

Is this a Grandpa Moses?

By Mary T. Schmich

Serene, Divine Grand Maurice LeGrand LeSueur Sullins—Grand Maurice for short—loves to say, "Art is total living."

Ask him what that means, and he will gesture grandly around his living room, which is crammed to the ceiling with boxes. He will gesture grandly around his bedroom, which is crammed to the ceiling with boxes. He will gesture grandly toward the canyons of boxes in his kitchen. He will fling open closets and wave grandly toward boxes and more boxes, then flash a one-toothed grin and say as if he has said it all, "Art is total living."

For Grand Maurice, it is. When he began painting he was Maurice Sullins, 60 years old, waxer of airplanes at the Joliet Municipal Airport. That was 16 years and 1,223 paintings ago. He had never had an art course. He had rarely seen a museum. As a preacher's kid in the farmlands of southern Illinois, he never thought he would be an artist. "It took me 50 years to figure out I was wrong," he says. At an age when many people grab their pension funds and run, he set out to be a painter with the joyous fever of the obsessed.

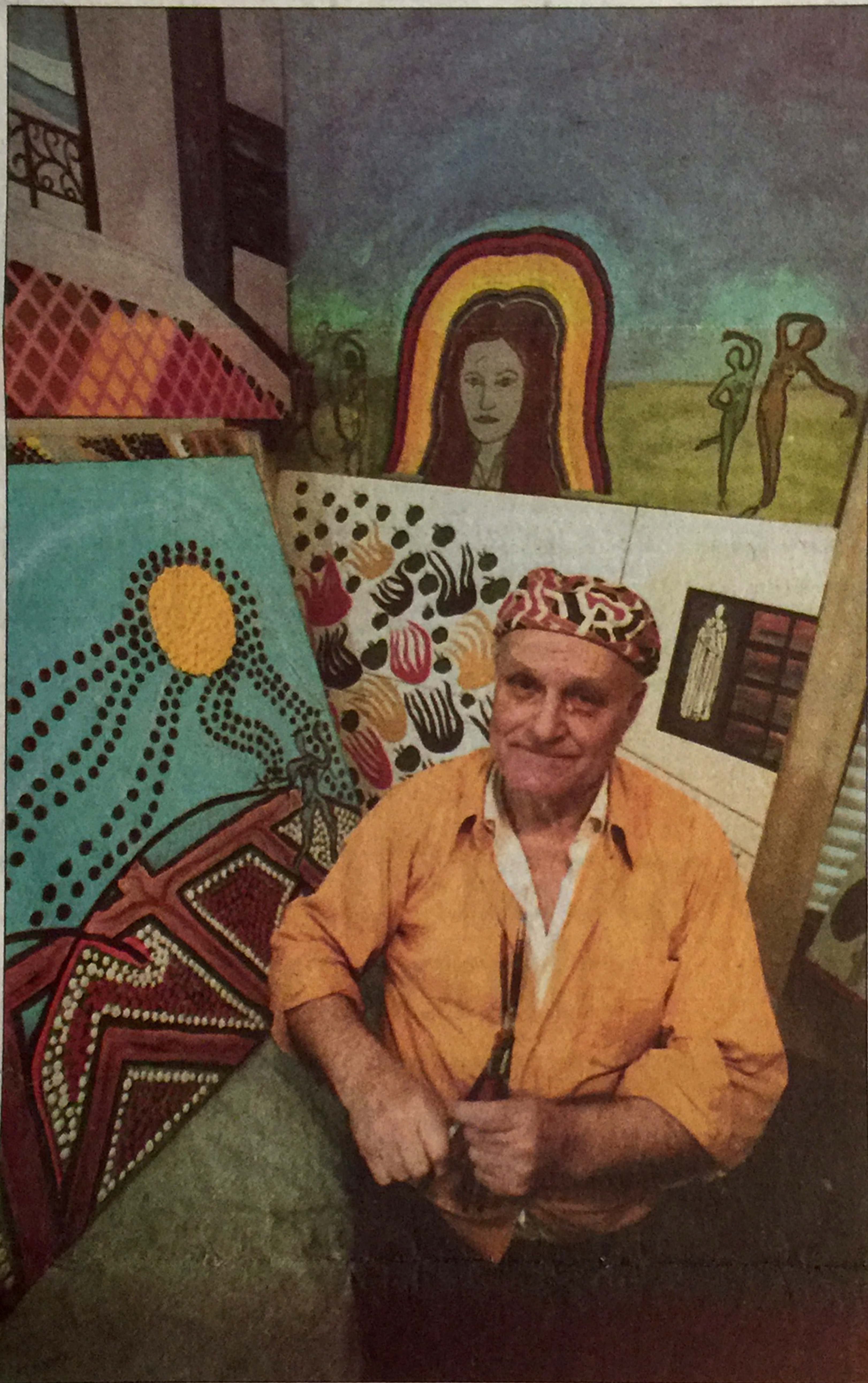
From his mother, he borrowed the name LeGrand and from his grandmother, LeSueur, throwing in an extra adjective or two when the mood or the *oeuvre* commanded. He began thinking of himself as an American-French painter and determined, in his words, "to pay tribute" to his heritage. Guided by art books and the National Geographic, he traveled exotic highways in his mind, visiting the poppy fields of southern France, the cows of the northern French countryside, the Eiffel Tower of Paris, and recording what he saw on canvas in Joliet.

Never mind that he learned his French solely from dictionaries and cookbooks or that in body he journeyed no farther than Chicago, and then only occasionally. In fact, the farthest he can recall traveling in his life was to George Washington's home in Virginia, Mount Vernon, in 1941.

"I don't have to go anywhere," he says with innocence, humility and certitude. "It's inherent in me." He taps his chest. "All the history, I had born in me."

Often he combined French motifs with depictions of Chicago women he had never met and called those paintings—all 225 of them—his "Miss Chicago" series. Jane Byrne was a favorite subject. So was Byrne's daughter, who appears twice in his 1,200th painting, "Kathy Byrne Celebrates 24th Birthday, New Year's Eve, 1981," once dressed as a Victorian and once dressed not at all.

Needing only two or three hours of sleep nightly, Grand Maurice painted often at 3 a.m., numbering each painting as he went and keeping journals of the time he started, the time he finished, the



Grand Maurice with some of his 1,223 paintings: "Art is like a rose tree, it blossoms."

Tribune photo by Bob Fila

materials he used. He would paint a box of six canvases, then put the finished work back in the box, put the box in a closet and head down to Specht's art supply store in downtown Joliet for more.

In search of instruction and inspiration for his painting, he frequented flea markets and garage sales, collecting books, magazines and junk. His collection includes more than 1,000 National Geographics, dating back to 1910. He dubbed the motley assembly of artifacts "the threads of life."

His friend Tim O'Keefe, a Joliet sign painter and sculptor, has calculated that if the boxes of Grand Maurice's paintings were stacked flat, they would rise 119 feet. Set end to end, the paintings would stretch for three-quarters of a mile. As it is, every single one of them is in Grand Maurice's two-bedroom house, along with the 502 big boxes that contain the threads of life.

Grand Maurice has never sold a painting, never really tried. Though he has won a couple of prizes in Joliet art shows, he is little known outside the art supply stores where in the past 16 years he has spent more than \$30,000 on canvas and acrylics.

These days he spends his energies touching up old canvases because he no longer has money to paint. The rent on his house eats up most of his \$483 monthly Social Security stipend. "Four hundred eighty three dollars," he says with a laugh, "that's total living."

At the age of 76, he has begun to think about his paintings in a new way. He thinks it might be nice to get some recognition, maybe to sell a few. He worries that he has no monetary legacy for his son and grandchildren. He worries just as much about what will happen to the paintings when he dies or if he can't pay his rent. He imagines hundreds of canvases stacked in the gutter for the trashman.

Those fears finally made him relent to O'Keefe's urgings that he try to get a little publicity.

"He's supercharged," O'Keefe warned on the day that Grand Maurice had agreed to submit to an interview. "He's so nervous about this interview he's only been sleeping 45 minutes a night."

Grand Maurice was waiting at the storm door of his house, grinning and fluttering in anticipation. It was cold out, but he wore only a short-sleeved white shirt with old brown pants, and on his feet he wore only socks. He led the way through an alley of boxes in the living room and past the "instant sculpture," a pile of more than 500 trinkets stuck together to form what looked like a Christmas tree. Its components included bobby pins, a Christmas bell and dime-store baubles. Hundreds of other trinkets were lying around, waiting for his grandchildren to come over and add them to the sculpture, among them badminton birdies, iron candle holders, shoelaces, a jar of Vaseline and the steel Chevrolet emblem

from a junkyard Chevy.

With a small bow, he graciously waved the way into what used to be his wife's bedroom.

The drawn blinds in the small room were dusty. On a vanity table sat his wife's half-empty perfume bottles and a tray of her rings, looking untouched since her death last February. They had been married for 51 years, and O'Keefe says that Grand Maurice hasn't been quite the same since she died. Grand Maurice says little about her except, "We didn't go out much, Mary and I, but we were never lonesome."

O'Keefe leafed through some of the 100 or so paintings in the room, displaying Maurice's stylistic range, as well as his fancy for whimsical titles like "Miss Chicago Sails into Summer in a Royal Blue Strapless Maillot Made in France" [painting No. 1159].

Some of the canvases are covered with boldly colored geometric shapes. Many contain an element directly derived from a famous painter, usually French, sometimes Spanish.

There are Miro's squiggles, Gauguin's islanders,

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Grandpa Moses in Joliet?

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Matisse's nudes, Degas' dancing girls, most done with flair and a good approximation of the original. Starting with his "tribute" to the artist, which may take up a lot of the canvas or just a few inches, Maurice takes the painting in a new direction. O'Keefe calls Maurice's style "faction art" because he incorporates the work of other painters into his own.

As O'Keefe showed the paintings, Maurice was sitting down, standing up, sitting down, standing up, adding a thought or two though he was trying hard not to talk too much. When he did talk, he would sometimes throw his head back, close his eyes and flash his fingers, like a man blissfully communing with a higher spirit.

With his wife's pink-framed glasses pushed back on his balding head, he began digging through a battered attache case crammed with pages ripped from magazines. He pulled out a raggedy page of a Modigliani print. "Modigliani jumped out the window," Maurice said in passing. "He was real poor."

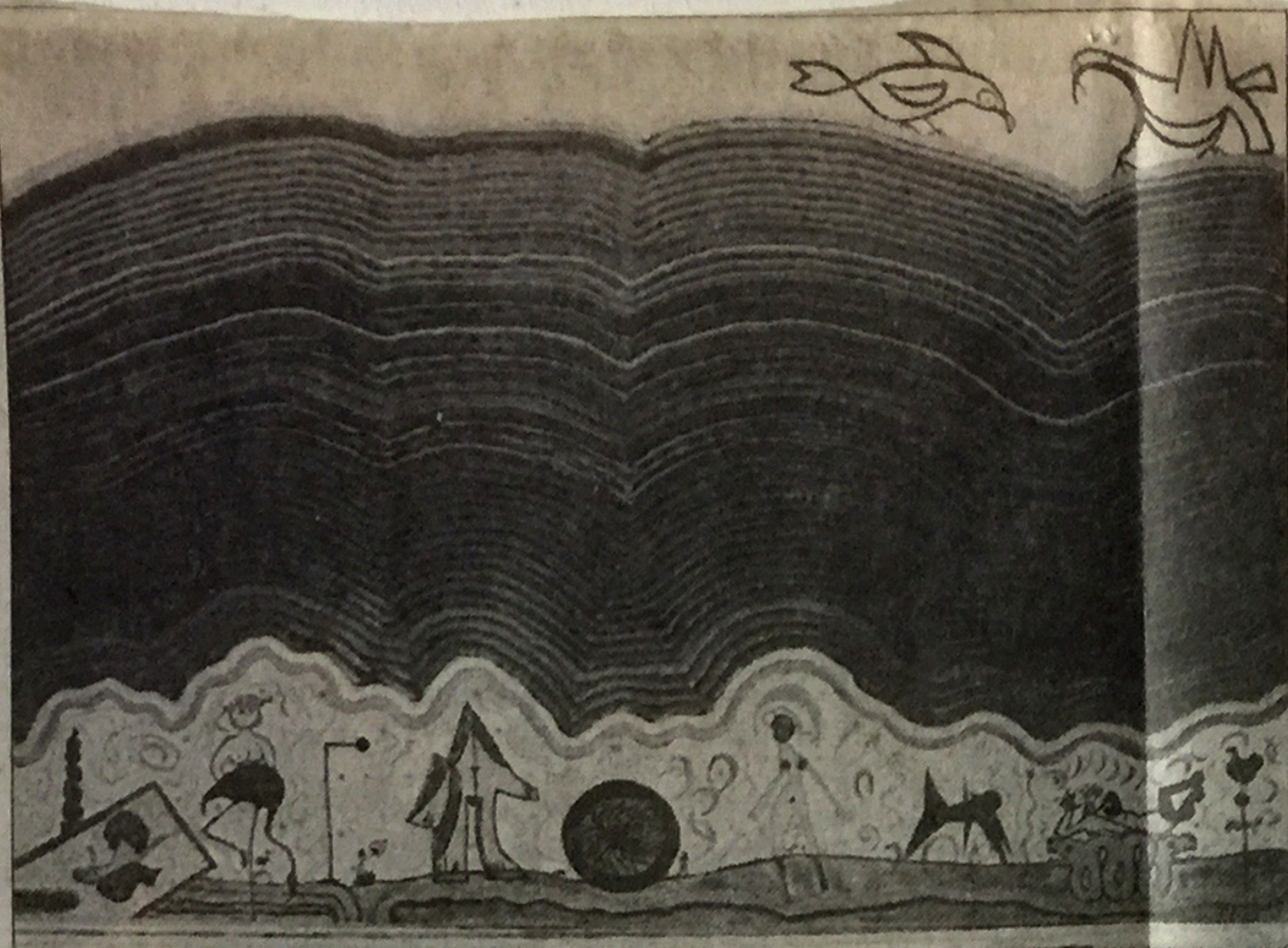
He disappeared briefly and returned holding a stained angel food cake pan, a small green glass bowl and a vase that held a 1 1/2-inch paint brush and a 2 1/2-inch brush. "Here's the tools of the trade," he said.

Sometimes, however, he hardly uses brushes. "I'm a dauber," he said. "I invented the eye stop. Nobody else has the eyestop." He creates the eyestop by holding the paint tube close to the canvas, squeezing and pulling it up. The result resembles a tiny chocolate kiss. It is hard to imagine that a man with a metabolism so zippy that he can't sleep for longer than three hours or sit for more than three minutes would have the patience and skill to create hundreds of eyestops in row after graceful row, but he does.

He also doesn't make mistakes, O'Keefe says. "He never bumps, he never spills, he never sketches first. He's 76. He doesn't have the time for the sketching and prolonged studies that conventional artists feel obligated to make. Maurice must paint immediately and directly."

Grand Maurice pulled out painting No. 586, "Chagall Milks Normandy Red Cow."

"How close have you been to



Examples of Grand Maurice's work display influences of famous painters. He thinks of himself as a American-French artist and wants "to pay tribute" to his heritage.



Tribune photo by Bob Fila

Grand Maurice keeps all 1,223 of his paintings stacked in his two-bedroom house and never has tried to sell them.

Normandy?" He looked with bright eyes from the painting to his audience. "You've been there? See? See? Isn't this it?" It is.

Are these paintings any good? Many are. O'Keefe estimates that a third of them are "exceptional,"

but no art expert has ever surveyed the work. With the growing interest in "naive" art, there may be reason for Maurice to hope that at last his paintings will draw attention. O'Keefe says he hopes that Chicago gallery owners or critics

will at least look at Maurice's work and, even better, show it.

O'Keefe is a soft-spoken man who has become Grand Maurice's informal guardian. He remembers meeting Maurice on a summer morning 15 years ago. He was setting up his scaffolding at the Joliet Airport, preparing to paint a mural on a hangar wall, when in the distance he spotted "an elderly fellow" energetically waxing an airplane. Four hours later, he noticed the man still working at a brisk clip.

While O'Keefe was painting, the man approached. "I'm a painter, too," he said. O'Keefe looked down at the man, standing there with a bucket of wax attached to his belt, buffing pads roped to his arms and a paint brush in one hand. O'Keefe smiled politely. He had met lots of "painters." "No, really," the man said, "I paint canvases."

O'Keefe invited him to bring some of them to the airport the next day. When O'Keefe left that afternoon, 10 hours after he had arrived, Maurice was still buffing airplanes with vigor undiminished by the July heat.

The next morning Maurice showed up in an immaculate 1964 beige Cadillac. He opened the trunk and set his paintings next to the car.

"I was really impressed," said O'Keefe. "He had six different paintings in six different styles."

Each morning while O'Keefe worked on the mural, Grand Maurice brought more paintings. "He had 108 paintings then," O'Keefe said, "which I thought at

the time was a lot of paintings. Lo and behold, 15 years later ..."

Fifteen years later, Grand Maurice has a houseful of work that, no matter what else it is or isn't, is deeply affecting in its sheer quantity, and which in its sheer quantity has become his life.

"All art is total living, that's everything in this house," he said late in the afternoon, thumbing through one of his record books. It was an encyclopedia, and he had simply scrawled information about his paintings over the printed entries. "Art is like a rose tree, it blossoms."

He had cleared just enough space on the couch to allow himself to sit down. He switched to a discourse on fruit and the color of fruit. The day before, he had splurged at the grocery store on apples, red and golden, and pears, green and yellow, and placed them in small dishes around the house just so he could feel their color. In a trophy cup atop a ballerina base, a grapefruit lay in a nest of junk jewelry. He would like others to experience his paintings the way he experiences the fruit, as "a grand golden visual feast."

Grand Maurice has his own language for describing his work, terms like "threads of life," "essence of art," "the cultural atom." He calls his work "essence of art," he explained, because it is a condensation of the old that leads to something new. The "cultural atom" is the core of great art; he hopes that his work will split the cultural atom and cause an explosion in the art world.

Talking to Maurice is sometimes

like talking to a foreigner whom you manage to understand even though the words elude you. Somehow through looks, inflection, unarticulated passion, the essential meaning comes through.

At the end of the day, he talked about painting en route to the front door, stopping from time to time to weave his way through boxes and point out a canvas he hadn't yet discussed. "Couchant Blue, White, Red and Green Nude, No. 345," he read from the back of one painting. "'Couchant' means reclining."

Looking at the France that Grand Maurice has created in his mind and on canvas, you have to wonder, Doesn't he want to see the real thing? Sunset on the Seine, the gritty ocher of a Breton farmhouse, the azure of the Mediterranean Sea?

"Why would I want to do that?" he said. "I'm proud of my French heritage, but Joliet is my home."

Once outside, he asked, "May I do the grand handshake, the grand gesture? For ladies only." Permission granted. He crossed the lady's hands, right over left. He kissed the right one. He kissed the left. "My mother died in '47," he said. "That's how I pay her tribute."

Standing on the wooden porch in his socks, his thin white shirt open at the collar, Grand Maurice waved goodbye. It was 11 degrees. Wasn't he cold? Or was this part of total living?

He grinned and nodded, and raising a hand to his mouth shouted back, "Yes! Total living!"