

Remembering Cedarburg's Mills through Art (Part 2 of 3)

The Cedarburg Art Museum's exhibition "Remembering Cedarburg's Historic Mills" is open to the public now through August 30. As earlier presented in the first of this series, a generous benefactor of the museum provided a gift to commission five artists to create artworks of area mills. This article focuses on the artworks by Lynne Ruehl and Benjamin Sloma who created paintings of the Concordia Mill and the Excelsior Mill, respectively.

Lynne Ruehl of Cedarburg has always been interested in local history. As a retired teacher, she would often give tours to make Cedarburg history come alive for school children. "The growth of Cedarburg was truly due to Cedar Creek and the development of its mills" she states. "I was drawn to the rural and tranquil location of the Concordia Mill. My great, great grandparents emigrated from Luxembourg and purchased a farm in Grafton in 1858. I could just visualize them traveling in a wagon along quiet dirt roads to a grist mill such as the Concordia Mill."

For her commissioned project, Ruehl referred to a black-and-white, historic photo of the Concordia Mill built in 1853. She would often visit the site on Green Bay Road in Hamilton to refer to the construction details. She observed that corners of the building went up with smoothly dressed stones and stone rubble was filled in elsewhere. While Lynne is known for her watercolor landscapes, sometimes with landmark buildings, she found the Concordia Mill painting a pleasant challenge to represent with watercolor because of its varying stonework.



Lynne Ruehl, 1853 Concordia Mill, 2019, watercolor, Collection Cedarburg Art Museum.

Benjamin Sloma won the commission to recreate the Excelsior Mill. This mill was originally constructed of stone as a water-powered sawmill and flour mill in 1871. The mill is still located along Cedar Creek near Columbia Road, east of the Cedarburg city limits. There were additions built of wood by 1875, but most of these framed buildings were consumed by fire in 1888 and the remains were purchased in 1890 by John Weber.



Benjamin Sloma, 1871 Excelsior Mill, 2019, oil on canvas, Collection Cedarburg Art Museum.

Sloma's oil painting, shown here, depicts the original monitor roof as shown in early pictorial maps before it was destroyed in the 1888 fire. The mill was rebuilt by Weber, E.G. Wurthmann and Fred Keuther with a simpler, angled roofline to open as the Cedarburg Wire and Wire Nail Company in 1892. The Bavarian style structure on the right in the painting was the original miller's residence built in 1866 and it still exists today along with what has still been commonly referred to as "the Nail Factory," even though the factory ceased operation in 1969.

Sloma lives in a century-old Mequon farmhouse and has a studio in the upstairs of its small barn. Sloma stated that the historic mill project presented an opportunity to aesthetically document locally significant and architecturally appealing structures. "The subject matter to which I am most attracted suggests the harmonious coexistence of humanity to its environment, such as a baled field of hay, an old bridge traversing a stream, or a mill like The Excelsior that had a functional, sustaining presence in the community," he wrote.

Ben Sloma credits some of the pre-1950s Wisconsin artists whose artwork he collects as being influential for his own painting. "The ethereal nature of Emily Groom's clouds, the humbly rendered village scenes of Gerrit Sinclair and Gustave Moeller communicate beauty and sincerity devoid of pretense," he states.

The commissioned artists in the museum's historic mill project have given permission to have their artworks featured on notecards that the museum has available for sale in its gift shop. The artworks on the second floor of the museum are accessible by stairs only due to the historic nature of the Wittenberg-Jochem mansion and can be viewed 12 noon to 4pm Wednesday through Sunday.