



## Pioneering artist honored for his stellar career

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BY STEVE METSCH, Staff Writer

A room filled with people ate lunch at tables with white linen tablecloths. And they were all there because of Thomas Miller.

Looking sharp in his dark gray suit, Miller, 88, sat back in his chair in the dining room newly named for him and reflected on the day's event.

"This is quite an honor and I certainly appreciate it. Thank you, thank you, thank you," he said Tuesday at Smith Village, an assisted-living center at 2315 W. 112th Place in Chicago's Morgan Park community.

Miller has lived at Smith Village for several years. An artist since boyhood, Miller has created countless pieces of artwork, some of which now hang on the walls of the Thomas Miller Dining Room.

"It's unbelievable. This is one of the best things that's ever happened to me," Miller said.

One of the first black men to become a graphic artist in Chicago, Miller has a long history of bringing art to people's lives. And that's after he battled through racial discrimination often encountered in his life and career.

A display of his work can be found in the mosaics he created for the rotunda of the DuSable Museum of African American History. He helped design trademarks such as Motorola's M and a 7Up logo redesign, along with the trademarks for the Peace Corps, Second City, Hi-C and Quaker Oats.

And his artwork can be found in the possession of Chicago residents such as Maxine Cummings, who lives in Morgan Park and frequently buys Miller's watercolors, oil paintings, drawings and other works.

"Oh, I give most off it away as gifts to family and friends," Cummings said.

Cummings donated one of the pieces she owns, that of a native African, for display in the dining room.

Asked if the person was a man or a woman, Miller smiled and simply said, "it's a human being."

Honoring Miller by naming the room for him and displaying his artwork was an easy decision, said Kevin McGee, executive director of Smith Village.

During a redevelopment of the building, a former temporary kitchen was turned into a dining room. Management wanted to decorate the dining room, and then realized an accomplished artist was already a resident, McGee said.

"He's such a talented artist, a fascinating and humble man. We're fortunate to have some of his pieces on display here," McGee said.

Another artist of note from Chicago's Beverly community, Jack Simmerling, also praised the work of his old friend.

"We first met when I opened my business and he came in for supplies. That was 51 years ago. I've been fortunate to call him a friend for a very long time. Tom regrets that he can't do much art any more, but I've told him to think back to how many people he's made happy over the years," Simmerling said.

Miller doesn't paint as much as he used to, thanks to two strokes, but three drawings in the room show the progress of an expansion that was built at Smith Village.

James Fitch, special projects manager for Smith Senior Living, said the drawings reminded him of all the hard work that went into the expansion.

And it also gave Fitch an idea on how to make the best use of Miller's talent.

"We've got a bunch of blank walls left around here, Tom," Fitch said as the room burst into laughter.

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