



Essie Mae Arsan
All Saints' Day Wreaths

The first of November, All Saints' Day, is an important day for Catholics in Louisiana French communities. Many communities observe this day of remembrance for deceased relatives and friends by visiting cemeteries, cleaning loved ones' graves, and decorating the tombs with flowers. Priests then bless the graves. All Saints' Day is also an occasion for an affirmation of family ties.

Essie Mae Arsan, a long-time resident of Thibodaux in Lafourche Parish, made the traditional wreaths (couronnes) of waxed paper flowers that were placed on tombs. African American and Anglo families alike once made these wreaths for this significant occasion. There were only a few individuals like Essie Mae Arsan continuing this traditional art.

When Mrs. Arsan was a child, the waxed-flower wreaths were made by her grandmother. Her mother carried on the tradition, and Mrs. Arsan did the same. She learned the art from her mother and grandmother and had been making wreaths since she was 12 years old. She taught a granddaughter who carried on the tradition.

The wreaths are made of wire, crepe paper, and paraffin wax. The style, form, and colors of Mrs. Arsan's wreaths remained essentially unaltered, but some of the materials and methods changed. The traditional colors for the flowers are purple and white, which represent mourning or death and eternal life or resurrection. Mrs. Arsan used white and brightly colored crepe paper for her flowers; there are seven or eight flowers on each wreath.

Mrs. Arsan first cut the petals from crepe paper, making them all the same size, about two inches high and one and a half inches wide. One by one, the petals were wrapped and overlap each other around the end of the stem of floral wire. As the petals were added, the wire was twisted around the base to secure them. The base was tied with strong thread and the stem was wrapped with green floral tape.

The petals were then separated and shaped like a rose. The flower was briefly dipped in a pot of hot liquid paraffin, which stiffens and protects them. In the past, a double boiler was used to melt the paraffin. Mrs. Arsan used an electric hotpot with a thermostat that kept the paraffin at about 250 degrees. After the flowers dried, they were fastened to a wire circle made from a coat hanger. Mrs. Arsan wrapped the frame with strips of green paper and then dabbed it with wax to make it weather-proof so that it will last for a year.

Wax flowers were also used for other purposes in the past: bridal bouquets and wedding decorations. Mrs. Arsan made her wreaths for regular customers for All Saints' Day and sometimes for other occasions like decorating tombs at Easter or on the birthday of the deceased. She also made pine straw baskets.

Mrs. Arsan was a member of the Louisiana Crafts Program and had demonstrated her craft at festivals throughout Louisiana, including the Black Heritage Festival, The New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, the Louisiana Folklife Festival, the Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival, and the Native Crafts Festival.

Few individuals like Essie Mae Arsan maintained this traditional art. Mrs. Arsan died December 8, 2006.

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