

ART

Artist re-creating portrait destroyed in fire



PHOTO BY GAN

Mehrdad Samimi has been commissioned to re-create a painting that had been destroyed in the Oakland Hills fire.

By Julia Smith
CORRESPONDENT

On a warm spring morning in 1906, a pretty 17-year-old girl named Margaret Chase, wearing a lilac voile tea dress and grasping a parasol, reclined across a stack of pillows in her Cape Cod garden, while her friend, Aldro T. Hibbard, selected a paintbrush and began work on his art class assignment: the effect of filtered sunlight on the human figure.

Eighty-seven years later, Orinda artist Mehrdad Samimi is attempting to re-create Hibbard's portrait of the young Margaret, a woman who died in 1967 and whose likeness, as rendered by Hibbard, was lost to the Oakland firestorm when her daughter's home was consumed by flames.

Judith Woods is Margaret Chase's daughter, and of all the things she lost in the fire — a lifetime's collection of memories and sentiments — that portrait was

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the one thing she mourned the most.

"After the fire, all of my very close friends said to me, 'You lost everything, and the painting of your mother,'" Woods says. "Everyone remarked on that."

Not long after the devastating blaze, Woods and her husband decided to rebuild their Acacia Street house. But, Woods realized, the living room would seem empty without her mother's portrait hanging above the mantle. Nor would it be passed down to Woods' niece, who was born in Margaret Chase's home during World War II and spent part of her childhood there.

"It was one of the great disappointments of my life, that it wouldn't go to her," Woods explains.

The miracle begins

And so, through a combination of circumstance, technology and artistry, Woods is anxiously awaiting the completion of Samimi's highly challenging commission. It was a mutual acquaintance, an art consultant Woods had spoken to, who introduced her to Samimi. That was in November. Since then, Woods has come to know Samimi and his wife Ellie, who owns the Samimi Art Gallery in Orinda, very well.

Samimi explains the difficulties involved in attempting to re-create a young woman's long past idyll.

"All Mrs. Woods had to go on were some old photographs with the painting in the background," he recounts. "We scanned those

on a computer, and the highest resolution we could obtain was 4,000 dots per square inch. The computer expert and myself tried to recreate as much of the painting as we could."

"In order to achieve the most detail," adds Drew Herroff, general manager of Oakland Colorit Graphics, who worked with Samimi on the scan, "our final scan extracted all the available data, down to the grain of the actual film." That was more than 10 times the usual intensity, necessary because of the poor focus and age of the snapshot they had to work with.

Used for espionage

The computer tool he used, Adobe's PhotoShop software, is often employed by government intelligence operations to enhance surveillance photographs.

Samimi lifts up an oversized computer printout, blurred but recognizable as the subject portrait. "We came up with this," he says. "Once we more or less agreed on the computer sketch, we went into the first color version of the painting."

Which is where technology leaves off and artistry takes the lead. Samimi is a formally trained painter. His father, Reza, painted official portraits of Eisenhower, Princess Grace, King Faisal and King Saud, among others. The young Samimi's art education began early, and he mastered the classical pre-impressionist techniques long ago. It is evident in the subtle brushstrokes and subliminally shaded still lifes, portraits and landscapes that grace the walls of the Orinda gallery.

It is there, too, in the unfinished work that sits on an easel in the center of the room. There, before a sylvan background, is Samimi's preliminary figure of Margaret.

"This is the first coat," Samimi explains. "The general color of the whole painting gets developed here. From now on, I'll just continue working on it, refining it, until it's done — another 20 hours, perhaps."

Additional details for the finished canvas are being provided by Woods' brother, working from his memory, and from trips to antique clothing stores, to familiarize Samimi with the gauzy texture of old voile.

Samimi acknowledges that this is a unique project, from any perspective.

"I had done portraits of people's ancestors before, that were done from very old photographs, but this was the first time we'd done anything using the computer. But I figured, if this technology could be used to enhance photographs taken from many miles up in the air, then this would be relatively simple. Really, it was like finding a new toy."

"My turn-on, in my line of work," he concludes, "is to do something where the client is really happy."

Judith Woods stands nearby, a mature, handsome woman in a beautiful crimson-and-plum wool suit. She turns and looks lovingly at the incomplete painting. She doesn't really need to say the words that come next.

"I am very pleased," she says quietly, and smiles a radiant smile.