

October 17, 2003 – Art Gallery Owner Celebrates Local Artist, The Delaware County Times

***Star rises in Chester Late Artist's Work on Display
by Matt Zager***

CHESTER -- What Andrew Turner created seduced Michael Gray so much, the water-ice vendor would watch the renowned artist paint for hours at Turner's home in the city.

Turner's paintings have indeed sold for thousands of dollars apiece and are part of the collections of Woody Allen, Bill Cosby, Danny Glover, Will Smith, Maya Angelou, Eric Lindros, The Artist Formerly Known as Prince and Moses Malone.

Gray now lives in Turner's former home in Chester in the 1500 block of Concord Road; he owns about 250 Turner creations.

Tonight, Simone's Art Gallery, 2226 W. Ninth St. in Chester, will begin featuring Turner's work -- from Gray's collection -- along with paintings by Samuel Benson of Chester.

Turner died of lung cancer at age 56 in Philadelphia in 2001.

These days, his reputation explodes from the mouths of those who knew him like the brilliant colors in one of his jazz paintings.

Turner painted what he saw in Chester, where he was born and lived most of his life.

In one painting, a boy lies on his belly and contemplates marbles; in another, a marching band is captured in its essence.

Turner said in a statement on the October Gallery's Web site: "The setting, usually my native Chester, is a beehive of creative stimulation or a deteriorating ghetto, depending on my state of mind. At the very least, hopefully these vignettes of experience will help to provide insight into some African-American lifestyles and serve as an inspiration to students and others to continue in the legacy of African-American participation in the arts."

No one is sure how many paintings he did. All agree he produced work at a furious pace, and that he often sold them for a song to people in the neighborhood.

Some describe Turner, who stood about 6 feet 5 inches, as troubled -- he had a drug problem -- but also as a gentlemen and a true artist.

"He wanted things a certain way and he wanted things the way he wanted to do them, but he was always looking for something new, cutting edge," said Mercer Redcross, vice president of marketing for the October Gallery in Philadelphia, where a Turner painting called "Independence Day" is on sale for \$15,000.

Asked if Turner experienced financial success, Redcross, who knew Turner for a dozen years, said, "Turner didn't need a fancy car or fancy clothes. He just wanted to be worry-free and he was that kind of person... I think he achieved that."

Gray, 49, met Turner, who was his art teacher, at the Frederick Douglass Junior High School at Seventh Street and Central Avenue.

But it wasn't until he bumped into Turner a decade or so later that his infatuation with the artist's work began.

Turner, who had been a lecturer at Widener University and artist-in-residence at the Deshong Museum, would paint in Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square and get an offer for the painting before it was dry, said Gray.

He once created a picture of a piano player, using shoe polish, in the short time it took to travel from Chester to Philadelphia by train, he said.

Now Gray said he hopes to sell autographed lithographs of Turner's work to build an African-American museum in Chester. He owns 1,000, he said, and figures he can get about \$500 apiece for them.

"I just want the kids to be aware of what we have in this city," said Gray, who serves as president of the parent teacher organization of Showalter Middle School in Chester, where Benson teaches art. "It's important for them to know about it."

The paintings will be exhibited at the gallery, opened last April by Simone Calvin -- a former high school secretary and single mother of four -- for about a month.