



## **“The Visitor”**

*Colored pencil on paper, 29 ¼” x 23 ½,” late 1980s*

**Leon Colvin**

United States, 1953-

Donated by Carol Gillespie,  
in honor of Maxine Gillespie, librarian,  
Valdosta State College, 1968-1980

Among the artists in our collection, Leon Colvin has probably achieved the greatest success as a result of overcoming the most tremendous odds. As a child he lived in the Poss Homes housing project in Chattanooga, with no exposure to art beyond newspaper comics and art instruction in elementary school. Yet his teachers were quick to recognize his talent, asking for his help in providing drawings of Santa Claus and George Washington for holiday bulletin boards, and classmates actually parted with their lunch money for his highly realistic drawings of Samson. Upon reaching his teens, he was asked to study art at Kirkman Tech, and he used the bus rides as an opportunity to explore downtown on foot. His route to school took him past Fowler Brothers Furniture Store, where he stopped to gaze in enchantment at the wildlife paintings in the windows. Finally one day he got the courage to go inside and said, “I want to paint like that.” A kindly saleswoman gave him postcards of the pictures.

Though he was one of only 27 African-Americans studying at Kirkman, his fellow students were very tolerant for the late ‘60s, and the faculty was surprisingly receptive to his rather unusual choice of subject matter. After graduation, he went through a period of what he described as “drifting”—first working as a physical therapist, then as a waiter, in Atlanta, before deciding to move to Valdosta in 1979 and to devote himself to his art full-time. He was the first local artist to do a one-man show at Valdosta’s Cultural Arts Center, and his career took off after that as a regional artist, where he has become one of the best-known wildlife artists in the Southeast. He does oil paintings, but his specialty is drawings in colored pencil of birds, often with flowers, and wildlife of all kinds. He is so fastidious in his work on the drawings that he will scrutinize them outdoors, under a magnifying glass, looking for imperfections. He pays particular attention to the eyes of his subjects, because as he told one reporter, he “learned very early on the eye is the key to the whole expression of his subject.”

“The Visitor” is one of Colvin’s colored pencil drawings, which depicts a green hummingbird and a bluebird perched on the branches of a blooming pink azalea bush. What makes this picture so appealing is that the birds are portrayed with more warmth and life than most pictures of this type, and look real enough to fly off the paper.