

The cutting edge

Silhouette artist leans back, relaxes and cuts

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

SALLY NEWCOMB'S preschool teacher noted that she was very good at cutting and snipping. That talent has taken

Newcomb around the country, capturing figures on black paper with a 7-inch pair of sewing scissors blessed by a decoupage artist.

"I really think you cannot teach the cutting," reflected one of the nation's few silhouette experts during her re-

cent semi-annual visit to Jacobson's in Birmingham.

"People who can cut do it against tremendous odds."

Admittedly "upright" when drawing an outline of a person or pet, when she's snipping away the Chicago area resident just leans back in her rocking chair and does what comes naturally.

"I don't draw very well and I really have to look," said Newcomb, who is not real comfortable with the "drawing person" in her.

"But the cutting person just sort of leans back and relaxes and it just happens."

With a master's degree and near a doctorate in English literature, Newcomb certainly never expected to trace people's shapes for a living. She planned to "be a mommy" and teach English to night school students.

BUT IN 1956, the mother of three sons was drafted into manning the silhouette booth at the Bound Brook New Jersey Junior Woman's Club Easter Bunny Fair.

With the help of a viewer which cast a shape on paper, she created 25-cent silhouettes. By Christmas, she was confident enough to do away with the camera lucida.

"I decided I could do it and thrust the viewer from me," she recalled, chuckling over people's notions that she is part of a franchise operation.

"People think I have six positions and choose one and glue the head on top. It's not that at all."

Popular in the late 1700s and early 1800s, silhouettes were an inexpensive way to record features. But they lost

appeal when the camera became available.

"It was felt that you could determine character from someone's features," said Newcomb, explaining that a sloping forehead indicated idleness and full lips showed sensuality. "King George III had both. People had real faith in it," she said.

Today, there are so few people creating silhouettes that she takes her Snips to Scotland each year.

"The books say it degenerated into a carnival art, although there are still some good people doing it," she explained. "But it's not as if there is a school of silhouette artists."

SILHOUETTES BECAME symbols, tending to stay on walls longer than photos. Most of her work hangs in living rooms, along stairways and in black and white bathrooms — although her handmade frames don't hold up well in moist areas.

"Silhouettes tend to have an emotional impact on people," said the 53-year-old grandmother. "My theory is that in cave days you had to recognize whether it was daddy or a bear painted on the wall."

Much of Newcomb's work is for people who regularly return to her. She makes a circuit of department stores, where she appears exclusively once or twice a year.

"Styles do vary," said the artist, who believes it makes sense to stick with the same person. "You don't want a series of silhouettes sending off different signals."

Most of her silhouettes capture children. She specializes in full-length figures of youngsters with props — their

own favorite toys or ones etched in her memory.

WITH SARAH LOFFMAN of Farmington Hills, she added a raggedy Ann doll held in front rather than behind. "She's sort of an upfront person, I think," noted Newcomb, who has immortalized children doing karate, sitting on horses, playing with balls and reading.

Despite her lack of formal art training, the sketches are usually ready in less than five minutes.

Her traveling gear includes a rocking chair, two pairs of scissors, special paper and a small red stapler which she regards as a "technological breakthrough."

"It used to be that the paper would shift and I would wind up with one skinny leg," she explained with a smile, cutting three copies of a figure at once.

Over the years, her skills have improved with her knowledge of anatomy. Dealing mostly with children, she uses whatever techniques work to get them to sit or stand still.

"One thing I can't do is have them eating," she said, recalling one child who "seemed to be operating on gum-balls."

While she's been creating silhouettes for nearly 30 years, not all are successful. She admits to having nightmares about the beautiful child with gold curls, blue eyes and rosy cheeks but "sideways he was just a bowl of tapoca."

"I WORKED and worked, but his mother just kept saying 'That's not Olaf,'" recalled the artist, who believes the toughest customer is an "accom-



The youngster in party dress with Raggedy Ann doll captured in silhouette is Sarah Loffman of Farmington Hills.

plished" 12-year-old girl with her mother and grandmother in tow.

"But most silhouettes are easy to do. The nicer the family, the more fun it is," said Newcomb, whose goal in life is to continue her work as long as possible, despite "little aches of arthritis."



STEVEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Holding a master's degree and working toward a doctorate in English literature, Sally Newcomb never suspected she would one day be known as one of the nation's few silhouette experts. Now she earns her living traveling with her scissors and black paper tracing people's shapes.

Evanthia Samra

Artist-of-the-Month chairs FAC art show

By Lorraine McClish
staff writer

Art is heavy on Evanthia Samra's mind this month.

She is taking on the job of chairman for Farmington Artists Club (FAC) spring exhibit while at the same time is Artist-of-the-Month for the April one-woman show in Farmington Branch Library.

But she said, "Art has been a source of relaxation, as well as work, for me for the past 20 years."

In those past 20 years her paintings have found their way into private collections across the country.

Her most recently completed work, a 4-by-8-foot painting of the resurrected cross, was hung in time for the dedication of St. John American Lutheran Church's remodeled and expanded complex on Gill Road just a few months ago.

"Art is an ever-changing form," she said. "Ideas change. Tastes change. Education evolves, which keeps us searching for new concepts."

She believes color and design are her own two strongest points, which is in evidence in both the abstract and realistic work she shows in the library this month.

SAMRA CALLS the show her "all-around" show because each of the pieces on exhibit, whether executed in wa-

tercolor, acrylic, collage or oil, have all brought her a win.

The collage called "Lillies" brought her Best of Show from Visual Arts Association of Livonia (VAAL). That work is done exclusively with hand-printed tissue paper.

The artist is currently vice president of FAC. She is a charter member of Farmington Art Foundation, which is the service arm of the club, and she is active in all of the foundation's programs for the community.

She has served as a resource person since the inception of the Picture Lady Program, one of the foundation's early projects, which provides art enrichment to elementary school children.

She has worked for Michigan's Art Train and Founders Festival art shows. Most recently she accepted the position of educational coordinator for VAAL.

Her art studies have been done at Madonna College, Oakland Community College and Birmingham-Bloomfield Art Association.

She has taught a young people's class at Madonna, but still continues her own studies privately with various artists in the area.

AS CHAIRMAN of FAC's spring exhibit, she will follow the club's tried-and-true success format.

The format is a showcase for the high degree of talent and originality of FAC members, while at the same time

raises funds to perpetuate the work of Farmington Art Foundation.

Juror Barbara Price from Cranbrook Academy of Art will choose a limited number of works to be placed in the exhibit's prestigious Juried Gallery.

Samra estimates there will be another 100 pieces in the Open Gallery at show time, and maybe another 2,000 pieces for shoppers in the Budget Gallery.

Along with this, members donate pieces of their work to be raffied off during the three-day show, with all proceeds going to the art foundation.

The exhibit runs from April 30 to May 2 in Mercy Center's formal lounge, 11 Mile Road, east of Middlebelt Road. Show hours are from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday and from noon to 5 p.m. Sunday.

There is no admission charge, and refreshments are complimentary.



RANDY BOST/Staff photographer

The color and design the artist feels are her strongest points as evidenced in "Broken Pots" now on display in the library.



RANDY BOST/Staff photographer

Evanthia Samra hangs "Harvest" in Farmington Community Library for a one-woman show of works that have been award winners in shows throughout the metropolitan area.

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