

Leon Travanti is Italian to the core. His travel-related paintings -- ripe, rhythmic, honestly sensual in the Mediterranean manner -- reflect his ethnic roots.

Born in Kenosha in 1936 to parents who had immigrated to Wisconsin from Italy (yes, he's a cousin of TV actor Daniel J. Travanti), he has been visiting parts of southern Europe -- Italy, Sicily, Anatolia -- regularly since 1965.

More than the warmth, sunlight, friendly people and azure seas, he values the sense of history and deeply embedded culture that these ancient nations represent.

Just such a multilayered sense of life, survival and death -- architectural as well as human -- distinguishes the 80 or so pictures he is displaying through Dec. 5 at the Michael H. Lord Gallery, 772 N. Milwaukee St.

The most moving and vital of these images are mixed-media works from his "Venetian Chronicles" series. Almost as memorable is a complex rendering of "The Golden Gate," based on a familiar scene in Istanbul.

All succeed in bringing out the human implications of centuries-old structures -- the scuffed, pitted, roughly abraded surfaces that betoken intense experiences and, sometimes, murderous deeds.

"I'm fascinated by ancient walls and enclosures," Travanti said in an interview, "because they all seem to have messages on them that are barely perceptible."

Travanti works his Mediterranean magic in a cozy studio on the second floor of the coach house that stands behind the 114-year-old Victorian manse he shares with his wife, artist and former teacher Carolyn White Travanti.

"A lot of these paintings," he explained, "are about the human act of enclosing, encapsulating and preserving. So they bring to mind rooms or containers -- castle treasuries, palace chambers, mysterious tombs that we don't understand any more . . ."

Travanti begins a project forearmed with sketches and photographs he has brought back with him from his Mediterranean tours.

He prepares the working surface by brushing a coat of gesso -- a liquefied mixture of powdered bone, glue and other materials -- onto a wooden panel or tightly stretched piece of canvas.

Once this has dried, he makes a preliminary drawing to use as a guide for the finished piece. Next he tints the surface with watercolor washes or acrylic paints.

"I have to dirty the canvas," said Travanti, who retired in 2002 after teaching for 40 years at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

"It comes to life once I really get it dirty. I no longer have a pure white surface . . ."

The Venetian paintings are broadly representative of Travanti's multi-image approach to art and art-making.

He breaks up the basic compositions into many smaller rectangles, some of them miniature paintings. He also attaches miniature objects to the wood panel by means of high-performance glue.

Doing so, he said, solidifies an emotional bond for him between his travels and the completed work. Masks, allegorical figures, carnival scenes and animals heighten the sense of cultural depth and visual diversity.

Once he has given a painting a direction, Travanti said, it almost invariably takes on "a life of its own." From this point on it assumes a distinct persona that is related to, but not identical to, what he had originally envisioned.

In a way, Travanti indicated with a hint of a grin, he is just a tool in the larger process of creation. Eternal Italy thus ends up as its own best -- and truest -- interpreter.

Leon Travanti's work is on view through Dec. 5 at the Michael H. Lord Gallery, 772 N. Milwaukee St. Admission: Free. Call (414) 272-1007.

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**CITATION (TURABIAN STYLE)**

AUER, JAMES. "Travanti's works have sense of history." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (WI)*, November 21, 2003: 12. *NewsBank: Access World News* "Historical and Current." <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/0FEF97F8E089E2CB>.

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