

House took longer to paint than to build

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

For three years, brick by brick, Jim Bisignano of Birmingham has been painting the historic governor's mansion in Des Moines, Iowa.

It's all been done in the artist's studio here in town. And the result is a 40-by-64-inch acrylic-on-Masonite painting that is an amazing blend of art and mathematical skills.

Bisignano is well known as an artist who can combine extensive technical skills with aesthetic ones. Paintings of world famous racing cars have long been one of his specialties. And while these are full of drama and color, they are also



Jim Bisignano of Birmingham is used to working with a lot of consideration for detail, but the mansion painting which he recently completed was the most involved and taxing of his career.

highly pleasing to those who understand the intricacies of aerodynamics, suspension, balance, braking, gearing and speed.

So when he received a commission to do the Iowa governor's mansion as it looked when it was built (before modifications were made over the years), he began by doing extensive research.

"It took more time for me to paint it than it did to build the original thing," said Bisignano.

He began with one postcard picture of the mansion and after his research made four to five smaller sketches before deciding on the view he liked best. When that was chosen, he painted a full-size, full-color working sketch. A former stylist for General Motors, Bisignano minimizes the margin of error as much as possible.

Still until he was into the project, this veteran of many painting challenges apparently had no idea of the extent of the work he was embarking on.

Every brick of the large mansion is clearly defined. Not one is hazy or glossed over. The architectural trim under the roof overhang is minutely detailed.

But Bisignano's meticulous attention to detail created monumental mathematical problems. From the pictures, original and later ones, he could count the number of bricks from ground level to the roof at the corner of the structure. In fact, he knew how many bricks had to show at every angle of the mansion. But because of the angle chosen, perspective became an important consideration.

One of his nicest compliments came from his wife, Judith, who, like her husband, is from Iowa.

"It looks like an Iowa day," she said when the painting was almost done.



Acrylic painting of the former Iowa Governor's mansion required extensive research by the artist to determine how it originally looked. For a long time he had one early black and white post card to work from. The porch on the left was later enclosed and the front steps squared off. This is true to the original design.

Staff photos by Dick Kelley

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