

A vibrant watercolor illustration of a tropical scene. In the foreground, a pool of water reflects the sky and surrounding elements. A stone archway with a lantern on top stands on the left. The background is filled with lush green palm trees and a clear blue sky. The overall style is soft and painterly.

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Artist Carlos Garcia-Barbon's distinctive watercolors can be found throughout the city including the Biltmore Hotel and Museum of Coral Gables

C. BARBON

Artist of the Gables

CARLOS GARCIA-BARBON PAINTINGS ARE AN HOMAGE TO THE CITY

By J.P. Faber

You may not have heard of Carlos Garcia-Barbon, but chances are you've seen one of his watercolors of Coral Gables. Several are hanging in the office of City Commissioner Patricia Keon. Others are hanging in the Biltmore Hotel, where you can also buy limited edition prints. Most likely you have seen his two-story banner celebrating the 80th anniversary of the Coral Gables Museum, hanging on the side of the main building at Aragon and Salzedo.

"I've watched people stop and stare at it [the banner]," says John Allen, the museum's executive director. "This is the first time we've had a banner with such minimal text. But it's been just as good as text. Maybe better. It's right outside my window and I see cars stop to stare."

The subject of the banner – one of the iconic, carved faces over the old entrance for firetrucks on the museum's west side – is a favorite of Allen, who recently published a book about the sculptures. But it's far from the only beloved image of Coral Gables that Garcia-Barbon has painted.

Formerly the art director for Avanti printers, Garcia-Barbon threw himself into painting local watercolors ten years ago, when he moved to Coral Gables. "I am essentially highlighting all these hidden gems [of the city], to shed light on the

beauty we have here in a way that hasn't been done before." Subjects range from the Biltmore to the Desoto Fountain, all done with Garcia-Barbon's fluid, bright, pastel touch.

His enthusiasm for the city – he has donated paintings for years to be auctioned by the Coral Gables Community Foundation – reached its peak when the museum, at the suggestion of Board of Trustees member John Medina, commissioned him for the 80th anniversary banner.

"Those firemen were Depression-era modern, very stark and chiseled," says Allen. "He certainly did a different take on them – a little more softly – and everybody loves it."

One thing which makes Garcia-Barbon special is his use of watercolors, a dying and unforgiving art. With watercolors, there is only one stroke;

Top: Artist Carlos Garcia-Barbon working in watercolor, an unforgiving medium that allows no room for error

Right: Painting of an iconic carved face standing over the entrance to the Coral Gables Museum

Next page: The easily recognizable facade of Coral Gables City Hall



no corrections or paint-overs are possible, as with acrylics or oils. "It's like playing music where you hear every single note," says the painter, who takes his inspiration from John Singer Sargent, one of the greatest American watercolorists. Not too surprisingly, Sargent painted his watercolors of Venice, one of the Gables' architectural inspirations. "If I'm not in the moment, [the paintings] won't have the liveliness. If I am happy and joyful, they will fly."

Garcia-Barbon's paintings were on display in the museum through the end of February. If you want to see his work now, you will have to stop by the Biltmore. Or attend any Community Foundation fundraising event; you may see him there, painting live, and hopefully in a good mood.

"His paintings have become symbols of the city," says Mary Snow, executive director of the Community Foundation.



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