Despite claims of 'dabbling,' Good an influential artist

BY JONATHAN NICHOLSON

The lines are soft and delicate, yet none too well defined. The colors alternate between subdued and vivid. And the people, when they do show up in one of Leonard Good’s canvases, are almost always portrayed charitably.

That may be because Good, 85, is at heart a charitable man. Though the stereotype of an artist is that of a disturbed Van Gogh-like figure who can only express his innermost feelings through his paint, Good is a seemingly well-adjusted retiree who “dabbles” in painting with a doting wife named Josie and a son who’s a “very good” mechanic in Langley, Wash.

Yet no one who merely dabbles in painting would have been exhibited in New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1966, or featured with a traveling exhibition of American painters in Paris in 1975. A dabbler would not have opened his second retrospective in 13 years a few weeks ago at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art on the University of Oklahoma campus in Norman.

So, if he’s not a tortured artist and he seems to have a normal life, why does he paint?

“Life is short. You might as well enjoy it,” Good said.

He recalled one artist who said he painted from “some deep inner category called imperative.”

“Well, I don’t paint from some deep inner category called ‘imperative.’ ” Good said. “I just paint.”

And he has done precisely that for quite some time. Leonard Good: Eight Decades” explores his beginnings as an art student at the University of Oklahoma to his later days at Drake University and retirement to his current home in Chickasha. It runs at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art through March 7.

“He’s had quite an influence in Oklahoma art,” said Jim Deighton, assistant director at Fred Jones, who helped put together the 54-piece exhibition. The works include watercolors, oils and acrylics.

Good graduated from high school at 15 and from OU in 1927 at the age of 19. After some post-graduate studies in New York City, he returned to OU as an art professor at the tender age of 23. He served on OU’s art faculty for 20 years.

He later went on to bring Drake’s art school to national prominence. He retired in 1977 after 25 years in Iowa. He’s lived in small house hidden in a thicket of woods on a residential street in Chickasha ever since.

“I taught 50 years. I thought that was long enough,” he said.

That long career has provided Good with some memorable tales. Once, when people complained he was too young to be teaching art, OU art department chairman Oscar Jacobsen defended him, saying, “That is a situation which is being remedied every year.”

The method of his paintings is also somewhat unusual. Forsaking an easel set up in a corner of the house, Good said he prefers to paint in the bathroom, which has an overhead skylight. By placing the canvas on small ledge above the toilet, he can take advantage of that light.

Still, through all the fuss over his lifetime of work, Good maintains a grace and a sense of humor that are disarming. His paintings hang in famous galleries, but also in the headquarters of the Chickasha Chamber of Commerce. He even had his call of his dermatologist in return for knocking $200 off a bill.

He said he has no favorite painting.

“I’m not that sentimental about paintings,” Good said.

“When you do one, you hope it’s the Great American Masterpiece. But it’s easier to say than do.”

SAY "HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY" WITH A CARD

What better way to say "Happy Valentine's Day" than with a framed sweetheart? We offer a choice of Carr frame designs, individual cards, and the popular sizes.