

# Undermain

*Arts under the mainstream*



*"In the fall, just imagine all that gold falling to the ground. That outdoor-indoor conversation will be stunning."* — Lexington artist Helene Steene

## Helene Steene, Walking in Beauty at Gatton Park





Helene Steene in her studio with "Walking In Beauty," commissioned for Lexington's new Gatton Park

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All photos by Kevin Nance, except where noted

It's a short walk from Lexington artist Helene Steene's home in Woodward Heights to Gatton Park on the Town Branch, the splashy new public space opening Aug. 23, just west of Rupp Arena — which is highly convenient, since she envisions spending a good deal of time there in the coming months and years. She's enthusiastic about the park's 450 trees — including a number of ginkgo trees, with which she has a special relationship that's both professional and spiritual. "Walk in Beauty," her new mixed-media painting commissioned for the community room in Gatton Park's only indoor space, is a whirlwind of autumnal ginkgo and other leaves swirling around a swath of blue that represents Town Branch Creek, which flows through the park. "I'll go in the mornings, have a cup of coffee and sit under a tree somewhere," Steene muses during a recent interview. "In the fall, just imagine all that gold falling to the ground. That outdoor-indoor conversation will be stunning."







Steene with a work at Hockensmith's in Georgetown, acquired by the Apiary in Lexington (Image provided by artist)

Ginkgo leaves have featured prominently in several of Steene's works over the years, including large examples now on display at the Apiary and the University of Kentucky Hospital in Lexington and at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, and "Walk in Beauty" is a handsome addition to the series. Four and a half feet tall by a whopping 16 and a half feet wide across seven wood panels, it hangs on the back wall of the community room at the rear of CommonSpirit Health Stage, the park's main performance venue. It's one of five public art pieces commissioned for the park, with the others including "Watermark," a sculptural donor wall by Lexington-based artist Amanda Matthews and her design firm, Prometheus Art; "Petal-Drop-Flutter," a sculptural installation in the

park's entry tunnel by Blessing Hancock, known for her public art commissions around the country; "First Impressions," a interactive sculpture in the form of a giant fossil that includes a timeline of Earth's (and Kentucky's) history, by the Brooklyn-based StudioKCA; and a mural by Often Seen Rarely Spoken (OSRS), a Kentucky-based artist collective, painted on a repurposed R.J. Corman railroad boxcar.

Of these, Steene's is the most analog, the most handmade and the most directly inspired by the park itself. "We love the story it tells about the creek," Gatton Park executive director Allison Lankford says in an interview, "and the different elements that tie it to the larger park project." Created in Steene's Loudoun House studio over four and a half months this winter and spring, "Walk in Beauty" refers not only to the Town Branch and the various trees in the park but also to the limestone substrata under the ground, indicated by a ribbon of marble dust. Some brick-like shapes at center bottom of the image refer to the remnants of an old stone wall from the 1700s found by the western edge of the creek near Oliver Lewis Way. A line of black that undulates through the piece is a subtle nod to architectural elements in the park, while the turquoise at the base of the painting echoes the color of the park's signage.



Helene Steene's "Walk in Beauty" installed in the community room at Gatton Park on the Town



The key element in the painting, though, is the fan-shaped ginkgo leaf, rendered both in gold paint and in Steene's signature silver metal. They flutter through the piece in a way reminiscent of the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai's "A Sudden Wind at Ejiri" — flying, floating, turning this way and that like parachutes on a beach — before settling on the ground below, where they harmonize with the ruddier tones of other leaves above. Collectively they conjure the poignant glory of nature in autumn, a burst of brilliant color made all the more powerful by our foreknowledge of the speed with which it will fade. Ironically, the ginkgo is one of the oldest living tree species in the world, dating back 200 million years, and an extract from its leaves has been used medicinally for centuries.





The fan-shaped ginkgo leaf, rendered both in gold paint and in Steene's signature silver metal.  
(Image provided by artist)

"In Japan, they call the ginkgo tree a living fossil, because they existed already when the dinosaurs were here," says Steene, 76, a native of Sweden who moved to the United States with her then-husband in 1976. "They were almost extinct, but in Japan and China they kept them alive." Ginkgo leaves have become a recurring theme in her work since 2014, when she completed the piece that was shown at Hockensmith's Fine Arts Editions Gallery in Georgetown and later purchased for the Apiary. "I like ginkgo leaves, period, and once, raking leaves with a friend, I realized that ginkgo leaves are not all the same shape, and started putting them into my paintings" she says. "Also there are so many ginkgo trees in Lexington that I feel like it's become a little bit of a



symbol tree for the city. The fall comes and, you know, that golden yellow is so beautiful."



A stunning autumn scene of ginkgo trees lining Catalpa Street in Lexington (Photo by Tom Eblen)

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