

A painting worth a thousand words

By Lennox Morrison

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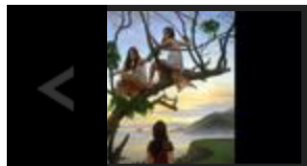
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Joshua's Tree

Some paintings, like this one, are commissioned to honour a lost loved one. (Ralph Heimans and Christina Hellmann)



Empty nester Lori McNee loves looking up at the oil painting of her sons and daughter completed a decade ago.

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Empty nester Lori McNee loves looking up at the oil painting of her sons and daughter completed a decade ago.

It hangs high above a table in her vaulted living room and was painted shortly before eldest son went to college. A painter herself, and fine art blogger, she paid Vancouver-based portrait artist David Goatley \$14,000 for the commission and spent \$3,000 more on framing.

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"It really captured their likeness and a moment in life," said McNee, of Sun Valley, Idaho. "As I'm puttering around the house I'll glance up and I'll be caught by the feeling and emotion in it."

Although portraiture is an established tradition, there's been an uptick of interest in recent years. Art lovers - notably from the UK, US, Australia and Canada - want to make a statement about their family for posterity.

"When a family commissions a portrait they are expressing the love they have for each other," Goatley said. "A photograph is a captured fragment of time, a 125th of a second. But a painted portrait expresses the person in their totality."

The decision to commission a portrait might be prompted by a special occasion, such as a birthday or a wedding anniversary, to commemorate a loved one, or when families are reunited and want to create an enduring image.

"There's been an upward trend in the last 15 years," said artist Ralph Heimans, whose sitters have included Queen Elizabeth II and Princess Mary of Denmark. It's partly fuelled by the lure of prizes offered for portraits

How to Cut Costs

A fine portrait doesn't have to cost a fortune.

Commission a smaller format, such as head and shoulders instead of full length, and a less expensive medium, such as pastels instead of oils.

"The least successful result is when people have a very low budget and want to get the biggest show they can," said Julia Baughman of Portraits Inc "It's better to commission a pencil drawing rather than the least expensive oils artist on our roster."



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and by a general resurgence of realistic work, as opposed to abstract, he said.

An elaborate oil painting beyond your budget? Computer software and do-it-yourself websites have opened up the world of portraiture to a broader audience and for as little as \$18.99 you can transform family snapshots into artworks. Whatever your preference, here's how to buy a family portrait.

What you'll pay

At Portraits Inc, an artists' brokerage in New York, co-owner Julia Baughman reports a 20% increase in commissions of portraits in the past four years. These days, she receives about 500 commissions per year. Family portraits normally cost between \$3,000 and \$25,000 in oils and \$1,000 to \$8,000 in pencil or charcoal.

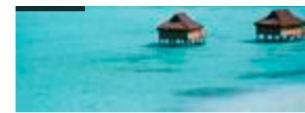
"The key word is 'honour'. People want to honour someone in the family and they want to capture that person at a certain time," Baughman said.

To commission an original painting, look to brokers such as portraitsinc.com and portraitartist.com, which can help match particular artists to your budget. At Portraits, Inc which represents around 150 artists the fee depends - as it does elsewhere too - on the artist chosen and the size of the work.

Since the price is usually based on the number of figures depicted as well as the medium, the fee for a large group may be more. For instance, a family of six in an outdoor setting could cost \$100,000.

Typically, Portraits, Inc requires 50% of its fee after the contract is signed, with the balance due on completion. Other brokers have varying payment options, but most require something upfront, with the balance due upon delivery.

An artist with an international reputation is often represented by a gallery or an agent. Ralph Heimans, for instance, has agents in the UK, Hong Kong, Dubai and Denmark. To commission a large scale oil painting from him, expect to pay around \$240,000 or more. Normally, Heimans' fee is in three tranches: 25% down payment, 25% on approval of drawings and the remainder on delivery of the painting.



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With any artist, ask about travel expenses. These are usually paid by the client and add to your costs.

Working with an artist

When working with an artist, expect the portrait to be completed within about six to twelve months. Some painters will work from supplied photographs, but most prefer to meet the people they'll be painting and take their own photos before presenting sketches for approval and committing paint to canvas.

As for the formal sitting, expect it to last one to three hours, sometimes with an initial session for photographs followed by a second sitting for the artist to use paint to take 'notes' of skin tone, eye- and hair colour. Ideally, everyone who will be depicted in the portrait should be present so the artist gets a sense of the family dynamic, as well as each character, and can reflect that in the composition. In some cases, the subjects and artist will spend several days together.

A very in-demand artist may have a waiting list of a year or longer, but brokers are always able to offer a choice of artists free to start work within a week or two.

London-based Heimans said creating rapport with his sitters is essential. "My approach is to establish a personal connection. My works are focused on integrating a subject and context and telling a story that's relevant to that person's life."

In Christina Hellmann's home in Hong Kong, the portrait displayed is deeply poignant. Entitled Joshua's Tree, Hellmann had it painted in memory of her son who died at age 15 of a rare neuro-degenerative disease. It depicts Joshua's sisters playing in the tree beneath which his ashes are entombed, with his mother gazing out across the South China Sea.

"When the sun shines on the painting in the afternoon the sea glows and it's so special. The whole emotion comes through," said Hellmann.

The idea for Joshua's Tree came when Hellman showed Heimans the spot where her son used to like to sit beneath a tree. "It felt like a very sad task to do a posthumous portrait. When I saw his sisters playing in the tree the



How to buy an island

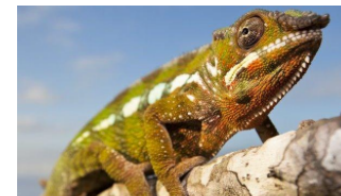
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idea came upon me that Joshua didn't need to be in the painting," Heimans said. The painting was unveiled two years after the commission.

Before a full painting is made, most artists will present options. Goatley, the artist who was commissioned by McNee through Portraits, Inc, made three small oil sketches of her children in different settings and she chose one option to be painted on a 48" x 60" canvas.

"Painting a portrait is a collaborative process," said Goatley, whose sitters have included Kim Campbell, Canada's first female prime minister. "I usually show my clients two charcoal sketches or small oil studies, which give a sense of what the composition is going to be and what the work will be like."

From there, the image is refined. "Clients will say, 'Can you make John smile a little bit more' or 'I think her eyes are a little bit more twinkly' and I'm happy for them to have that input," Goatley said.

Do it yourself, online

If a private commission is financially out of reach, a family snapshot reproduced on stretched canvas and wrapped around a wooden frame of 8" x 12" on photofiddle.com starts at around \$40. Your image can be reproduced in a variety of styles including a black and white sketch, comic book dots, pop art, a deep sponge painting or an oil painting.

A shot taken on a newer model smartphone will be of sufficient quality to bring good results, according to Michael Karmatz, owner of Photofiddle. "Make sure the photo you use is of good quality. A lot of times people take photos from far away and only 10% of the photo is of the people. It's best for people to take up to 75% of the photo."

Glenda Cohen, a hobby photographer and homemaker from Long Island, New York, regularly uploads shots to create digital artworks on photofiddle.com.

"I make them as gifts and surprises. When I see my photos turned into art it's like going to a concert and hearing music live rather than just switching on a headset," she said.



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Digital images can be reproduced on canvas, paper, wood, acrylic, silk and stone and typically take up to three days to be ready for shipping. Other sites that transform photos into art works include snapfish.com and photobucket.com.

One project by Cohen involved converting vintage photos from 1921, when her family first arrived in the United States from Poland.

"The photos were lying in a box. I created a collage online, had it printed on regular art paper and framed in a deep chocolate wooden frame." The collage is a great talking point among her family and friends, she said.

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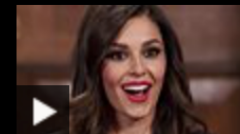
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