

ROANOKE TIMES & WORLD-NEWS

PAINTBRUSH BRIDGES

**AN ARTIST WITH A TALENT FOR FRIENDSHIP BECOMES A ONE-WOMAN
CULTURAL ENVOY TO OKINAWA - SHE WASN'T OFFICIAL, BUT SHE SURE WAS
EFFECTIVE**

Date: Thursday, October 1, 1992

Section: CURRENT

Edition: NEW RIVER VALLEY

Page: NRV-3

Type: ARTS

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CHRISTIANSBURG - Visitors to another country usually leave their money and bring home memories. Barbara Capps left paintings and brought home friendships that bridge the Pacific Ocean.

Late in the spring, the Christiansburg artist and teacher packed her bags, along with 39 large paintings, and flew to Okinawa.

"It was now or never," she said. "You can procrastinate and miss something, or you can grit your teeth and go."

A major reason for the trip was to visit her daughter and son-in-law in Okinawa, but her paintings helped open cultural doors to Okinawa's art community.

Her oil paintings, pastels and watercolors were appreciated enough to be shown at a prominent gallery in Naha, Okinawa's capital, and several were purchased by banks and corporations.

The showing in the Galerie Salone de Mitsu put Capps' work on exhibit in the same gallery with works by Picasso, Miro, Chagall, Christos, Bernard Buffet and Andy Warhol.

"Arts and artists are deeply loved in their culture. I found the artists themselves to be very supportive of each other," Capps said. "They just do not have the kind of competition found in America. Without their help, I could not have been as successful."

Nobuhachi Miyagi, a professional artist in Okinawa, liked Capps' works enough to buy some - a compliment among artists who usually exchange paintings instead of purchasing them.

Another sign of the art community's approval came when Yara Choshun, an artist well known in Okinawa, helped Capps arrange the reception for her showing.

Choshun showed her the proper way to make and send out invitations that carried pictures of her work, the proper format for Japanese calligraphy and the protocol of address.

He made signs for her and helped translate the paintings' titles into Japanese.

These courtesies indicated the Okinawans' regard for Capps; another artist who followed her at the gallery did not receive that kind of help. Before the day of the reception, Mitsu Arakawa, owner of the Galerie, treated Capps to a tea ceremony. The tea ceremony is a cultural kudo, but its being done by the gallery owner was another indication of the value the art community placed on Capps. Artists who are seeking only money are shunned in the Okinawan culture.

Capps said she was a bit nervous before the ceremony because she didn't know the customs. "Just stand there and be pretty," Arakawa told her.

She needn't have worried. A local radio announcer sat behind Capps, interpreting the elaborate ceremony and advising her on what to do each step of the way.

The day of the reception, members of the art community turned out. At receptions for artists, each guest brings a flower arrangement, food or wine. Capps was in for some more surprises.

Each man got up and spoke to the gathering. There would be a spate of words, lots of laughter, then the translator would turn to Capps and explain it in a few words of English.

"I kept wondering if I was missing something," she said with a laugh. "I kept expecting him to translate more."

Because homes on the coral island tend to be small, it was mostly banks and corporate businesses that bought her paintings on this visit.

"Next time, I'll be sure to include smaller works of art for their living spaces," the artist said. The paintings that did not sell during her visit were left in Okinawa to be sold later.

Capps said the most important gift from the experience was the cultural bridge that was built. She raised a healthy curiosity about Virginia's people, landscapes and culture.

Miyagi gave Capps four folders containing photographs of Okinawan scenes to paint while she is at home. In exchange, Capps will send photos of Virginia's mountain landscapes and architecture.

At least two of Capps' new friends will visit Virginia in 1995. Capps, who will be their host, plans to learn some Japanese before then.

Another highlight of her trip was the chance to visit her daughter, Terri, and Terri's husband, Maj. Robert Ireland, an Air Force flight surgeon in a fighter squadron.

Terri Capps often performs traditional Japanese dances at weddings and festivals on the coral island. Mother and daughter were inspired to create another cultural bridge. They will collaborate on a book describing the history and meanings of the traditional dances, written by Terri Ireland, with Capps illustrating the colorful costumes.