

A golden Christmas

Local artist invited to White House

By Elizabeth Wilkerson
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ABENTONVILLE author Christine Andreae was one of nearly 400 artists across the country to receive a golden globe earlier this year.

But, unlike the Hollywood award of the same name, these golden globes — or, to be more exact, these gold-toned plastic spheres — were destined to adorn, not a mantle, but an 18-foot Fraser fir in the White House's Blue Room.

Andreae was chosen to paint the Cedar Creek and Belle Grove National Historical Park ornament for the White House Christmas tree. The theme for this year's White House decorations is "Holiday in the National Parks," and each of the nation's 391 parks is represented on the tree, according to a National Park Service news release.

"This was just sort of an undeserved bonus," Andreae said of the opportunity to work on the ornament. She said she was "kind of surprised" when Cedar Creek and Belle Grove National Historical Park Superintendent Diann Jacox asked her to paint the ornament.

"I've come late to being an artist," Andreae said. "I'm a writer, actually."

Andreae has published four mystery novels, though her most recent work, "When Evening Comes: The Education of a Hospice Volunteer," is nonfiction. She turned to drawing when a chronic illness made writing difficult, she said.

"I just started drawing because I really couldn't write anymore," she said. "I also just loved doing it. ... It was a healing thing for me."

Andreae said she took a number of art classes at Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington and was asked to participate in an exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. For the exhibit, "Botanical Treasures of Lewis & Clark," a group of artists "invaded" a small Idaho town, sought out the famous duo's plants and returned with suitcases full of "decaying greenery," she said.

"Really, I'm trained as a botanical artist," she said.

"It's a very specialized kind of thing that I do," she said. "Basically, it's like being a writer with a small vocabulary. ... The Christmas ball pushed it."

Andreae generally works in watercolors, colored pencils or graphite, she said. Using acrylics, which she had never worked with before, on the golden ball's "slippery, round surface" was a "real challenge," she said.

"It was really hard to paint on that slippery surface," she said. To practice, she got a round piece of plastic and borrowed a box of acrylic paints from an artist friend, she said.

"I tried all sorts of things," she said, such as writing in pencil on top of the acrylic paint, which is how she incorporated the park's name into the ornament. She also had to thin down the paint for the clouds, she said, so they would appear more transparent.

The ornaments arrived in September and were due in October. Andreae said she spent too much time on the project.

"I spent several hours a day for weeks trying to figure it out," she said. "It was fairly forgiving because you can paint over acrylics. ... It was fun. It was a project."

"Fortunately, I don't have to make a living making Christmas tree balls."

Developing the design was a challenge, as well, she said, as Jacox wanted the ornament to represent all aspects of the park. The ornament includes images of a cannon, the Blue Ridge Mountains, Belle Grove's doorway, a turtle and a hawthorn blooming, she said.

While formulating the design,



Christine Andreae, a local artist and author, painted a Cedar Creek and Belle Grove National Historical Park ornament for the White House Christmas tree this year. She began drawing after a chronic illness made it difficult for her to write.

Andreae wondered whether it was appropriate to have a cannon on a Christmas ornament, she said. But, there are a host of Civil War and battlefield parks, she said, so hers was not the only ornament on which a weapon appeared.

The instructions, which she described as "very explicit," said the artists should create a design that could be seen from all sides, she said. The ball's eventual location on the tree, about chest-high, made it possible to see all the ornament's elements, she said.

"It was very satisfying," she said.

On Nov. 28, Andreae and her husband, Fred, who serves on the advisory commission for Cedar Creek and Belle Grove, attended a White House reception in honor of the artists who had prepared the ornaments.

"That was an amazing experience," she said. Aside from the main tree, which was in the Blue Room, there were "something like 30 trees," she said, and the decorations were "very lush."

"You had to wonder why it was so gilded," Andreae said. "It did give it a very palatial look. ... It was very glittery."

Since then, Andreae said she has seen her ornament "float by" during a recent television special about the White House's Christmas decorations.

"It looked pretty good, I have to say," she said, laughing.

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Andreae uses watercolor paint, colored pencils and graphite to create artwork of a tulip leaf that she found outside her home.



Courtesy photo

Andreae's ornament depicts a cannon on a battlefield at Cedar Creek and Belle Grove National Park in Middletown.



Courtesy photo

An image of a turtle shares a spot on the Christmas ornament that hangs on a tree in the White House Blue Room.