

Ferris Wendel Norton

An analytical, deliberative art conservator and a rollicking rural storyteller combine in one unlikely, delightful package.

By [Celia Storey](#)

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PHOTO BY [CELIA STOREY](#)

The bluffs along Cave Creek in Newton County were home to Arkansas' indigenous peoples thousands of years before art conservator Wendel Norton's own great-great-grandfather settled at Bass after the Civil War. Norton enjoys balmy weather Jan. 28, 2013.

NEWTON COUNTY — If all you knew of Wendel Norton was what you saw of him at the Arkansas Arts Center last month, you'd consider him tall, serious, perspicacious. Here was a scientific art expert comfortably advising museum staff art experts and not intimidated by the Jeanette Edris Rockefeller Gallery's deliberately tenebrous lighting.

Never in a million years would you picture this responsible professional gleefully yanking off his shoes in January to follow a gaggle of chatty women barefoot into a creek. But here is a man of parts.

Norton-of-the-Creek is human sunshine - jokes, sound effects, snippets of boomer pop culture. If he tells you his family invented the Ferris wheel, no, they did not, but you will find yourself snorting inelegantly at that and the delight with which he puts on an accent to tell tales on his neighbors in the rural communities of Ben Branch and Cave Creek.

Set that fun guy aside for now.

Focus on Norton-of-the-Gallery.

Arts Center registrar Thom Hall and curator of drawings Ann Wagner explained that the museum hired him this winter to assess one of its finest holdings and then, if he found it OK for travel, to prepare it to be loaned to a museum in Rome. Painted in 1914, *Two Women* was a gift to the future art museum in 1955 from future Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller's sister Abby Rockefeller Mauze.

The artist's signature is a little thriller in one-inch majuscules: DIEGO.M. RIVERA, with the odd spacing and two periods, just like that. And Arts Center patrons know this cubist treasure well. When standing upright, it conveys a seductive illusion that its surface isn't flat and that the *Two Women* it portrays at near life size aren't merely visually fractured by colorful geometry: Something's off between them, something to make the seated woman cold to the other's simpering diffidence.

His assessment found that *Two Women* is intact, so he had his woodwork specialist Louis Whitfield make the 6-foot-by-5-foot canvas a new frame for its journey. It will ship to Rome to star in "Picasso, Braque, Leger and the International Language of Cubism," March 7-June 30 at the Complesso del Vittoriano.

But he also observed that the last time the piece was conserved - in 1960 - experts at the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo., applied a wax relining to the back. "Conservators today use another polymer that's more stable," Norton says.

Hall said it is "tremendously helpful" to have that information and the museum is considering how to act on it.

Removing the wax would be "a multistage setup, and it requires a long stay and a team of people working with it and special equipment," including a suction table, which would warm the wax and slurp it from the canvas using a vacuum cleaner, Norton says, adding that for such a large and valuable work he suggests hiring a big conservation lab such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York or the Smithsonian.

Norton Arts itself conserves all manner of stricken items, from family heirlooms painted on tablecloths and decapitated garden Venuses to private collectors' varnish-clouded acquisitions and to public art such as the murals at the Dardanelle Post Office, the Conway County Courthouse in Morrilton, the Charles Quest altar mural of St. Mary's Cathedral in Helena-West Helena (a church designed by - how did this happen? - Charles Eames). In 2010, the company rehabbed Jack Skellington puppets used in the filming of Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* for the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio.

Conservation is not about fixing all this random stuff, as tempting as that impulse can be. "It's almost an obsession when you start looking at something," Norton says - for instance, graceless paint mitts spackled atop water-damaged hands by someone trying to repair a portrait. "You go, 'Wow, what needs

to be done with that?’ But the main part of conservation is ‘First, do no harm.’ Everything we do should be reversible, and it should be set up so that it’s not carried too far into some kind of treatment you’re doing.

“Hopefully we’re not just fixing stuff. You see a lot of that, you see things that just got fixed. And it causes problems.”

After earning a bachelor of arts in fine art at Hendrix College in Conway, where he met his wife, Liz, Norton studied painting and sculpture in St. Louis and in New York at the Art Students League. He learned the Italian sculpture techniques he likes from sculptor Philip Pavia (1912-2005), who was part of a club of avant-garde intellectuals including Robert Motherwell and Willem de Kooning. But philosophically, Norton identifies with the irony, humor and anti-war thinking of post-World War I dadaism.

He worked his way into management at conservation companies in Dallas and New York before striking out on his own in 1989, in New York. Today Norton Arts has outposts there (wife Liz) and San Francisco (brother A.D. Wyatt Norton) and at Snowball in Searcy County and Cave Creek in Newton County.

Which brings us to Norton-of-the-Creek.

HOME IN THE HILLS

For the past 15 years, Norton has lived on the historic May Farmstead, 210 picturesque acres in a horseshoe bend of Cave Creek not far from the Buffalo National River and Mount Judea. He and his brothers visited during summers in their youth but didn’t grow up here. His father, Ferris Wendel Norton Jr., was a Methodist minister, and the family lived in Dallas, Houston, East Texas, Arkadelphia, Crossett.

So he pronounces Judea “Judy” as the locals do, but with a grin, and he’s tickled to tell you the town motto: “Howdy! Now git.”

He hauls up and down Arkansas 123’s hairy hairpin turns and plummets down the county’s gravel on Cave Creek Road in a black, three-quarter ton GMC pickup - a vehicle “allowing the artist that paints naked people a bit of respect from the good neighbors here,” he jokes, adding, “I think.”

But for all the delight he takes in mocking hillfolk, his mother’s people are hill people.

The farmstead backs up to the Gene Rush Wildlife Management Area, named for Uncle Gene. Norton’s brothers (Reid “Tennessee” Norton is an animator and cartoon director in Hollywood; Wes Norton is a chemist in St. Louis; and A.D. Wyatt Norton is an artist and political activist in San Francisco) own land across the river; a cousin has a cabin on a flank of Red Rock. The interplay of shadow and light on the 100-foot bluff Norton loves to study from his kitchen door was, without a doubt, studied as well by great-grandmother Ada May, for whom that bluff is named.

Is there some hillfolk set of predispositions he has inherited through his mother’s line? Norton is deliberately, articulately, peaceable. If you push him, he takes a step back. He’s going to listen if you interrupt him. He’s not going to tell you how to live. But he also doesn’t like being told how to live. He brings up these thoughts as he explains the family history on this land.

His great-great-grandfather, Dr. George Thompson, was “a Civil War doctor on the Confederate side,” Norton says. “It’s well documented the battles he was in. He was in quite a few. There must be something in DNA about war and those experiences that passes through to generations. I know it must have been terrible” for a healer.

“He was captured, taken to Little Rock and worked at the federal hospital there. When it was over with, he decided he would get as far away as possible, and he came here to settle at Bass,” which is three miles downstream from Miss May Bluff.

Thompson’s daughter Ada grew up in Bass in a house he painted white and blue. At 15 she married Monroe May, and in 1886 they built the single-pen section of the log cabin in which Norton now resides. “She took up her father’s profession as doctor physician and made her rounds in a buggy,” Norton says. “She became a state-certified midwife, which was the highest women could get at that point.

“By 1900 they finished around the cabin in Ozark vernacular, the Ozark style,” he said. Ada painted it white and blue.

After buying the farmstead in 1998 from cousins, Norton and colleagues professionally restored the cabin, spring house and barn. (The fancy paint scheme matches Ada May’s.)

It’s easy to see how deeply he feels the former presence of those long-dead people. Much harder to imagine is this now quiet area as a densely populated community. But Liz Norton says it was, and the life of the mind was not neglected among Ada’s neighbors. After two world wars and the Great Depression, economic hardship drove the young away.

They included his mother’s father, William May. “He joined the Hila Morgan Traveling Show where they did oratory,” Norton says. “It was an amazing show, part vaudeville but part Shakespearean. It went all over the country. And then somehow he hooked up with the people who developed Bella Vista, the resort, and ended up being the right-hand man for them.” ART WORK VS. ART

Norton Arts has a large studio a crow’s flight east at Snowball, and it’s a more freight-friendly location than Cave Creek. But a few yards from Ada May’s cabin, he has built an equally spacious, clerestoried studio with windows that will open on fine days. A sign on the entry teases: “Hippies Use Side Door.”

The studio is a vessel for light; he built it using plans from the 19th-century Cave Creek community building, which a storm blew away in the 1970s.

Although the studio’s full of Norton Arts projects at the moment, it is supposed to be his own art studio. His works guard the walk and line the walls - expressionistic paintings and carved-stone sculptures of barefoot and otherwise bare women.

Visitors can count on being invited to join whichever artisans are at work in the studio for a stroll downhill to splash barefoot in Cave Creek. Norton jokes that the business has “kind of like a Grateful Dead business plan.”

First you cross a wooden footbridge over the spring, run your hand over a curvaceous something or other Norton carved from a fallen limb of inwardly orange bois d’arc, and then you step out onto the

broad stone outcrop where daughter Vanessa married Tim McQuin in 2009. (She's executive director of the Historic Preservation Alliance of Arkansas, and McQuin, a law school student, is president of Bicycle Advocacy of Central Arkansas.)

One recent balmy Monday, artists Judith McLeod and Denise Dore happily stopped their meticulous dabbling at damaged art to eat some lovely lentils cooked by painter Carol Saari at the cabin and then tramp a while with the dogs Zorro and Strummer - who didn't smell half bad, considering they'd spent the morning killing a skunk.

The women pointed out their gray-green swimming hole, the locations of close encounters with elk, the astonishing abundance of fossil-bearing gravel and the - look at this one! green, blue, tan, yellow, brown, gray slivers of flint. "There are ancient Indian dwellings down the way, and they've found archaic points that are about 8,000 years old here," Norton said. "So no telling how long they'd lived here.

"And you can understand why they lived here," he added, tipping his face up at Miss May Bluff, where less than 30 minutes before, a bald eagle had swooped across the sky.

NATURE BOY

Liz Norton spends most of her time at the couple's apartment in New York, where she runs the company books and sings soprano with the Oratorio Society of New York in three performances a year at Carnegie Hall. She prefers city life, but her husband has always wanted to live beside Cave Creek, she says.

"One of the first things he did was take down all the fences," she says. "Maybe it's kind of symbolic of anything restrictive. He felt real strongly about that."

He repeats such thoughts as he describes his childhood as a preacher's kid - which he considers to have been truly a very good life. He respects his parents' values. But his mother was always expected to be "on": "So she was sort of in a traveling show, too."

His father didn't set out to be a minister. "The way the story went, he was in the Art Institute of Chicago and he got drafted in the second year of [World War II]. First he was painting airplanes and then he got into combat. Story was he 'made his promises,' and then when he got out and met Mom, she helped him keep them, to 'dedicate your life to Christian service.' And it was a good thing. It's what they based their lives on. ...

"That's the way I grew up. It was always in service to the ministry. Phone rings any time of the day, just like for a doctor. ...

"I had to go back to more of a ... not secluded, but a more private way of life. We have to understand ourself in order to do what we do, as artists, to go within," he says. "I really believe that humans would be better served if we were able to have more of that introspective time and had more time to apply it."

He believes the time he spends doing his own fine art is healthy for him, which makes him healthier for other people to be around. But conservation work "pays for everything," he says. "So you seek a balance."

"He's a free spirit in many ways," Liz Norton says. "As the business is concerned, his capacity to analyze information for conservation purposes is really incredible to me. He's got a real scientific side to him, he understands science really well, but then the artistic, creative part is a good blend for him. ...

"But the heart of Wendel is artistic, and he has a really creative soul. That's really who he is."SELF PORTRAIT Ferris Wendel Norton

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH: Feb. 23, 1951, in Dallas.

"OLD" BEGINS AT Death.

AGE BRINGS The true beauty that comes from experience, wisdom - people can be like wine.

A GOOD CONSERVATOR NEEDS Patience.

THE COOLEST THING NORTON ARTS HAS CONSERVED WAS Robert E. Lee's dispatch bag that went to Appomattox.

MY FAVORITE PART OF A NEW PROJECT IS You always learn new things from doing the research you have to do, like about the nuances of 19th-century bricks.

I MAKE MY OWN ART BECAUSE It's good for me. That sounds a little selfish, but if it's good for me, it's good for others that I do it. It's a healthy thing to do.

MY DREAM JOB WOULD BE Making fine art all the time.

I WISH EVERYBODY WOULD GET TO Experience loving kindness.

A BUDDHIST RINPOCHE IS A cool guy.

RUDYARD KIPLING'S JUST SO STORIES IS IN MY KITCHEN BECAUSE We've been reading it out loud for fun.

I WISH THEY WOULD BRING BACK Foghorn Leghorn.

I DRIVE a three-quarter-ton GMC pickup, and the garage contains a '57 Chevy and a Toyota Celica.

GUESTS FOR MY FANTASY DINNER PARTY: Hunter S. Thompson, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Keith Richards, John Lennon. And my brothers and all the people I love.

I WOULD SERVE THEM Gumbo and catfish, or no, just gumbo. Carol Saari's gluten-free muffins.

MICROWAVE POPCORN IS Yummy if you put hippie yeast on it.

THE MOST OFTEN PLAYED TUNE IN MY DATABASE IS "Ripple" by the Grateful Dead.

THE BEST THING ABOUT LIVING IN THE WOODS IS Fresh air.

IF FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGISTS UNCOVER SOME OF MY WORK I HOPE There's a good conservator in the house.

ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP: Neo-dada

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