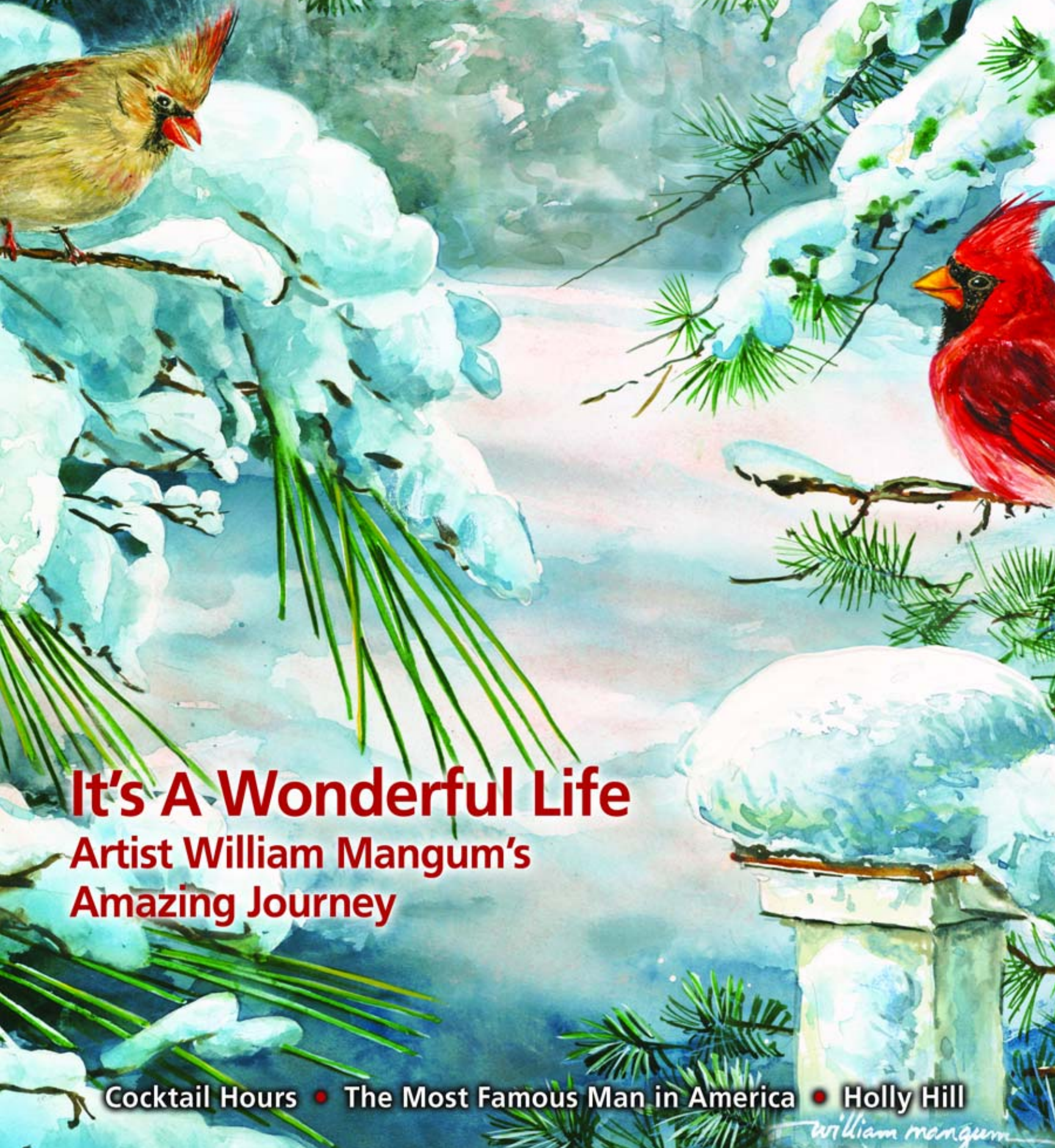


PineStraw

The Art & Soul of the Sandhills

December 2009



It's A Wonderful Life
Artist William Mangum's
Amazing Journey

Cocktail Hours • The Most Famous Man in America • Holly Hill

william mangum



Photograph by Hannah Sharpe

The Long Winter Journey of William Mangum

BY JIM DODSON

*"T*here's something in each of us, I think, that eventually needs to give something back to those who have helped us on the journey," says acclaimed artist and Pinehurst native Bill Mangum, pausing to reflect on a particular painting in his spacious Greensboro gallery. "And for me, this painting really says it all."

The painting is called "Bridge of Hope." It shows a simple stone bridge spanning a woodland creek, mantled by newly fallen snow. In the forefront, a lone set of footsteps tracks across the bridge, while in the distance a man moves toward a clearing where afternoon sunlight paints the tops of the trees and blue skies hint of a receding storm.

The painting's obvious allegorical elements are hardly accidental. "One stone doesn't make a bridge," the artist continues. "But many stones bound together creates a strong bridge over the stream. In just that same way, many of us working together to help one another can do so much. In some way or another, we're all helped by others. I know I have been."

"Are you that man walking through the storm toward the sunlight?" a visitor asks.

Mangum smiles. "Sure. But aren't we all?"

With a portfolio that includes more than 3,000 original paintings of iconic and often vanishing North Carolina scenes and people, ranging from the lighthouses of the Outer Banks to the rural faces of the Smokies, Mangum has brilliantly preserved the changing face of his beloved home state with his soulful paintings and limited edition prints. For many of his fans, they recall a childhood that may or may not exist anywhere other than his paintings and their own imaginations.

Behind the material success of a man who has more than 50,000 pieces in private and corporate collections around the world and has been hailed as "North Carolina's Artist," however, this impressive body of work reveals far more than the maturation of a gifted landscape artist. On a deeper level, it reveals an almost classical odyssey of personal struggle and determined achievement, of success and failure on an equally notable scale, and a spiritual awakening worthy of a Renaissance artist.



“MOVING ON,” MANGUM’S HONOR CARD WORK FOR 2009

Even before his birth at Moore County Hospital in April 1953, little Billy Mangum effectively had a world of long odds arrayed against him.

His pretty mama Louise was a divorced mother of a 10-year-old and a nurse’s aid at the Pinehurst hospital when she learned she was pregnant by a man she’d hoped to soon marry. Unfortunately, the baby’s father, one Bill Mangum of Smithfield, was sent to prison for having accidentally killed another man while driving drunk. He would be locked up for eight years.

After Billy’s birth, Louise had no place to turn but to her family back in Mamers, a rural farming community in Harnett County. A short time after she arrived there, her own mother died and an unlikely savior appeared in the form of Hugh Mangum, Bill’s younger brother, who offered to marry Louise and become a father to her boys.

“We called Hugh ‘Pops.’ He was a chief gunner’s mate in the Navy who moved us up to a base in Rhode Island,” Mangum remembers. “He was also an abusive alcoholic. When my sister Elizabeth was born — making us a family of three children by three different fathers — I witnessed terrible beatings of my mother and eventually received some of the same myself.”

In part to escape the terror of these abuses, Billy Mangum

began sketching things he saw around him — toys, abandoned cars, fields and houses.

While Pops was deployed in the Mediterranean, Louise Mangum suffered a stroke and was hospitalized. She was just 35 years old. “For months,” Mangum remembers, “they had no idea what was wrong with her. They thought she’d simply lost her mind and was unable to speak. She was even sent to an asylum for a while, until the stroke was finally diagnosed.”

Billy’s sister Elizabeth was sent to live with relatives in Raleigh; Billy was sent to live with his Uncle Gilbert on a hardscrabble tobacco farm in Mamers. By then, his brother Bob was off to college in Mississippi.

“I was surrounded by family but I really hated the life in Mamers — or thought I did,” he remembers. “These were poor farming folks, and I was suddenly attending a rural school with country kids after years of being in a big city school up north. I felt lost between worlds.”

His Aunt Kate lived in the nearby hollow. “She was this huge wonderful woman, full of love and generosity, an amazing cook who kept a vast garden and was always putting up vegetables and fruit preserves. I really began to learn about love from her.”

In the third grade, Billy did a crayon drawing of Mount Fuji that



“BRIDGE OF HOPE” 2006

won him a large blue ribbon at the N.C. State Fair. “I wore that blue ribbon on my chest for days, maybe even weeks,” he recalls. “I was so proud of that.”

A student he wasn’t, however. By the time he attended high school in Spring Lake, near Fayetteville, working odd jobs to help feed the family, Billy Mangum’s grades were so poor he had to earn extra credit doing school bulletin boards just to graduate. An art teacher named Miss McDuffie gave him a first glimmer of hope.

“She was one of the first people who encouraged me to follow my gift. My brother Bob was the other guardian angel. He was very successful in the sheet metal business down in New Orleans and a brilliant entrepreneur. Simply put, I probably wouldn’t be here today without either of them. Bob tried his best to get me into a decent small college but none would have me. I’d never learned how to study.”

So Bill Mangum enrolled at Sandhills Community College, where an amazing transformation took place. A working artist was born.

“It was there, under the guidance of some terrific teachers and encouraging folks, that I not only learned how to study for the first time, but I also fell deeply in love with art. I made the dean’s list and got into pottery and drawing and decided, wow, I think I can really make something of myself doing this,” he says.

In 1974 he moved on to UNCG, gaining valuable exposure to other artistic influences and mediums. “Thanks to what I’d learned at Sandhills, I was well ahead of others. I tried lots of mediums but it was not until something special happened during my senior year that I discovered my love of watercolor.”

As Christmas approached, having little or no money for gifts, he went to Woolworth’s and purchased a 59-cent watercolor set and returned to his dorm to paint a snowy landscape for his mom’s Christmas present: a rural snow scene of western North Carolina. He went back to Woolworth’s and paid \$2.98 for a frame.



The watercolor that changed Mangum’s life. December 1975.

“My mom was blown away by it. She looked at it and declared, ‘Billy, you’ve got to do more.’”

Today, the painting that changed his life — or at least pointed him toward a light in the clearing — hangs in Mangum’s work studio at his Greensboro gallery.

What happened next sounds a little like a Frank Capra film. After the holidays, a dean was impressed by his studies in watercolor work and proposed that Mangum serve as the college’s Artist in Residence during freshman orientation week. The job even paid \$75 and, more important, offered him the chance to have a showing of his original works.

“I phoned Bob and asked him for a loan of \$300 so I could frame up ten paintings,” Mangum recalls. “He came through for me once again.”

For six weeks, Mangum painted day and night. Rural landscapes and real faces were his primary themes. He sold every painting and pocketed \$3,800. “I couldn’t believe it. The reaction was so positive and all I really had in it was my own work and maybe \$40 worth of paint.”

Even as he started work on his master of fine arts degree, the



An artist's easel: preliminary works and early renderings.

entrepreneurial wheels were turning in his head. In 1977, after marrying his college sweetheart Cynthia, he produced a painting of a snowy barn called "West Jefferson," inspired by a photograph taken by Hugh Morton. It captured second place in a competition sponsored by the N.C. Watercolor Society. Mangum had 500 prints made from the painting and sold them out in eight weeks, making \$53,000.

With this windfall, he purchased a pair of new Cadillacs and a piece of land near a Greensboro country club. "At that moment all I wanted was respectability, material success, a productive career like my brother Bob enjoyed. Thanks to artists like Bob Timberlake, the demand for commercial art like this was growing by leaps and bounds," he says, referring to the Lexington-based commercial artist whose elegant renderings of North Carolina would eventually translate into a highly successful brand of clothing and home furnishings. "I saw myself as following in Bob's tradition. He was blazing a trail in the commercial marketplace. If he wanted to be the Andrew Wyeth of North Carolina, I wanted to be the next Bob Timberlake."

During his second year of business, Bill Mangum made enough money to open a small studio gallery. Then disaster struck in the form of a major economic recession.

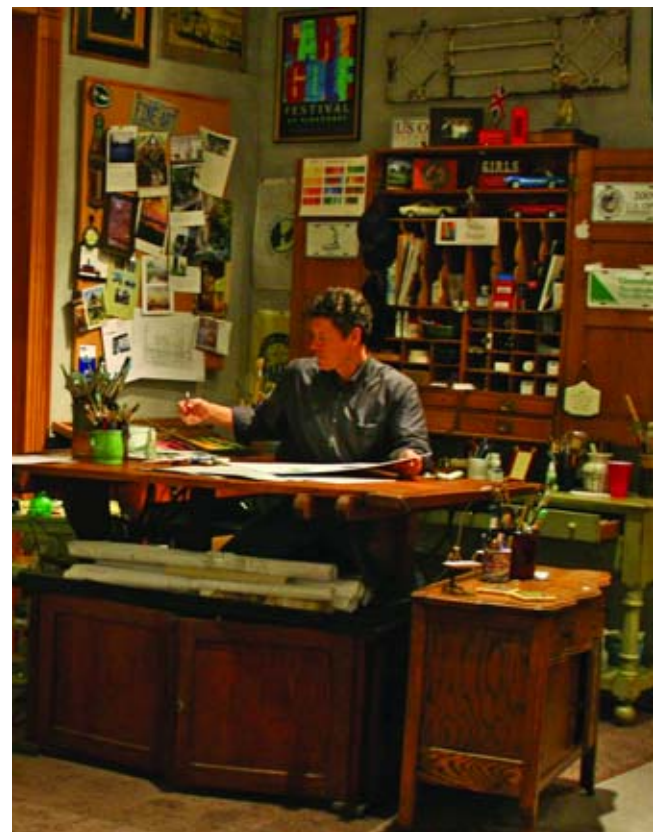
"The bottom fell out of the art market and suddenly nobody was buying anything. I had the skill set for creating art but no understanding of business practices. I found myself deeply in debt and having to declare bankruptcy just to stay afloat."

It turned out to be the darkness before the dawn, the storm before the clearing. One evening, while both his Cadillacs were being repossessed outside his house, the artist says he turned his fate over to a higher power.

"I opened my life to Christ and prayed something to the effect that if God ever gave me a second chance I would not only learn how to handle my success, but would find a way to give back to others for what I'd been blessed to receive," he says.

Within days, Mangum learned that both *American Artist* and *Southern Accents* were planning profiles of his work. Big brother Bob once again came to his assistance with money and solid business advice.

"That first winter was tough, a struggle through the darkness," he admits.



Mangum in his Greensboro studio.



“SOUTHPORT” 2001

“Cynthia and I had three young children. We literally heated our house at times with a kerosene heater. Concerned friends who knew how we were struggling often dropped by unseen to leave bags of groceries by the back door. I learned a lot about human compassion for others undergoing crisis.”

Thanks to painting called “Deep Gap” that earned a cool \$80,000, Bill Mangum began painting his way back into the black. Within four years, he paid off all of his debts, wiping the slate clean.

During this inwardly reflective period, Mangum joined a men’s prayer breakfast group and developed deep spiritual bonds with other men who’d been through the refiner’s fire in one way or another. One morning in 1988, after having breakfast with a friend, he spotted a homeless man standing outside a Hardees. The man asked him for \$5.

“I thought about it and told him I didn’t feel comfortable giving him money but would be pleased to buy him breakfast,” Mangum says. The two sat and talked. The homeless man was named Michael Saavedra. “As we were leaving, I gave him my business card and told him to call me if he needed anything. I can’t explain why, except something drew me to him. I was still hell bent to be the best artist in America. But something got inside me. Here was despair and homelessness and mental illness like I’d never seen so intimately before – literally right in front of me. A man with no home, no hope. Basically forgotten.”

The two men became friends. In time, the artist became the homeless man’s primary caregiver, visiting Michael during his various hospitalizations and helping him get off the streets for the first time in decades. When Saavedra died three years after their first meeting, Bill Mangum was perhaps his closest friend.

About that same time, a neighbor invited Mangum to do a painting for the nascent Honor Card program of Greensboro Urban Ministry, a faith-based volunteer program that fed and housed the city’s homeless.

Soon afterward, Mangum not only began showing up at 6 a.m. on Wednesday mornings at Urban Ministry to help prepare the weekly prayer breakfast meal, but enthusiastically took on the project, producing an initial work titled “Not Forgotten” that graced the Honor Card of 1988. That card raised more than \$52,000 in local donations.

“All of this softened my heart,” Mangum quietly allows, sketching at his easel in his spacious Battleground Avenue studio 21 years later — the day before his annual “Meet the Artist” event, which will bring out more than 1,500 fans, producing lines that stretch out the gallery’s front door and down the sidewalk.

“What I learned from all of this is that the materialism I’d once felt was so important — something I now realize I rationalized as compensation for the deprivations of my own childhood — was being broken down, little by little. It’s not gone completely, mind you, but it showed me something more important than material success.” He smiles wryly. “My entrepreneurial competitiveness is still as keen as ever. But my perspective is very different today.”

During this fertile period, not so coincidentally, the William Mangum brand began its own upward arc.

By the year 2000, he was doing more than \$1 million in sales and employed 17 people. He was producing limited edition prints that were sold in more than 280 galleries nationwide. Four published collections of his works became bestsellers, and plans were made for his own eventual home furnishings line with a leading N.C. firm. For many years, he produced the governor’s annual Christmas card, too.

That same year, the artist unveiled his most ambitious project to date: *Carolina Preserves*, a sumptuous tabletop homage to the Old North State that featured 138 original paintings from the mountains to the coast, with reflections from 48 distinguished North Carolinians ranging from Dean Smith to Billy Graham. Among other things, an outstanding documentary on the production was made by UNC-TV that still crops up on PBS.

“The inspiration for the book came directly from my own childhood — my life in Mamers and Aunt Kate’s amazing cupboard of preserves,” Mangum explains. “The idea was to match the beauty of this state with the most authentic voices we could find.”

Right out of the gate, priced close to \$100 — the most expensive art book in the nation that year — *Carolina Preserves* sold 7,500 copies. Within a year, however, events of 9/11 gutted the commercial art market as well as the furniture, hospitality and publishing industries — all traditional collectors of Mangum’s work.

“In some ways the timing couldn’t have been worse,” he notes, pointing out that close to 90 percent of his industry has disappeared. Today only a handful of galleries that once carried his works and other top artists’ even remain in business. “In that respect I feel very grateful to be doing what I most love doing.”

This holiday season marks his 21st year producing the Honor Card, which has spread to more than 10 cities in North Carolina, having generated more than \$3 million in direct assistance to the state’s homeless. “I’m proud of the fact that for every dollar we receive to help produce the card,” he says, “we’re able to give back \$12.50 directly to the people who need it most.”

This year’s card is called “Moving On,” a title that’s more than a little symbolic for a gifted artist who is moving on as well.

In October, Mangum released his sixth book, a dazzling collection of 23 of North Carolina’s classic golf courses, partly inspired by his time at the 2005 U.S. Open, where he and fellow painter Linda Hartough served as Artists in Residence. Many of the state’s most venerable courses are showcased in the book, and the artist admits a growing passion for painting golf courses.

Fortunately, despite the economic winter that has ravaged so many of his contemporaries, demand for Mangum originals and prints remains vigorous — a measure of his accessibility as a painter and his savvy as a businessman.

The artist paints roughly one new original piece a week and is busy carving out an expanded career as a corporate keynote speaker, doing innovative custom programs that feature original art and client recognition on a breathtaking scale.

Maybe equally inspiring to his fans, any day this accidental son of Pinehurst is not somewhere speaking or doing a corporate event, the artist can be found working in his private studio at the back of his gallery. And the chances are good he’ll invite you back to have a look at something being created.

“I’ve always believed in intimate contact with people who collect my work,” he says. “If someone cares enough to come through my doors, the least I can do is get up and meet them.

“Whatever is yet to come,” he muses, gently brushing strokes of ochre watercolor onto a rudimentary sketch of a country church that could well have stood in the landscape of his own childhood, “I sometimes marvel at how far I’ve come and realize that the ups and downs have made me who I am; they’ve given me a powerful faith in my own creator. It’s been an amazing journey.”

In the next breath, he mentions that Louise Mangum, his mom, passed away earlier this year.

“I miss her every day. She believed in me before anyone else did. No matter what life threw at her, she was always full of optimism and hope, always encouraging me — the major stone in my own bridge across the stream. Even now I have her voice in my head, gently telling me: ‘Billy, you have to do more. It just takes time, honey. It just takes time.’” PS



“LINVILLE FALLS” 2004



“YOUNG HIGHLANDER” 1999