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Decoupage Gets the Royal Treatment

BY JESSICA ESTEPA

When the Meridian International Center was first approached about featuring the queen of Denmark's art, its staff wasn't sure what to expect.

"We wondered what a queen's art would be like," said Curtis Sandberg, Meridian's vice president for the arts and cultural programs. "We were immediately shown some background and were astonished and delighted. We had never seen decoupage that had such depth."

That eventually led to the exhibit at the Meridian's White-Meyer House (1624 Crescent Place NW). The free exhibit features decoupage — paper cutouts glued together to create a colorful, bigger picture — by Queen Margrethe II for the latest film adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Wild Swans." Also featured in the exhibit are costumes, designed by the queen, from the movie and paper cutouts created by Andersen.

The Meridian is the first (and only) place in the United States to show the queen's work. Before its display at the Meridian, the exhibit was also featured in Denmark and Mexico City. It will travel to Beijing next.

The movie, which is narrated in English and has English subtitles for the Danish spoken by the actors, plays on a loop at the exhibit. It runs about 60 minutes.

The decoupage creations, which took the queen more than four years to create, served as the sets for the film. Through green screen technology, the backgrounds were edited into the scenes filmed by the actors, simulating a lush and fantastical environment for the beloved Danish fairy tale.

Erica Cosgrove, the Meridian's exhibi-



This decoupage of "The Peasant Woman's Cottage" was created by Queen Margrethe II of Denmark.

Photo Courtesy JJ Films, Copenhagen, Denmark

tions coordinator, advises visitors to take a close look at the decoupage displays. As they are a little larger than the size of a piece of paper, the queen used cutouts from things like art and auction catalogs to create her works.

"A sea decoupage actually has a small piece of Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe prints from a catalog," Cosgrove said. "Her gift is taking various visuals from different places and blending them together. It's so complicated, but it's beautiful."

The display came to the Meridian, which has a staff of three people working on exhibits, instead of a larger venue because the Embassy of Denmark was interested in putting something together quickly in 2009, Cosgrove said. At most places in Washington, venues are booked years in advance.

This allowed the Meridian to step in and send Exhibitions Director T.K. Harvey and Sandberg to Denmark to do some research on how the exhibit was displayed at the Odense City Museums in Copenhagen. While there, the two worked out a deal that would bring over not only the

queen's art, but some of Andersen's paper cutouts — a little-known talent of his — as well.

They came home with more than a hundred pages of notes, from the dimensions of each set to how many pinpoint lights were on each decoupage, but it was well worth it.

"We wanted to create it in such a way that American audiences could get a sense of the culture and the meaning of the exhibit," Sandberg said.

The display serves as a cultural exchange between people in the U.S. and Denmark, Cosgrove said. People are often familiar with Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," but they know little beyond that.

"We want this to educate U.S. audiences," she said.

At a recent U.S. premiere of "The Wild Swans" at the National Gallery of Art, Frederik, the crown prince of Denmark, gave an introduction. Referring to the queen as "Mum," he said the film and story combines the art, culture and history of Denmark.

"Personally, I think that the film and art is humorous, enchanting and elusive," said the prince, who was also in town for the opening of the Meridian exhibit. "The picture invites you in."

The exhibit will run through July 3.