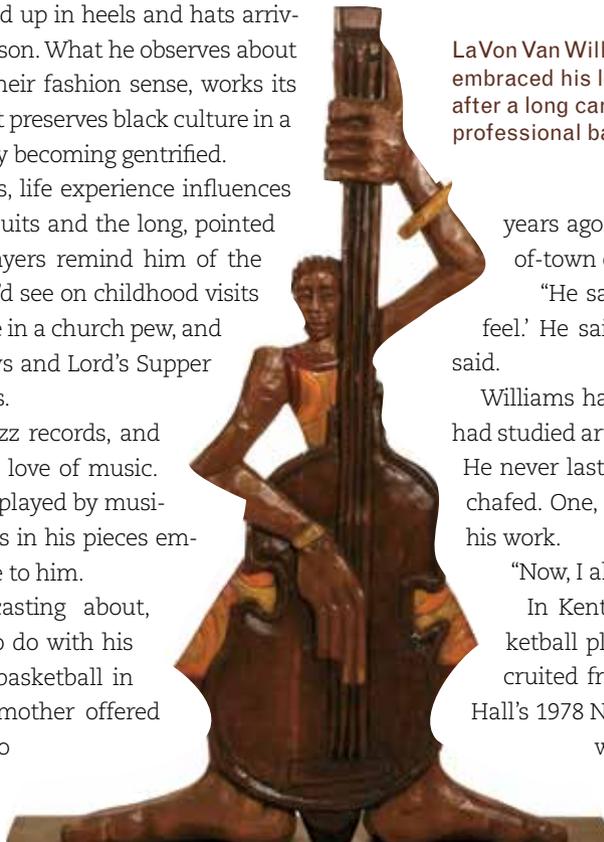
years ago. The other artists stopped laughing when an out-of-town collector bought the brothers' work.

"He said, 'I love this work. It has a Harlem feel, a jazzy feel.' He said he could hear Miles [Davis] playing," Williams said.

Williams has been making art ever since. He often wishes he had studied art in college and has even tried taking a class or two. He never lasted long though because his teachers' suggestions chafed. One, for example, told Williams never to use circles in his work.

"Now, I always start with a circle," he said with a grin.

In Kentucky, most will first think of Williams as a basketball player. He was, after all, a Parade All-American, recruited from Colorado by Joe B. Hall. He was a member of Hall's 1978 NCAA Basketball Championship team. Yet Williams would rather be remembered as an artist. "Creating art was always my first love," he said. "I would have always chosen art over basketball."



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Williams' art preserves African-American culture and the heritage of its singers, musicians, and dancers.

Williams' work is part of the Kentucky Folk Art Center's collection and many private collections. He is not currently affiliated with any galleries, but he does accept commissions.



**Janice Harding Owens**

Janice Harding Owens is not Grandma Moses, although her paintings have been likened to those of the 20th-century folk artist. Beyond the primitive style of art they share, the two women have much in common.

Like Anna Mary Robertson, aka Grandma Moses, Owens is a small, lively woman. Grandma Moses, who died in 1961 at age 101, was noted by one writer as a person who “charmed wherever she went.” The same can be said for Owens, who has traveled comfortably in circles far beyond her hillside home in Rockcastle County.

Like Grandma Moses, Owens has lived life in the country, the majority of it on 30 mostly forested acres between Berea and Mount Vernon. “What is flat, we made flat,” she said, her husband, Ron, nodding in agreement.

Owens has seven children; Grandma Moses had 10, although only five lived past infancy. Owens has 11 grandchildren; Grandma Moses had nine. Grandma Moses worked next to a washer and dryer on top of an old kitchen table. Owens works in her kitchen, her canvas leaning against shelves Ron made. He made her a table-top easel, but she doesn’t always use it.

Pastoral scenes common in the country inspired Grandma Moses; the same inspires Owens. Grandma Moses painted from the top down, starting with the sky. So does Owens. Grandma Moses’ never painted a shadow. Neither has Owens.

But Owens started her art career at a much younger age than Grandma Moses, who didn’t pick up a paintbrush until she was in her 70s. So Grandma Moses never negotiated some of the challenges Owens has faced.

As a young mother, Owens became an artistic multitasker. She’d hold a baby and paint. Fry chicken and paint. Leaving the kitchen for a quieter work area was out of the question. “Somebody was always needing something,” she said.

For practical reasons she chose to work with acrylic paint.

“I had seven children here at home when I started painting; I couldn’t have toxics like turpentine and mineral spirits around.”

Acrylic was also forgiving. “I don’t know how many times she walked in and found a smiley face painted on one of her paintings,” said Ron.



It’s also easier to clean. said Ron, “You would not believe how much paint has been spilled over the years.

Her children are mostly out of the house now, but in their place are grandchildren, ages 8 months to 18. It’s likely that the spills and smiley faces will continue.

Owens’ late sister was a realist painter, but Owens, like Grandma Moses, paints scenes that exist only in her mind. “My niece said to me, ‘You know these places you paint don’t exist.’ I said, Yes, they do. In here,” pointing to her head.

Like Grandmas Moses’ famous contemplations on rural life, Owens paints a simpler time. There are no power lines, no cars. The snow is pure; the trees are straight; the buildings square.

“No complications,” is how she sums it up.

Grandma Moses died long before Owens became an artist, yet their artistic paths have crossed. At the home of the late musician Skitch Henderson in Connecticut, one of Owens’ paintings hangs with three original works by Grandma Moses.

“It is my claim to fame,” said Owens. “I get to hang out with Grandma Moses.”

Owens’ work is sold at the Kentucky Folk Art Center in Morehead and at the Kentucky Artisans Center in Berea. Her pieces have been commissioned by numerous businesses, including Woodford Reserve Distillery, and individuals.  
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Janice Harding Owens is likened to a contemporary Grandma Moses, and her paintings evoke a simpler, idealistic time.