

Lovely art, lower cost - Painted in China, portraits make tradition affordable

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The (GA) - September 22, 2005

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- Edition: Home; The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
- Section: Business
- Page: F1

A 4-year-old, rendered softly in oil paints, wears a white dress and smiles just slightly out of a heavy gilded frame.

The portrait is one of 20 lining a small banquet room at the Grand Hyatt in Buckhead where North Carolina entrepreneur Hannah Davis is holding an open house. Davis' fast-growing portrait business targets well-to-do families who want to continue the Southern tradition of family portraits but aren't comfortable with the typical price tag of \$10,000 to \$20,000.

Davis' hook: She commissions paintings in China, where the wages of artists, like other professionals', are much lower than in the United States.

A 26-by-32-inch painting from Davis, such as the one of the white-clad girl, costs \$3,500. A small painting can be had for less than \$1,000.

A Princeton University graduate with a thick Southern accent, Davis, 40, worked for a bank but had long wanted her own business. After traveling extensively and meeting fine artists in China, she thought about selling their work in United States, where it would seem like a bargain. She was searching for a "real concept" to focus her business idea, she said.

Then, at a family wedding in August 2003, her cousin complained to her that his wife wanted to have their child's portrait painted -- for \$10,000.

"It was like lightning struck," Davis said.

Two years later, Davis commissions 60 child portraits a month through her Winston Salem-based firm, Art Gallery Originals. She is adding executive and pet portraits to her lineup.

Davis' story illustrates that the opening of China's vast labor market is changing the economy in ways nobody imagined. Not only are major industries like textiles being transformed by the cheap labor in China, but also a tiny niche business like child portraiture.

Even rich balk at \$10,000

After coming up with the idea, Davis went to China to meet with artists. She already knew a Chinese businesswoman who had studied at the University of North Carolina. That woman eventually became her partner, coordinating with the artists in Shanghai.

Now, Davis travels around the South meeting with her growing clientele, which she described as "the fanciest of the fancy." She said she had discovered that even people with plenty of money didn't necessarily want to spend \$10,000 for a portrait.

"There are psychological price points," she said.

However, she said, old-money families also don't want the super cheap portraits, which are often done by blowing up a photograph and painting oil directly on top for a very realistic look.

"My clients wouldn't have that even if it cost \$20," she said. "We get people's attention by the price, but it is really about the art."

Here is how the process works: A client looks at the samples that Davis takes to her shows and decides on a background -- usually abstract or a garden scene. Davis encourages people to have a photograph taken professionally. The photograph must be shot outside in natural light, and the subject usually does not flash a big toothy grin the way a child might for a regular photograph. In a traditional portrait, the subject smiles just slightly or not at all.

Davis' partner then hires an artist in Shanghai, who works from the photograph. The client receives the portrait about four to six months after placing the order.

At a traditional portrait firm, the client would choose the artist, then the subject of the painting would sit for the artist at least once.

Well-known Tennessee artist Gordon Wetmore, who is represented by several U.S. firms, said he spends several hours at the first sitting, taking photos and also doing two watercolor studies, one to get an idea of the person's posture and another that focuses on the face. He spends months painting before another sitting at the end of the process. Sometimes the client asks for changes, which he makes. A typical client spends \$20,000 to \$25,000 for a three-quarter-length portrait, which shows the subject's face and most of the body.

Wetmore said the sitting is integral to his work. "It infuses a lifelike quality," he said.

A Southern tradition

But Buckhead mother Christina Whitney, who visited Davis' open house in Atlanta last week, said she didn't think the sitting was particularly important. Her own portrait, painted when she was about 12, was done from a photograph.

Whitney, whose children are 2 and 4, had planned to have her children's portraits done when they were in middle school. However, Davis' prices are so good that Whitney figures she can do portraits now and again later. She said she was impressed with the samples at the open house.

"We wouldn't do it if the quality wasn't there," she said.

The most renowned portrait firm in the United States has long been Portraits Inc. in New York, which serves corporations, universities and families. The works are particularly popular with Southerners.

"The family portrait is something that has been historically done in the Southern family since the 1700s," said Marian MacKinney, president of Portraits Inc. "It is a tradition in the South, much more so than anywhere else."

There are also a handful of well-respected firms based in the South. Executives at American firms say the personal relationship between the client and the artist is enough of a differentiating factor to keep their businesses strong even in the face of the new competition. However, these same executives acknowledge the Chinese portraits are good.

"The Chinese artists are really well-trained," MacKinney said. "Someone was brilliant to come up with this idea."

Margaret Brunstad at Portrait Brokers of America in Birmingham said she had looked at Davis' site and that the portraits were lovely.

"Everything's global these days," she said. "It was bound to show itself in some way in this business."

- Caption: PhotoHannah DavisPhotoBECKY STEIN / SpecialHannah Davis sells portraits to her clients, whom she calls "the fanciest of the fancy," at a substantially lower price by commissioning them from Chinese artists. The artist goes by a photograph, and in four to six months ships the finished painting to the United States.

- Record: 50922401

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