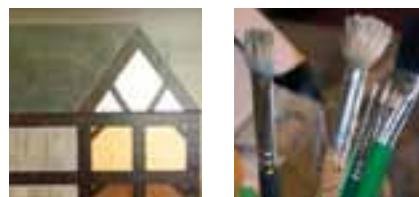


Folk art graphics

BY *Laura Jean Whitcomb*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Amy J. Putnam*



What makes you reach for one box instead of another at the grocery store? David Zerba knows. For 15 years, he designed packaging graphics for a variety of companies, including Hood, Hasbro and Gillette.

Packaging in the 1970s was a true art. Without the help of computers, graphic designers, like Zerba, would create and produce packages that protected and marketed products. Products designed for children, for example, might have a bright color scheme. Convenience foods should be designed to be easy to use. But packaging design isn't just about the carton; it complements the product's quality and enhances brand recall.

"I was asked to redesign the line for Hood's complementary line — iced tea, lemonade, grape drink," says Zerba, who was part of the 20-person Boston firm Nason Design Association. "By graphics alone, sales increased three times."

When graphic design went digital, Zerba left the industry and sold imprinted sportswear in Boston's Faneuil Hall Marketplace. "I was so naive about it,"



"Three Village Buildings" by Claremont artist David Zerba

he says. "I didn't realize how it would take off." His company, OCEAN-O-GRAFIKS, was successful for many years; a big seller was a t-shirt, with a marine graphic, packaged in plastic fish bowls.

When Zerba sold the business and returned to New Hampshire to care for his mother, he rekindled a hobby he had as a teenager: folk art paintings. Zerba's landscapes are similar to Warren Kimble's, but he's been painting a lot longer than the Vermont artist. It's his newer work, with a contemporary graphic design approach, that truly set Zerba apart from other New England artists. "My work is influenced by my background in graphic design, particularly poster, packaging and cover design," he says. "I depict existing and imaginary structures in a minimal format with shape, color and texture."

Zerba uses acrylics on wood, which is taken from the backings of vintage frames to give his paintings texture. He started his barn series with a painting of a simple white barn with a black roof and a red door. "I approached it as a design process for a client," he says. "I looked at it as a poster of 'barns of New England'."

He developed his first white barn into several two-dimensional contemporary designs. In one, a 20-by-24 barn looks as if it has been carved from the wood, and each beam and barn board is painted with bright colors. He has a framed giclee print of that same barn and, even without the two-dimensional aspect, it is still stunning. You wonder why Pier One or Pottery Barn haven't licensed his work yet; you could easily see Zerba's designs in homes across the country. The traditional New England



"Reflected Barn"

landscape is now a bold graphic image.

As you look around Zerba's Claremont studio, you can see how that barn has continued to evolve from bold colors to an "orchestral" theme with a piano key wall and silver and gold metal leaf overlays representing different instruments. The series was submitted to the New Hampshire Art Association, and Zerba became a member in 2008.

This year, he'll be showing his work in a gallery in Provincetown, Mass. He's started one acrylic on board of a pier. This version is gray, but there's also a modern version where the piles have a thicker border and brightly colored interior. Zerba is thinking through the visual representation of this landscape, and it will be interesting to see where he takes the image next.

WHO: David Zerba

WHAT: Bold, contemporary landscapes

WHERE: Zerba's work has been shown at Artful Things and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon and the Library Arts Center in Newport

WHY: Traditional landscapes as bold graphic images

CONTACT: 558-8274

Claremont-based Amy J. Putnam is a photographer who is most often seen shooting folk concerts and whale watches (seldom at the same time). When not out taking photos, she can often be found online, Twittering and blogging.

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