

Hiroko Cannon's
'Bewick's Wren
in Lilac Tree'



Watercolor artist paints birds in detail

By ERIC SLADE
Oregon Public Broadcasting

On a sunny morning in Pendleton, Hiroko Cannon quietly opens her back door, silently slipping into the yard where she can watch the birds beginning to gather around her array of bird feeders. This is research, gathering images for the meticulous watercolor paintings she's been creating for the past 20 years.

She never uses a camera, preferring to simply watch and remember what she sees. "Just my brain and my eyes are the best camera," she jokes. "Best quality in the world." She adds those images to her deep knowledge of birds gained through years of research in books and online, and from wandering nearby trails and scenic areas. "When you know the bone structures, you can move them around and know how they're going to look."

But Hiroko isn't just trying to show what the birds look like, she wants to reveal their

personalities, too. "I watch their movements and their activity, and then I make a story," she said. "They have a hierarchy, who's the strong one, who's the weak one — stuff like that. They are just like humans. They are really funny creatures."

Hiroko was born in Osaka, Japan and moved to Tokyo at age 23 to study with renowned painter Saetsu Nagasawa who taught an ancient form of Japanese art. She was soon working as a commercial illustrator, creating work for department stores and international clients like Sears and Toyota. But in 1986 her husband landed a job in the U.S. and she moved with him to Pendleton. When she got her first glimpse of the town, "all I could see is this green thing surrounded by wheat farms. I've never seen a place like that. I thought it was some kind of punishment — I was almost crying," she remembered. "It was a culture shock!"

But over time she became involved in the community, raised a family, made

friends and adapted to her new life. One of her favorite new customs was the potluck. "You put all kinds of food in a big tray. And then sometimes the juice from the casserole runs into the cakes and the cake soaks it up," she said. "I liked that!"

Each of Hiroko's paintings starts with a sketch where she can play and explore, finding the shape and design of the image. "Sketching time is kind of fun," she said. But when she gets into the painting, "that's kind of Zen work. No one around me. I have to be really careful, working on each feather. I feel very calm." Though she studied oil painting back in Japan she abandoned it years ago when the smell became too much. Now she uses a translucent Winsor Newton watercolor, in her own signature style. "I use tiny brushes and apply the paint in a colored pencil kind of way," she said. A single painting can take many weeks or months to complete working in her intricate technique, slowly building up layers of color to bring the feathers to life.

And though Hiroko always works alone she feels a deep connection with the bird she's painting, as if it's with her there in the room. "So I talk to him or her sometimes," she said. If it's been a long day of painting, she tells it, "Hey, I'm tired. I don't want to take care of you today. Bye!"

Her work is prominently displayed at the Pendleton Art Center, and at other Oregon galleries and shops. People in Pendleton sometimes stop her on the street to thank her for her work. Recently a man saw her at Walmart and told her, "I put your card in a little tiny frame and then put it on the kitchen wall."

And maybe that's part of the reason Pendleton seems to be her home, for good. "I don't want to go back to Japan because I'd miss the people," she said. "People really like my art, and they say it from bottom of their heart. I can feel it. And I really, really appreciate it. And I'd say thank you to all the people in Pendleton for being so kind to me."

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