

One Cedarburg mill met early demise while another has had a lengthy business history

Cedarburg Art Museum commemorates local mill history with five recently commissioned artworks in its exhibition "Remembering Cedarburg's Historic Mills," thanks to an anonymous donor to the museum. This third and final article illuminates the artwork of Wisconsin artists William A. Suys, Jr. and Tom Kubala who illustrated the 1871 wind-powered grist mill and the 1864 Hilgen-Wittenberg Woolen Mill, respectively, for their museum commissions.



Bill Suys's 2019 oil painting is a historic re-creation of the county's only wind-powered grist mill that operated from 1871 to 1891 in Cedarburg.

As the only wind-powered mill in the county, the "Old Gristmill" was built in 1871 by stone mason Frederic Asche, carpenter farmer Frederic Spille, and miller Charles Duvel. It operated as a local gristmill for barley and various flours until 1878 when it was sold. Next Wilhelm Thiel ran it along with his bakery until the mill with its wooden walkway and wooden wind-blades were consumed by fire in 1891. The remaining stone structure was never used again. It eventually became a safety hazard and was completely removed in 1947 so that nothing remains at its former location near Zur Ruhe Cemetery on Bridge Road in Cedarburg.

The talents of Bill Suys as a fine artist of animal and human portraiture, wildlife, and architecture are known nationally. Awards of excellence for Suys abound in national competitions and he is a signature member in the juried organizations of Oil Painters of America and the Portrait Society of America. His favored subjects are figurative portraits of animals and people (and he would like to do more) but he also loves the history and architecture of the Cedarburg and Mequon areas. He enjoys bringing history to life, as in his historic re-creation (shown above) that provides a memory of a meaningful structure in Cedarburg's history no longer in our midst.

In 1864 Friedrich Hilgen and Diedrich Wittenberg founded the water-powered woolen mill to produce woolen goods for the military during the Civil War. The original section of the limestone building was the northern part. Later, an addition on Bridge Road was added by 1873. Over time, the Mill grew and prospered becoming the largest woolen mill west of Philadelphia manufacturing yarns, blankets, socks, flannels, and mackinaws. By 1907, roofs of both sections of the mill were removed and a third floor was added. The Hilgen-Wittenberg Mill operated for more than 100 years until the business closed in 1968.

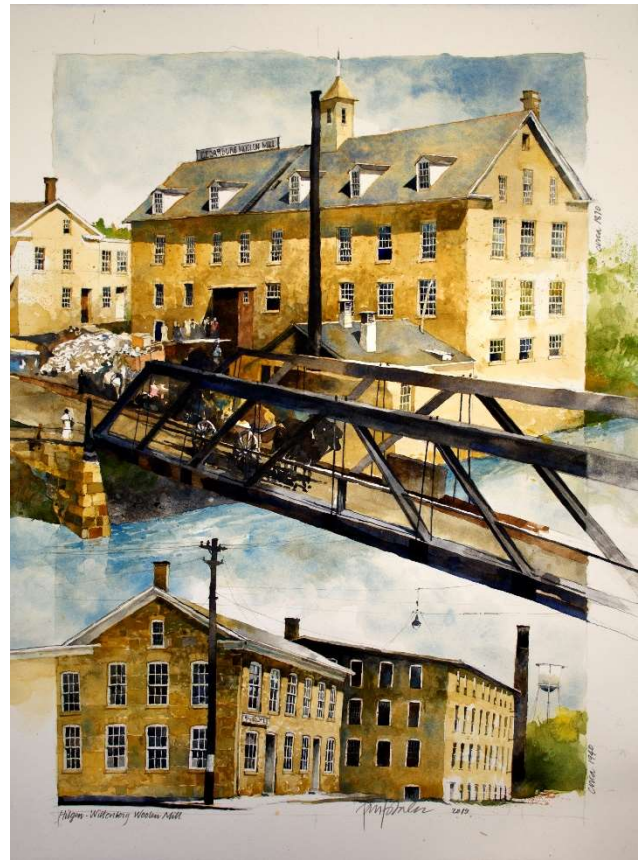
By 1972 the unused buildings were purchased by Jim Pape and Bill Welty and through the mid-1970s they were renovated and repurposed into a complex of shops known as Cedar Creek Settlement. Today the repurposed woolen mill is a popular tourist destination with a winery, boutique shops, and restaurants at the corner of Bridge Road and Washington Avenue in Cedarburg. As a contrast to the wind-powered grist mill that had a short useful life, the Cedarburg woolen mill complex has had a lengthy period of business activity since 1864, thanks to its ongoing revitalized purpose within the last 45 years.

Trained as an architect, Tom Kubala of Cedarburg was well-suited to depict the multi-stage development of the Hilgen-Wittenberg Woolen Mill. Kubala was reminded by looking into the history of the mill that buildings are alive and that they change through time. He noted that “...change is so slow that most people assume the historic structures they see now were always that way. In deciding to paint the mill from two different time periods, I hoped to jog the viewers’ thinking as to the building’s perceived ‘permanence’.”

The Cedarburg Art Museum is fortunate to have these paintings of Tom Kubala and Bill Suys in its permanent collection along with commissioned mill artwork of Bruce Hustad, Lynne Ruehl, and Ben Sloma. All five new artworks are on display on the second level of the museum through August 30. Illustrative panels devised by the Cedarburg History Museum relating to the history of the mills are on loan to accompany the artwork. Cedarburg Art Museum is open to ten visitors at a time Wednesday through Sunday 12 to 4pm and on beer garden Thursday evenings, 5:30 – 7pm. On Thursday, July 30, the public is invited to curator briefings in the museum starting at 5:45 and 6:30pm regarding the newly commissioned artwork.

-Mary Chemotti

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Cedarburg architect and artist Tom Kubala presents the Hilgen-Wittenberg Woolen Mill in a watercolor painting showing it in 1870 and in 1920 during its long history of manufacturing yarns and woolen goods.