



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Ernest Lee has been selling his paintings near Benedict College for 11 years. The artist loves to talk with his customers. He estimates about 15,000 works around Columbia.



Roadside Attraction: Columbia's Favorite Folk Artist

The capital city's "Chicken Man" creates memorable paintings on a downtown corner

Self-taught Columbia painter Ernest Lee is a folk art force of nature. His makeshift studio-gallery at the downtown corner of Lady and Harden streets, three blocks south of Benedict College, is part flea market, part wishing well. And the artist, whom locals call the "Chicken Man," wouldn't have it any other way.

"I paint every day," Ernest says. "Someone walks up and requests a painting: chickens, palmetto trees, etc. I'll do some things right

on the spot." Ernest is a quasi-local legend in Columbia, a college town whose pride in the USC Gamecocks helps keep his trademark chicken paintings in high demand. "I'd say I got about 15,000 paintings in and around the city," he says. The Columbia Regional Visitors Center sells miniature magnets and larger pieces of Ernest's work in its gift shop, and, several years ago, the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., selected one of his rural scenes for exhibition in a state-by-state competition.

Since 2000, Ernest's bread and butter has been his roadside setup that's open almost seven days a week (though he does start late on Sundays). On good days, Ernest says a dozen people will also stop by to talk art, which he considers the best part of his job.

"Painting is a privilege and a blessing," he says. Find Ernest Lee at 1239 Harden St., 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Saturday (and some Sundays). Prices for the acrylic-on-wood folk art are \$25 and up. **SL**

FOLK ART ONLINE To follow more folk artists like Ernest, visit whohadada.com, an online co-op of more than 50 working artists with bios, photos, and upcoming folk art events.