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## Artist lies among the clouds

*Family and friends say Denny Arant's colorful funeral suited him perfectly*

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VENICE -- Denny Arant didn't lay a brush on his final artistic inspiration. But his spirit was all over it.

From their hearts, to their brains, through their hands, to his final canvas, Arant's family and friends scribed their farewells.

About 25 well-wishers, following Arant's artistic philosophy, drew and wrote on his sky-painted pine casket during a memorial service Thursday.

Arant, 79, died Saturday. His body was inside the closed casket, with a leaf from the grave site of his favorite artist, Vincent Van Gogh.

Arant's paintings and sculptures are displayed in galleries locally and throughout the country, including the Chicago Art Institute and the Smithsonian Institution.

He moved to Nokomis in 2002 from Washington, D.C.

When Arant's partner of five years, Judy Sokal, dreamed up the idea of painting his casket blue and covering it with clouds, she didn't think Farley's Funeral Home would consent.

But funeral Director David Farley welcomed the unusual memorial.

Farley said it was the first time in his 44 years in the business he had seen friends and family actually use a casket as a canvas, although a couple of years ago a family wrote farewell messages on a casket.

Arant's funeral reflects a changing approach to the rites of death. In recent years, Farley said, he's seen horse-drawn hearses, homemade caskets, slide shows and photo tributes.

"There's a lot of personalization," Farley said.

The sky on Arant's casket reflected much of what his artwork conveyed, making it a perfect landscape, said Sokal, also an artist.

"Denny believed that everything in life is connected. He painted still life in the sky, the ocean in the sky, and picnics in the sky," she said.

The tribute not only honored the artist, but also proved cathartic for those close to Arant. Sokal and Arant's daughter, Debbie A. Johnson, spent nearly five hours painting the casket.



STAFF PHOTOS / DANIELLE RAPPAPORT / Fran Barone, a friend of Denny Arant and a fellow artist, writes a message on Arant's brightly painted casket before a memorial service on Thursday.

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"We felt guided to do it," Johnson said. "You have to follow who you think the person is. This is him."

A variety of colored markings adorned the top of Arant's casket. Each writer seemed to have carefully selected a color, reflected before starting, and then set down whatever feelings were inside.

Each person took to the task, honoring the man who lay inside the closed casket.

"Your body will leave us, but your artwork will live forever," wrote Fran Barone, a friend and fellow artist. The two met about 10 years ago in Florida, and often spent hours chatting about art over coffee.

Another friend, Terry Leopold, scooped up a handful of markers. He drew a yellow sun over the sky background, writing next to it, "To a light in our world."

No tribute could be more fitting, Leopold commented.

"It's a 100 percent Denny," he said.

Arant's personal items lay atop a nearby table; a yo-yo, sunglasses, tarot cards, his painting moccasins, his paintbrush, a stuffed toy poodle. Each item reflected his character, habits and affections.

Surrounding the casket were pieces of his artwork, including his last painting, of a woman sitting in front of a vanity. A man's figure is in the mirror before her, and she has turned her head sideways as if trying to see who is approaching. He died before he could sign it.

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