

“Into the Wild”

September 19 – November 2@ MoTA

1st Floor Gallery

DAVE KELLY

SEBRING, FL

After a year of testing his hand at wood carving, Folk Artist David Kelly called the High Museum in Atlanta. He thought if you were going to do it, you might as well do it big. Hoping to donate a piece of finely carved wood, he experienced the sweet and sour of the life of an artist. “I’m thick-skinned and knew I could handle a ‘no’ if that’s what I got,” he told *Georgia Magazine* that ran an article on the artist in 2008. While it was a no, the feedback he received was encouraging – good, marketable, and showing natural talent, the museum curators noted – prompting Kelly to continue to carve and to refine his work.

While doing so, he introduced himself to management at museums, developed relationships and gained their respect; several now own a small collection of his pieces. Sometimes artists are taught formally, and then there are those like Kelly who have enough raw talent and tenacity to stick with it until it becomes their life. What is true of art is also true of teaching. In 2006 David Kelly exhibited at the North Georgia State Fair where he also demonstrated his folk art. Kids showed an interest from the beginning, and quickly Kelly realized that it wasn’t enough to show and sell, he also wanted to have children put their hands to wood and begin to carve themselves.

“I like doing educational things for kids and families. It’s interesting to see their interest in my work, and to feel as if I’m giving back,” Kelly said.

Kelly’s work with kids had a way of inspiring others. It enabled the kid-artists to bring others to museums where, Kelly said “their own work hung along-side that of professionals.” The September/October exhibit at MoTA features a few of those pieces, signed by the artists – all of them from the youngest to Kelly himself.

Over the next five years, Kelly’s work was shown at festivals, fairs, and art leagues from North Florida to Tennessee, while he worked with children to teach his artistry to them, always gifting the pieces to the organization which then either displayed it or used it through charity auctions to benefit their non-profit. They were gifts that weren’t just valuable artistically, but valuable in the lessons learned by Kelly, and the families whose children he taught about folk art and tenacity.

In 2012 the Dave and Val Kelly relocated to Florida, bringing some of the work, as well as Kelly’s talent with them. Over time, his interest included painting, Kelly’s commitment to being a folk artist extending to acrylic and oil. “I paint what I see,” he said, moving from blank canvas to completing a painting in one sitting. He knows it isn’t the norm, but it works, he says, for him. Working with wood remains his life-work, but as Kelly is the first to say, “I’m not an artist, I’m a Folk Artist.” The museums, festivals, fairs, and children he’s worked with and those who own his pieces think he’s a bit of both.