



Audubon Miami Valley Newsletter

Oxford area will miss 'Web of Life' artist

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Southwest Ohio recently lost one of its artistic icons, Charley Harper, when he died Sunday, June 10. Charley had a tremendous influence on southwest Ohio, the Oxford community and Miami University.

I first met Charley when he made presentations to the Oxford Community Arts Club. Later I arranged a meeting in Oxford with Charley and the Ohio Nature Conservancy.

Charley received an Honorary Doctorate from Miami in 1983 and three years later designs and installed the "Web of Life" mural that graces the entryway to the Pearson Hall, Miami's biological sciences building. This was one of four mosaic murals that Charley created.

Charley's life and his artistic contributions are best captured in the recently released book *Charley Harper: An Illustrated Life* by Todd Oldham (Todd Oldham/ Studio/New York City), pp 423, American Modern Books, 2007, \$200 and \$400 special edition.

The book traces Charley's remarkable career from his *Ford Times* magazine beginnings, to the *Golden Book of Biology* (1961), to the *Animal Kingdom* (1968), to *Birds and Words* (1974), to his mosaic murals, to his amazing silkscreen paintings, and finally to his many posters for conservation. The book is stupendous measuring 17 ½ x 12 ½ inches with many of the art works spreading across the entire expanse of two full pages. The color renditions of Charley's works are rich and breathtaking. They are as true to the originals as one can expect.

For those of us who knew and loved Charley the lengthy interview between Oldham and Harper that opens the book captures the essence of the man in some small way.

The interview does not entirely show Charley's wit and humor. If I have any criticism of the book it is that it fails to include Charley's words and his genius of reducing his art to words that empower that art. One of his paintings reproduced in the book was originally titled "Pelican Pantry" and was accompanied by the following insightful Harper prose:

"Well, did you ever! The gall of Gulls! Catch this scenario: the Brown Pelican dives into a school of fish and comes up with a pouch full of protein; the Laughing Gull, hanging around for a heist, swipes some mullet for his gullet. Poor Pelican- gulled again. Ha, ha ha laughs the Laughing Gull. Who always leaves them laughing. Wouldn't you think the plundered Pelican would get wise to this pickpocketry? He's not the biggest brain in the brine, but he's been through a lot of schools."

This is Harper wit and insight at its best, and without it many of the paintings in *Charley Harper: An Illustrated Life* are just paintings missing that other unique dimension of a truly brilliant artist and naturalist. That having been said, this is a book well worth owning. You will spend hours perusing its pages.