

# Pondering Robin Purnell, *the painter who bridged Rappahannock and Russia*

BY TIM CARRINGTON

*For Foothills Forum*

**I**n a county rich in artists, Robin Barker Purnell holds a unique position.

A Rappahannock resident and wife of a senior American diplomat, she traveled the long weaponized U.S.-Soviet divide at a time tensions were loosening, and established an artistic presence in Russia and Kazakhstan. Distancing herself from her generation's fascination with abstraction, she pursued the rigors of a classical artistic training, learning to paint like the

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**Robin Purnell's "Self Portrait"**

## PURNELL

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Northern Renaissance masters she most admired, eventually blending meticulous depictions with startling, dreamlike juxtapositions. Her subjects span a wildly improbable mix of characters from Rappahannock County and the crumbling Soviet empire.

Robin Purnell's one-woman shows appeared in familiar Rappahannock mainstays – the Middle Street Gallery in Washington and the Longview Gallery in Sperryville, precursor to today's Haley Fine Art. But Purnell also was the first American artist to mount exhibits in the Dostoevsky Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia and the Catherine Palace in Pushkin. The enthusiastic reception that met her in Russia reflected the hopes of the early 1990s, when many envisioned strong East-West diplomatic ties and flourishing cultural and commercial exchanges.

That early optimism has been eclipsed by harrowing images from today's brutal war in Ukraine. The house at the edge of Washington, where Purnell painted and gathered other Rappahannock artists for lively potluck dinners, has been sold to an absent investor, and now sits empty. Once neatly tended and hung with paintings from Rappahannock and Russia, the house is encased in weeds and general neglect. And Purnell's stream of exceptional paintings ended with her suicide in 2008, following a protracted struggle with mental illness.

What remains are the paintings themselves, hanging in the county library, in dozens of private collections, and at Haley Fine Art, which maintains Purnell's place on its page of gallery artists 14 years later. Rappahannock's painters, appreciators, collectors and portrait subjects go on pondering her artistic mastery, her capacity for friendship, and the way her brilliance in the studio intersected with the shattering effects of mental illness.

"She's in a class by herself," said county resident Bill Dietel, who owns a Purnell painting of a Russian seed vendor, and who commissioned a portrait of his late wife Linda. Betsy Dietel, his daughter, owns a pair of Purnell canvases – "Young Russian Hunter, the Hunters and the Hunted" and "Jack in the Pulpit."

### Something that's not real

Purnell's library portraits, owned by her three adult children and a nephew and on long-term loan to the library, float above browsing visitors who seldom pause to accept the meditative but slightly unsettling gaze of Purnell's Rappahannock subjects. Purnell's characters, painted with faithful attention to likeness and detail, seem to outgrow their own biographies, becoming archetypes as well as distinct individuals. Each portrait presents both the subject and a piece of the painter.

"The Green Thumb," part of a private collection, features a



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

**Andrew Haley, Purnell's last art dealer, in his Sperryville gallery on Monday.**

*Below: "She's in a class by herself," said Bill Dietel, whose collection include's Purnell's "The Seed Woman."*

white-haired woman modeled on Rappahannock's Joyce Abell, surrounded by floating seed pods, plants, and fish. The sitter shows a thumb subtly turning green, and carries an aura that suggests she's mutating into Mother Nature herself. The floating fragments from Nature, appearing in multiple paintings, aren't surrealistic pranks, but are intentional symbols and signs Purnell considered central to her art. They might reflect stories from the characters she portrayed, or cosmic layers of sea, land and sky. Fish, which show up regularly in the Russia paintings, for centuries have been a symbol in Hebrew, Christian and pre-Christian cultures. Other natural elements in the paintings suggest masculine and feminine energies, evoking procreation and renewal.

In Bill Dietel's "The Seed Woman," a Russian Babushka presides over a display of seed bags, each identified by a pictogram. The painting suggests a typical genre scene, except that amidst the flower and vegetable seeds are sacks that promise to harvest birds, sea monsters and dragons. The vendor is an ordinary Russian market woman, but also, perhaps, a sorceress.

"Robin has a sense of something that's not real," said Dietel. But others would say that, even with the wildly imaginative flourishes, Purnell had a sense of what was *most* real – nature, fecundity and humans changing amidst changing

circumstances. John Bourgeois, who owns two of Purnell's Kazakhstan paintings, said of her art: "When I first saw it, I was immediately drawn to it. It was sort of mystical."

Purnell studied the world and its motley inhabitants, but she also absorbed the gifts of multiple teachers and inspirers, recycling and remixing their visions and techniques:

The Greek painter and teacher Aristotle Solounias helped Purnell establish the classical foundations of painting and drawing. Intense study of Northern Renaissance masters Jan Van Eyck and Hans Holbein the

Younger convinced her of the limitless possibilities in depicting the real.

Her fascination with Hieronymous Bosch cultivated a capacity to present fantastic metamorphoses as though they had been calmly observed at close range. Contemporary British artist Kit Williams, a fellow traveler in a reimagined realism, created artistic puzzles in books and canvases featuring animals, rolling landscapes and ordinary Brits, their sexuality and aging effects boldly displayed.

Russian icons suggested that painted faces might look out at their viewers, as well as the other way around. Vjacheslav V. Mukhin, the Russian cultural leader who organized Purnell's 1992 exhibition in the Catherine Palace, wrote that the face of one of Purnell's Rappahannock portraits displayed "an impulsive, magnetized and energized appearance similar to the faces of ascetics and prophets depicted in the Icons."

Typically, Purnell's repertory of plants, tendrils and birds don't settle in the background but press into the sitter's space. Andrew Haley, owner of Haley Fine Art and Purnell's last dealer, said: "She loved the idea of people being reflective of the space they found themselves part of." The Russians endure the cold and shoulder the burdens of history and hardship, while the Rappahannock characters reflect the local interplay of nature and artistry.

Some found her paintings unnerving. An →



BY TIM CARRINGTON

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SPERRYVILLE ART DEALER ANDREW HALEY



“Russian Boy, Age 11”

➔ auctioneer at a charity fundraiser is remembered avoiding the sale of a particularly haunting painting entitled, “Insomnia,” after concluding, inaccurately, that it had been composed in a drug-induced state. When the auction got off to a sluggish start, the auctioneer relented, and Purnell’s painting soon fetched a strong price.

Subjects of commissioned portraits might be given the leeway to guide a composition. Alex Purnell, the artist’s 37-year-old son, recalls his mother asking a sitter if she wanted her freckles painted. The subject replied, “I don’t have freckles,” giving the artist a clear sense of the ground rules. But Haley stressed that in her own creations, “Robin would do whatever she needed to do to make the painting. She didn’t allow any external pressure to influence her.”

Ultimately, Haley said, Purnell’s paintings reflect her riveting interest in “the origins of life,” a vast subject embracing nature, procreation, and culture. Other artists underscored the difficulty of accurately describing physical realities while invoking the larger patterns and harmonies. “We all bring the impossibility with us,” said Barbara Heile, who enjoyed Purnell’s potluck artist dinners, and knew her children. “We can’t get there,” she added, but Purnell came close.

### Characters up close and in depth

Purnell studied her subjects, listening to their stories, observing their features and skin tones, coming to love them as friends, but ultimately absorbing them in her own artistic journey. Subjects felt deeply seen, faithfully described,



“Kazak”

but in some respects, reimagined, or simply relocated into a larger drama masterfully directed by Robin Purnell.

Purnell painted landscapes and abstractions, but Haley believes her “inescapable preoccupation” was with humans in their full humanity, specific and time-bound but also embodying a larger story.

Purnell’s focus on human subjects went hand in hand with her gift for friendship. Painter Rex Slack and Purnell would regularly exchange contacts at galleries that might exhibit their work. When one of Slack’s paintings was accepted for exhibition at the prestigious Royal Academy in London, Purnell, who had earlier enjoyed the same honor, helped her friend navigate the museum’s regulations, traveling to London with him to transport his painting in person, since postal or courier deliveries weren’t accepted.



“Russian Women in Winter”



County resident Lyt Wood, below, was the model for “The Naturalist,” right.



BY TIM CARRINGTON

“That was probably the best time I had with her,” Slack mused. “That was a good time.”

Lyt Wood, who recently retired from leading the Rappahannock Nature Camp, met Robin Purnell in the early

1980s, not long after diplomat Jon Purnell visited the house at the edge of Little Washington and immediately signed a contract, figuring – correctly – that his wife would love the house and the county. Wood, who worked on an orchard, was selling apples and honey at a small farmers’ market in Washington, where Purnell regularly showed up to shop and socialize, her two children in a stroller,

Unaware of Purnell’s life’s work, Wood was surprised when she selected him to be one of the county characters she would research, photograph, draw and eventually portray on

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# “Because her art was fading I knew she was fading, I knew she wasn’t going to be my mom much longer.”

DAUGHTER JANE PURNELL

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canvas. She aptly titled the resulting portrait of Wood “The Naturalist,” and the two fell into a lifelong friendship. Wood joined her family on vacations and visited her during the hospitalizations that came late in her life.

“Robin and her whole family have generously enriched my life,” Wood said, “and I have treasured my time with them in their house and studio, at camp and in New Hampshire (where Purnell’s family had a vacation retreat).” For two years, Purnell managed the Nature Camp Wood had launched. In his home above the Hazel River, Wood has Purnell drawings of natural forms, his grandmother and himself. A gold frame surrounds a Purnell painting of clouds, with bright edges and dark centers, set against an intensely blue sky.

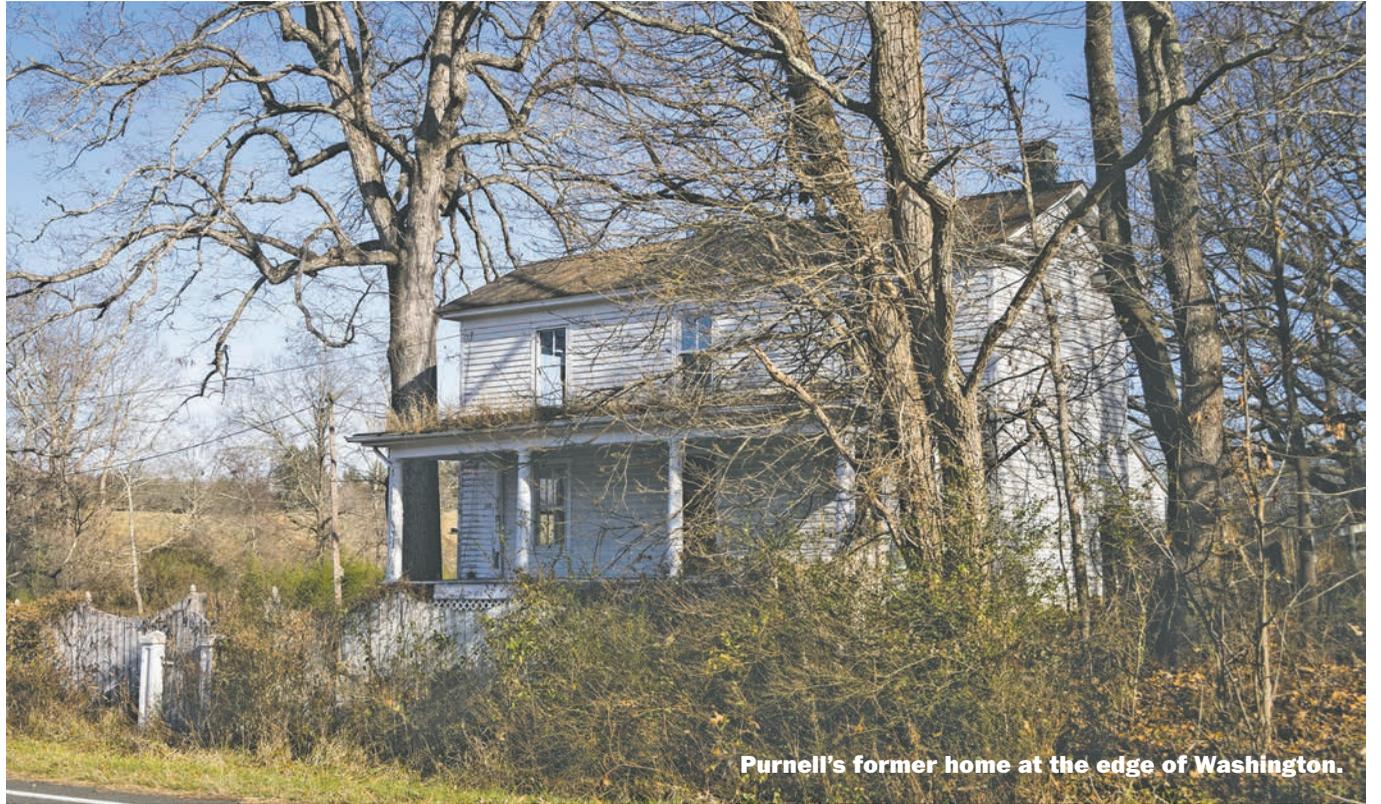
One Purnell portrait shows a small crow perched on Wood’s shoulder, true to an episode he shared with her. But in another, the visiting bird is a bay-breasted warbler, which normally darts between the upper branches of tall trees and is seldom glimpsed by bird-watchers. Wood said that when he questioned the artist about the warbler’s presence in the painting, “Robin explained that her intent was to choose a wild bird that was not normally likely to come close to a person.”

Lorraine Duisit, whose portrait hangs just inside the library entry, recalls lengthy interviews exploring her favorite plants, her family’s French origins, and her love of music. The painting features grapes, an embedded Rappahannock landscape, Duisit’s grandmother, and a clump of uprooted poppies, symbolizing the family’s migration from France. Purnell brightened the sky and flowers, but described the vegetation in muted gray-green tones, creating an effect both quickening and calming. Cats and birds nestle close to Duisit, who wears a beret and holds a guitar.

Both Duisit and Wood have been faithful to the identities assigned them in Purnell’s paintings: Duisit, always the musician, Wood, always the naturalist. “She was looking into the soul of the sitter,” not simply painting the outer form, said Chris Stephens, a prolific painter of Virginia landscapes and landscape-inspired abstractions. Louise Goddard, who owns two Purnell paintings set in wintry Russian landscapes, said, “She doesn’t just make a photographic likeness. I can almost see the history of a person’s life in her paintings.”

In 2020, when Duisit produced an album, Purnell’s painting became the cover. With support from the Rappahannock Association for Arts and Community (RAAC), the music-maker produced a video in which a camera roams the intricate portrait while one of her songs plays.

Another painting features Ian Dawson, a British emigrant working short-term jobs in Rappahannock. The painting is named “The Buccaneer,” a



Purnell’s former home at the edge of Washington.

BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR Foothills Forum

term for privateers or free sailors who drifted the high seas in the 17th and 18th centuries. True to his title, Dawson moved on after the painting was completed, and friends lost track of him.

## *Rapp to Russia and back again*

In 1989, Jon Purnell moved the family to St. Petersburg, where he served as the deputy principal officer of the U.S. Consulate. Following earlier assignments in Liberia, Austria and Russia, he recognized the special opportunity of knowing Russia in 1989. “We were there at a genuinely unique time,” the diplomat recalled. “The Soviet Union was unraveling and Russians wanted to reach out to the Americans – and the feeling was mutual.”

While Jon Purnell worked to understand the political upheaval unfolding in the East Bloc, Robin Purnell, freed of many of the old Soviet constraints, studied life drawing at the

Mukhina Institute in St. Petersburg, befriending local artists and leaders in the city’s burgeoning cultural community, including the leading art critic at the Leningrad Times and the deputy at the Catherine Palace Museum. In contrast to Western societies’ artists, Russian painters clung to realism throughout the twentieth century, making Purnell’s artistic language easily appreciated.

For Purnell, the key was a careful selection of subjects. She also visited the open-air markets in the grand city, buying vegetables and bread, but also befriending the aging vendors, wrapped in scarves and shawls. She saw them as the quiet protectors of Russia’s soul through the harsh years under totalitarian rule. These ordinary women, fatigued and unadorned, would populate the next wave of Purnell’s character canvases. In the spring of 1992, she mounted a one-woman exhibit at the palace, which had functioned as the summer residence for Russia’s czars. She was the first American artist to exhibit her work at the legendary venue.

Purnell carried some of Rappahannock to Russia with her: Duisit’s portrait appeared at the palace exhibit and was the basis for locally produced posters. But Jon Purnell said many Russians were more curious “to look at Russia through American eyes, through an American painter.” The opening reception for the exhibit functioned as a celebration of the post-Cold War thaw, with Russian artists, political leaders and diplomats from other nations streaming in to view the works of the Virginia artist who had captured the attention of St. Petersburg’s cultural luminaries. Jon Purnell recalls that the director of the Catherine Palace museum, who had initially had left his deputy in charge of the event, reinserted himself once he saw the impressive

crowd, offering the official welcome.

“It was a big success,” Jon Purnell said. “Perhaps the high point from an artistic standpoint.” Mukhin, the deputy director who organized the show, later wrote that the 1992 exhibitions in the Catherine Place and the Dostoevsky Museum “represent an outstanding occurrence of the city,” adding that viewers were “charmed by the sincere, wide and kind talent of the American artist.”

## *A return to Virginia*

In 1993, the Purnells returned to Virginia. Jon Purnell took an academic break at the Army War College and Robin reconnected with local artists and friends. Painters gathered monthly at her studio to discuss their work and enjoy potluck meals. Stephens recalled: “She seemed rock-solid, with a sense of humor and a towering ability.” As the house became a gathering place for the creative community, Purnell speculated that it might someday become a retirement residence for painters.

The East-West migrations had one more chapter: In 1997, Jon Purnell was named deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The resulting move unleashed a new wave of Robin Purnell portraits, depicting dark-eyed Kazakhs behind rows of apples or melons in open-air markets, or staring across wintry landscapes. The hunters and market vendors suggest characters in folk tales set in a timeless mountain kingdom. Purnell would absorb the region’s topography and atmosphere on horseback, riding across the Central Asian steppe with a guide. Side trips to Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan generated more portraits and glimpses into remote cultures. Her paintings began to appear in local Kazakhstan ➔

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➔ exhibitions alongside the works of local artists.

The Kazakhstan posting concluded in 2000, and following a return to the house at the edge of Washington, the artist's life and work entered a period of turmoil and fracture. The Purnells' marriage ended in divorce. Robin's mental health challenges began to impinge on her capacity to manage her daily life and work. Without medical evidence, she spoke of turning to jelly inside, or of having no internal organs at all. A diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia emerged. Protracted hospitalizations at Western State Hospital in Staunton and Sibley Hospital in Washington, D.C., followed, but lasting and effective treatments proved elusive.

In "Touched With Fire," a deeply researched book about creativity and mental illness, Kay Redfield Jamison, a professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, chronicles the painful turmoil of dozens of revered artists and writers, including Vincent van Gogh, Virginia Woolf and Mark Rothko. Quoting phrases from Lord Byron, Jamison concludes that "the great artists have always sailed 'in the wind's eye,' and brought back with them words or sounds or images 'to counterbalance human woes.'" Jamison adds: "That they themselves were subject to more than their fair share of these woes deserves our appreciation, understanding, and very careful thought."

Slack, sharing other friends' deepening concern, noticed Purnell's art was losing its earlier brilliance. Purnell's daughter Jane, now an actor in New York, recalled corresponding with her mother during her last hospitalization and receiving the gift of a felt gingerbread man, with glued puff balls and glitter, produced in a crafts space for patients. "Because her art was fading I knew she was fading," Jane said. "I knew she wasn't going to be my mom much longer."

The creative life still links mother and daughter: "She would create portraits on a canvas, and I create portraits on the stage," Jane said.

After her death, Purnell's family donated her brain to science – hoping that someone might find clues to the mysterious dance of artistic genius and mental illness. Ruth, the Purnells' other daughter, a photographer and mother of five, said, "we all felt this is what she would want."

If the research unlocked the mystery of Robin Purnell, the family never learned of it.

Meanwhile, the paintings hold their places, in Rappahannock County and elsewhere – like novels to be read and reread for years to come. Rappahannock and the collapsing Russian empire provided the characters, the colors, and the creatures, and Robin Barker Purnell concocted the paintings.

"They're still living," said Heile. "They're bigger than Robin because she was working with something bigger than her."

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*Editor's note: Bill Dietel is director emeritus of Foothills Forum. Tim Carrington is a board member of RAAC.*