Like phoenix, Acadiana artist Carl Groh renewed by fire

By NANCY REGENT
Advocate state writer

LAFAYETTE - Carl Groh watched in horror as years of his work went up in flames. Attorney Tony Moroux's $2.5 million home here was engulfed in flames on Christmas Eve last year, and many of Groh's paintings were in the home. His studio was located on the third floor.

Groh was living in the home at 107 Stonehenge Road, and was in the kitchen at the time of the fire. Tony and Jebbye Moroux's daughter, Mimmy, and her friend were in the living room watching cartoons when the fire erupted. They ran out the front door, and Tony Moroux crawled beneath the smoke to join them in the front yard.

The fire destroyed the second and third floor of the 12,000-square-foot home.

"It happened so fast that all you think about is self-survival," Groh said. "No one thought of taking any art. Everyone was just concerned for each other."

Groh said some of his best work was hanging in the home, including a 9-foot portrait of Jebbye and Mimmy.

"It was a fabulous painting," said Tony Moroux. "We are definitely going to redo it." Moroux shied from talking about Groh's work.

"...I'm no art critic, but I know his work is very good. He takes a lot of time and is well-schooled in the masters."

Groh is not bitter about the fire. Despite losing years of work, and specially mixed paint and some brushes he said could have lasted a lifetime, he talks excitedly about redoing some of the paintings.

"Materialism is not everything," he said. "I learned that great friends are treasures. The rest doesn't really matter."

Friends "passed the hat" in January and presented him with a $3,000 check to replace equipment.

The money helped with travel expenses to New York, where he is a protege of artist Aaron Shikler. Shikler has painted Jacqueline Onassis, John Kennedy, Ronald and Nancy Reagan and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

A student of Shikler's for five years, Groh, 35, is one of a handful of young artists to study with Shikler. About every four months, he has a session with Shikler, and stays in New York for two weeks to a month.

Shikler helped Groh make dramatic changes in his style.

"Before Aaron, my paintings were very Southern," he said. "It looked like I had painted them about 160 years ago. They were beautiful, but didn't have glitz and power."

Most great portraits are simple, with great design, Groh said. Portraits should not create curiosity about the china or flowers in the background, but center on the person.

"Portraiture is all about designing a beautiful space," he said. "And usually you have a good-looking subject, and that helps."

Beautiful people pay thousands to have their portraits hang over their mantels.

Groh's fees start at $3,500 for a 16-by-20, a colored drawing costs $5,000, and a full-length painting costs $15,000. Some portraits range from $2,000 up to $15,000.

"I've realized that dreams do come true," Groh said. "My greatest goal was to study under this great man (Shikler), and it seemed like an impossible dream. But he looked at my portfolio and it seemed like an impossible dream. But he looked at my portfolio and thought highly of me."

Groh settled on portraiture only recently, after spending years focusing on southern Louisiana landscapes, using the techniques of the old masters to present the view of his surroundings.

"I've seen many artists, but I think he's one who has special talents," said Taylor Clark of Taylor Clark Galleries in Baton Rouge. "He has a very bright future as an artist, and we think very highly of him."

Groh was the first Louisiana painter whose work was accepted by Sotheby's for auction in Los Angeles, and he believes his timeless technique is the reason for his acceptance.

"Two generations from now we will see what art pieces will still be around," Groh said. "Hopefully mine will be included in the great works."

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