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BY LIZ HAFALIA/THE CHRONICLE

Mehrdad Samimi held snapshots he is using to recreate a 1906 painting for an Oakland woman who is the daughter of its subject

Portrait Lost in East Bay Fire Being Reborn

By Bill Wallace
Chronicle East Bay Bureau

Using classical painting techniques and 21st century computer technology, an Orinda artist is reconstructing an heirloom portrait lost when its owner's home burned during the East Bay hills fire.

In a process that is part art, part painstaking detective work, artist Mehrdad Samimi is working only from photographs and family memory to complete the prized portrait so it can be installed in the family's new home this spring.

The original painting, an oil portrait made in 1906, showed 17-year-old Margaret Chase, shaded by a parasol, reading a book as she reclined beneath a group of trees in Cape Cod, Mass. The portrait was something of a rarity, done by a noted New England landscape artist named Aldro T. Hibbard, who was only 20 years old when he painted the portrait.

Chase was the mother of Oakland Hills resident Judith Woods. The portrait hung in Woods' home on Acacia Street in Oakland until it was destroyed in the 1991 firestorm. Woods said she hopes the reconstructed painting can be completed this spring in time to hang in the new home they are building at the same site.

"I have always lived with the portrait," Woods said. "I wanted to recreate it if it was at all possible."

Last fall, Woods began investigating the possibility of having her mother's portrait redone. The problem: The only source materials she had for reconstructing the painting were small black-and-white snapshots taken at a family gathering during Christmas 1957.

Only two of the photos show the painting at all well, and in them, it is a blurry rectangle, little bigger than a thumb. After talking with several friends and associates, Woods was referred to Samimi, a painter who owns a small art gallery in Orinda Village and has done official portraits of California Governor Wilson and former New Orleans Mayor Moon Landrieu.

Samimi took the snapshots of the painting to Colorip Graphics, an Oakland computer firm that specializes in improving photographic images.

There, a computer was used to enlarge and enhance the painting's tiny image on the photographs and reproduce it in a large enough format that it could serve as an artist's sketch for reproduction, said Colorip's general manager, Drew Herzoff.

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> — ORINDA ARTIST MEHRDAD SAMIMI

Herzoff said image processing is often used in photography, but he is unaware of the technique being used to recreate a painting.

"I haven't heard of somebody doing something like this before," he said.

The process is far from complete. Samimi has reconstructed the background of the portrait to Mrs. Woods' satisfaction, and is now working on the details of Chase's clothing and likeness.

To recapture the texture of the clothing Chase wore in her portrait, Samimi is studying fabrics at a vintage dress museum in Lafayette. He is also reviewing family snapshots of Chase taken in 1957 to help with her likeness.

"She (Mrs. Woods) says the background color is just about perfect," Samimi said, studying his work-in-progress. "The umbrella is right. The color of the dress should be a bit more faded."

There is still much work to do, but Samimi is excited about the challenge. Generally, an artist is faced only with the task of painting something as it appears in his own mind.

"This," he said, "involves painting something that is in somebody else's mind."