Painting man's best pal

Carencro woman captures nature, dogs on canvas

By Dixie Simon

CARENCRO — By day, Audrey Carriere works in the world of children's health as a Head Start nurse for the Lafayette Parish School Board.

But on Tuesday nights, she sits before an artist's canvas re-creating Mother Nature's world of flowers, trees, birds and — pet pooches.

"I look for something unique that draws me to that animal," she says over the bark of her daughter Rene's black Cocker Spaniel. "I ask myself, are the eyes bright, is the mouth turned up or down, is the pet's personality hyper or sweet?

Once she pins down that special characteristic, she says she "goes with it" in the painting, but before putting that first brush stroke on raw canvas, there's a lot more research ahead.

She studies several views of the animal from slides and enlarges and reduces photos, checking details. Sometimes she borrows books from the library to be sure she gets the breed's anatomy right.

The most elusive part, according to Carriere, is the pet's facial expression, and that, she notes, is best studied from life.

"Capturing that look is where an artist's work has it over photography," she says, "because it is lost in the split second of the camera flash."

Photos, she continued, can't reproduce the subtle shadings of a pet's coat like the layers of paint from an artist's brush. And, she added, neither can they offer the 3-D tactile quality of a painting.

Carriere reasons that animal lovers have a better chance of getting a flattering picture of their pet with a painting because an artist has control over all the elements in a finished work, like lighting, shadows and background.

"The first dog I did was my friend's black Lab, a project I sort of took on as a dare to myself," she reveals. "I worked from a photo, blew it up, and added the background. It was so successful, I hated to part with it."

But then pet owners commissionsing paintings started asking her to add elements into the pictures for which she had no live models.

As a result, she says, "I've had to fake-in puppies, flowers, boats, ducks and swamp scenes." Some she copied from magazine pictures, others from postal greeting cards.

The finished portrait, then, is not a duplication of anything, but a re-creating on canvas — an original work of art.

To give herself a break after such tedious work, the artist says she paints something "loose" next, like flowers.

Referring to a handsome example on the dining room wall of her Carencro home, Carriere notes, "I guess I've painted more magnolias than any other flower, but calla lilies are still my favorite."

Originally from Franklin, this country girl's roots show up in the landscape paintings of rural roads and Cajun cabins that line the walls of her studio.

"Painting different things builds a better artist," she explains. "It gives me a chance to vary my brush strokes and improve on perspective and color work."

Husband Dale, who is also Carencro postmaster, helps out with his wife's hobby by supplying her with photos of Louisiana waterways he takes on fishing trips.

Some have reappeared as background scenes in Carriere's paintings; others have been fully reproduced as works themselves.

In thanks for such contributions, Carriere says she offered her husband the painting of his choice.

"No problem, for a fisherman. He hooked a picture of a large-mouth bass for the post-office."

Carriere's studio once served as the family's formal living room, but parlor entertaining gave way to painter's sanctuary 13 years ago when she took her first art lesson.

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