

Capture your house on canvas

(AP) — House portraits have long been the province of the upper crust, but interest among middle-income Americans is creating a growth industry for artists and designers.

Today, dwellings ranging from mansions to mobile homes are being memorialized in oils, acrylics or water colors, in pen and ink drawings, sepias, photographs, needlepoint wall hangings, hooked rugs, wood models and miniature shadow-box constructions.

Cost often is determined by the degree of the artist's involvement — from copying a mailed photograph to making a personal visit and conducting extensive interviews with a family and its friends.

By mail order, a photo of your home can be reproduced on an eight-inch oval ceramic plaque for \$38.95 including postage. You can opt for a custom hooked rug of your home and grounds — for \$75 a square foot. An electrified dollhouse set in an antique printer's type tray starts at \$3,500, and a house portrait by a recognized artist is in the \$12,000 to \$25,000 range.

Patricia Shiland of New York, who does what she calls miniature lifestyle portraits in dollhouse form, can spend up to 120 hours on one of her constructions. She does exhaustive studies of the home's history and the owner's interests and lifestyle before she begins her portraits.

THE APPEAL of these personalized pieces is the personal aspect, says David Bradstreet Wiggins of Tilton, N.H. This painter, decorator and antiques dealer travels from state to state painting murals incorporating exterior views of a home on interior walls. He also will depict a home on a fireplace accessory known as a fireboard.

"People want their family history and their property entered in the picture," he says. "They want their children included and lots of romantic allusions — sunsets and seascapes, allegorical things which are not apparent to the casual viewer."

Kathy Jakobsen, who is represented by Jay Johnson America's Folk Heritage Gallery in New York, has immortalized her clients' pets, their hobbies, their ancestors and their tractors in commissioned portraits. Personal touches have included a gopher that chewed up a garden, a chicken coop and a client seated at a piano. For the owners of the Hitchcock Chair Co., she rendered in paint the town of Riverton, Conn., where the chairs are made.

The Huggery of Old Brookville, N.Y., makes memory rugs. The process starts with a photo of the house and a list of extras requested by the client. A watercolor is then made, showing such details as favorite pets and the surrounding landscape. Once the watercolor is to the client's liking, the rug is hooked, using a needlepoint technique, in sizes ranging from 2-by-3 feet up to about 9-by-12 feet.

AFTER A MENTION in Country Living magazine, G. Willkors, a gift shop in Locust Valley, N.Y., received mail orders from all over the country for the ceramic plaques it sells for \$38.95.

"You rarely get a superb house," says Barbara Goldstone, the shop's co-owner. "In fact, we just did somebody's trailer. So it is not that it's a special house, but that it is their house."

"Anyone who has put time and effort into a home will at some point have a representation of it," says Rachel Newman, editor of Country Living.

While Newman sees house portraits riding a crest of popularity today, Robert Bishop, director of the Museum of American Folk Art in New York, says it's nothing new. "The idea of recording your house for yourself and for posterity really started very early," he says, "certainly in the mid-1700s."

It was, he says, a way of letting others know you had arrived. Today, he adds, there are plenty of ways of showing you've arrived, so the nostalgia value of the house portrait has superseded its importance as a status symbol.


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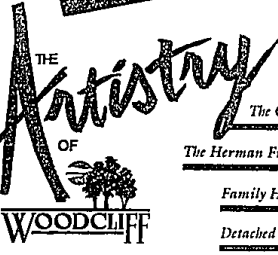
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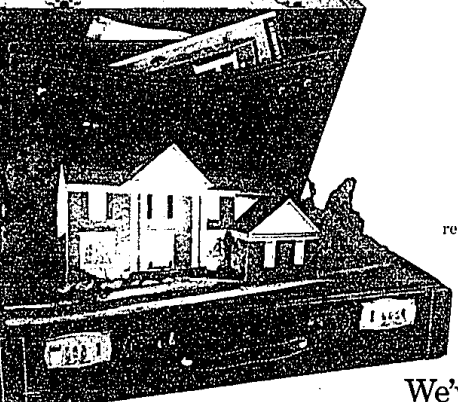
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