



Roff Graves, owner of Graves' Country Gallery, showcases and sells folk art from his Cherokee Lane shop, as well as online.

NEWS-SENTINEL PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN EVANS

## A man and his folk art

A look into the world of Roff Graves, the folk art collector behind the colorful Cherokee Lane storefront

By Lauren Nelson  
LODI LIVING EDITOR

Cherokee Lane is a hodgepodge of commerce: Old-time diners still popular for their breakfast specials, smog shops who fight for customers with \$19.99 specials, and order-at-the-window restaurants where tacos come stuffed with everything from spicy sausage to deep-fried octopus.

But next to an alleyway and small gas station is a different kind of business, a storefront that is closed to the public, yet is home to an eclectic 500-piece collection of folk art. The art — from pottery to paintings and woodworks — celebrate the folk style that is the opposite of fine art: Never perfect, often out of perspective and somehow illustrates life of the working class. In the gallery, there are paintings that reveal black history from artists who both experienced slavery and were part of the civil rights movement. Pastels of black women being shot at by white men hiding in trees. Clay heads of devils, including one piece that reveals a devil preacher. And crucifixes, painted and carved.

It's a world that Graves, owner of Graves' Country Gallery, calls his own. A place as interesting as the 73-year-old art dealer with Santa Claus white hair, bushy eyebrows, a contagious smile and eyes that tear depending on which story he's telling.

With a heart for the south, the less fortunate, and his own eccentric side, Graves is immersed in the art world that started with a farm scene painting he found in a secondhand store on E. Main Street in Stockton in the '70s.

"The animals are totally out of scale," said Graves, who knows it's a good painting when the perspective is off. "It's probably my most beloved painting."

Before that, he knew little of art.

Graves, 73, was born in Shamrock, Texas. He and his brother, Ralph, grew up in the back of their parents' car as they drove from Texas to Oklahoma and California, chasing work in orchards. They picked peaches, prunes and apricots. Then, his family was poor, as was most everyone else. When he was 11 or 12, his family settled in Lancaster, Calif.

In high school, Roff Graves still didn't have a special interest in art or even history. His interest, he admits, was California girls. He thought it would be impressive to join the French Foreign Legion. And he even attempted to join the Marines, but his parents would only give their son permission to join the Air Force.

That decision didn't lead to art, but to careers as an investigator for the Department of Motor Vehicles and Caltrans. At 57, he retired — not knowing it would only lead to another career.

One day, while skimming the pages of "Antique Trader," Graves read about an emerging folk artist, Clementine Hunter. The prices of her paintings were rising, the article said.

"I thought, 'I should buy a piece, just for fun,'" he said.

Graves can't remember whether he paid \$150 or \$200 for that painting — one of the ugliest paintings he says he's ever seen, but he's had several Hunters over the years and the last one sold to a gallery in Baton Rouge for \$2,500.

But he's not in it for the money. He loves the art cluttering Graves' Country Gallery as if he painted and sculpted each piece with his own large hands.

To Graves, it's about the artist. Their stories. Their memories. Their heritage. Their losses. And it's about sharing their message and vision of a time that was.

Collecting art started as a hobby, but now the love has seeped into his own skin as if he were the black woman who painted about being shot at by white men hiding in trees. Or if he were the lonely, pale woman staring out of a painting by homeless painter. Or a child in a farm painting, naive and playing with horses decades before a time period became known as the civil rights era.

Now, Graves does most of his art dealing online, and says he's sold to just about every state. But when he first started, he'd buy in person, and get to know the artist who created his latest favorite piece.

"I used to go and meet them ... I danced with them, sang with them," Graves said.

He would drive all the way across the country to meet with the artists he fell in love with.

He drove non-stop for three days and three nights, from California to Folk Festival in Georgia. In the early years at the festival, he met artists he'd read about, artists he'd represented, artists he wanted to represent.



"Snakes Everywhere" by New Mexico artist Kelly Moore hangs on the wall at Graves' Country Gallery.



Carver Shane Campbell is known for handwriting messages into his wood pieces, as he did with these black crows on a branch.



DAN EVANS/NEWS-SENTINEL

Roff Graves points out some of his favorite pieces from his collection of folk art.

**Continued from Page 1**

Bernice Sims, one of Graves' most popular artists, who he says is "one of the most-beloved black artists today," was at Folk Fest in Georgia. Her paintings portrayed her memories of days of living on farms, as well as paintings of the Civil War and protests she marched in. Her paintings sold out by 9 a.m., but her stories — like the one of the time she carried a pistol wrapped in her apron through a protest —

brought a crowd of 100 visitors pushing toward her, wanting to hear.

Graves has sold over 100 of Sims' paintings and keeps a framed 8-by-10 picture of the artist in his gallery.

Perhaps its coincidence, but much of the art Graves owns is made by artists who are cooky and full of personality and opinion — much like Graves himself.

Hanging on the walls of the dark, barn-like gallery with high walls and an arched ceiling are the paintings of Steven

Chandler, who is known for painting Georgia's red mud. In the way he does about everyone, Graves tells a story of the time someone tried to copy Chandler's painting. Graves—who normally speaks with his hands — pauses and narrows his eyes to emphasize Chandler's wrath.

"He will literally fight with the devil if the devil copies him," Roff said. "He'll be around when everyone else is gone."

Graves tells stories like his painters paint. And when he looks at a painting for the first time, it's as if he can feel what the artist felt.

Chandler, who was discovered by Graves through an auction, knew he could trust the Lodi dealer the first time he heard Graves talk about a painting. It was a David Padworny painting that Graves enjoyed so much, Chandler remembers. Graves bought it simply because he felt the anguish expressed through the layers of paint.

"He bonded with it immediately. I realized that this guy really loves art," Chandler said, over the phone from his studio in Georgia.

More than five years later, Roff has bought and sold at least 30 of Chandler's paintings, a feat for folk-style art in California.

"He's just a good ol' guy. He's someone I can trust," Chandler said. "He reminds me of the skipper from 'Gilligan's island'."

In the Cherokee Lane gallery, near bookshelves of books on folk art and tall shelves of pottery, Graves points to pieces and tells stories as if he were reading a picture book. There are paintings by Jimmy Sudduth, Rev. Finster, Juanita Leonard, Kelly Moore, Mose Tolliver, Jack Savitzky and more. Some are well known, and showing in big-time galleries. Others are homeless and will sell their paintings for their next drink. They are young and old. But they all have a passion for a

**Graves' Country Gallery**  
**What:** A folk art gallery viewed by appointment.  
**Where:** 15 N. Cherokee Lane.  
**Call:** 368-5740.  
**View art and shop online:** [www.gravescountry.com](http://www.gravescountry.com).

folk art for that expands from country scenes to images of the devil.

"I have one of the most extensive libraries of folk art in the country," Graves said. "I truly, truly believe I have the top folk artists in the nation."

However, Graves has his critics. Some people think he has junk. That's why he closed his shop to the public; he got tired of people saying he was crazy. One woman asked the price of a Noah's Ark carving, and when he answered seventeen hundred fifty dollars, she thought he meant \$17.50 and pulled out a \$20 bill.

He's planning to open his doors again with regular business hours, but for now, he only shows his collection to those who are interested enough to call and make an appointment. Most of the time, they are those from out of town.

"I don't let people in unless I like them," he said, only half joking.

Graves' Country Gallery isn't really a family affair. Arlene, his "third and final wife," as he likes to say, isn't interested in art as much as her husband, but will bring visitors by when Graves promises to wipe away a little dust or manage some of what might seem like clutter.

With the exception of his 17-year-old granddaughter Jeanette Graves-Lang who helps him with the business, his 30 grandchildren (from six marriages between the couple) aren't too involved.

Graves-Lang has just started spending time in her grandfather's gallery.

"He likes some pretty crazy

stuff," she said, adding that passersby really aren't able to imagine what kind of collection is really inside the storefront labeled as an antique shop.

During a recent afternoon in Autumn, after he surveyed his two-room gallery, Graves walks out of the glass door to Graves' Country Gallery and stands along Cherokee Lane. The building is painted in all colors, by both professional artists and people he meets on the street. Excited about the idea of opening shop again, he smiles and rests his hands on his truck. It too is painted like one of his pieces with blue skies, billowy white clouds and farm houses.

And so simply, he says, "This is my world."

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Pottery depicting people and creatures are on display at Graves' Country Gallery.

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