

Now, Picture This Trends: For celebrities who take up painting, which comes first, their renown or their art?

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Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Los Angeles, Calif.

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Date: May 27, 1990

Start Page: 1

Section: View; PART-E; View Desk

Text Word Count: 1869

Document Text

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On a recent night in Beverly Hills, crowds stood patiently behind velvet ropes on the sidewalk, waiting for admittance. Limousines lined the curb. Doormen checked their clipboards. Waiters cruised with silver salvers of shrimp and pate. Security guards with walkie-talkies kept things under control.

The opening of a new discotheque? The premiere party for Hollywood's latest blockbuster?

Hardly. The place was the Circle Gallery, and the occasion was an invitation-only art opening for singer Donna Summer. Her driving version of "She Works Hard for the Money" was playing loudly, but it couldn't compete with the din of several hundred guests, trailing clouds of Giorgio perfume as they cheek-kissed their way past her canvases.

"Who knows the mystery of why so few of us are touched with sparks of genius and prodigious talent? Donna Summer . . . is a Renaissance woman."-Jack Solomon, president and founder of Circle Fine Art Corp.

Summer was in the back of the gallery, working hard for the media. She smiled patiently but nervously as a dozen photographers snapped her photo with other celebrities like O. J. Simpson, Micky Dolenz of the Monkees, Carlo Ponti, Red Buttons, and Charlene Tilton of "Dallas." It was the third leg of an "artist's tour" for Summer, one that had already taken her to the Circle Galleries in San Diego and Bal Harbour, Fla.

"The thing I like about painting, as opposed to singing, is that it lets me grow at my own pace," said Summer, 41, who has been painting as a hobby for 15 years. "It lets me use my techniques and designs, and my own personal sense of taste."

Summer met Jack Solomon at the New York Art Exposition last year. From there, she said, "everything just fell into place."

Gallery officials were prepared to take purchases by check and major credit card. The paintings weren't inexpensive. Two large acrylics, "Hard for the Money" and "Jazz Man," were tagged at \$45,000 apiece.

Other watercolors like "Good Things and Watermelon" and "Life's Like a Delicate Flower," were in the \$2,500 range. The combined price tag for the exhibit's 37 works of art was \$474,400-an average of \$12,821 apiece.

The tour was Summer's first exhibition.

"I'd like to be known as an artist who acts rather than an actor who paints."-Tony Curtis.

"I would rather be known as an artist who acts than an actress who paints."-Elke Sommer.

For young painters who haven't found success in the art market, there now seems to be a shortcut.

Record a disco album. Star in an action-adventure film. Perform in a situation comedy.

For years, people like Frank Sinatra, Joni Mitchell, and Tony Bennett have become known as "celebrity painters"-actors and singers who also pick up a brush now and then. And the ranks are growing. This month alone, Summer and actress Ann Sothern opened their first L. A. exhibitions, and Sylvester Stallone provided a preview of his work, scheduled to go on exhibit in August at Beverly Hills' Hansen Gallery.

(One might note that the actor-to-artist process doesn't seem to work in reverse-with the exception of media-loving Andy Warhol, who played himself in an episode of "The Love Boat" and appeared in television ads for diet Coke.)

If there's one thing that all these people have in common, it's a desire to have their art appraised and appreciated

for what it is-not for who they are. However, other beginning painters rarely have their works launched with lavish parties, their openings covered by "Entertainment Tonight" or their first canvases up for sale in the \$25,000-\$50,000 range.

Which raises the question: Are celebrity paintings, as some cynics have suggested, merely five-figure autographs?

According to gallery owner Dan Saxon, of L.A.'s Saxon-Lee Gallery, celebrity art shows are the canvas equivalent of vanity presses.

"It isn't that these people don't take their art seriously. I'm sure some do," says Saxon. "But they approach it in a non-serious way. They promote their work as a celebrity. If that's the route they choose, fine, but it doesn't leave room to be judged as an artist."

Saxon claims to have been approached in the past by several spokesmen for celebrities. "They've guaranteed that everything will be sold, and they say you'll make a quick \$50,000 or \$100,000," says Saxon. "But I can't do it. I mean, I love money, but that's prostituting yourself. It hurts, believe me."

One thing, it seems, that all celebrity painters have in common is a distaste for the C-word. Don't call them celebrity painters.

"That's not a term she likes," said one gallery official, when asked about Donna Summer's move into art. "(She's) very concerned about being labeled a celebrity artist like Red Skelton or Tony Curtis. She wants her artwork to stand on its own."

"I chafe when people use the term celebrity artist," Curtis told an interviewer last year. His inaugural L.A. exhibit was held at the Beverly Hilton in April, 1989, and guests like Norman Lear, Berry Gordy, and Zsa Zsa Gabor were among those who bought 53 of the actor's works. The artist's share of the proceeds at the Beverly Hilton show was reported by Variety to have surpassed \$500,000.

Not all celebrity painters do as well as Curtis, who had sold more than \$2 million worth of canvases even before his Los Angeles exhibit. (Curtis, like Anthony Quinn and Red Skelton, is represented exclusively by Center Art Galleries-Hawaii.)

A popular outlet for many celebrity painters is the charity auction. The result: exposure for the artist, money for the charity, and a chance for fans to own an original Frank Sinatra oil or Dinah Shore watercolor.

Sinatra, who has never had a gallery show, has proved to be a boon to charity art auctions in need of name-brand canvases. One of his works, auctioned in Washington to benefit an anti-drug group, fetched \$25,000. Another, auctioned in April for the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center in Rancho Mirage, brought \$17,000.

Other celebrity artists exhibit on the walls of L.A. nightspots-canvas as counterpoint to plates of pasta. Nicky Blair's, a West Hollywood eatery popular with celebrities, has displayed the works of Anthony Quinn, Curtis, and Sylvester Stallone. Stallone himself showed up last month to Magic Marker his signature on a large canvas at the opening of blak:bloo, a new private club on Sunset Boulevard.

"One would call her work a cross between primitive and Impressionism."

"Critics say she lights up a canvas the way she lights up a screen."-From the invitation to Ann Sothorn's first exhibition.

Despite the hyperbole, art critics have generally reacted to these efforts the way that theater critics did when '50s bombshell Jayne Mansfield recorded an album of Shakespeare's soliloquies-that is, with raised eyebrows, if not actual derision or outrage.

Director David Lynch, a longtime painter with actual art training, debuted his work publicly in New York in 1987 to fairly good reviews. His second show, however, at New York's Leo Castelli Gallery, was trounced by the New York Times. And when he opened an exhibit of his paintings at the James Corcoran Gallery in Santa Monica last fall, ARTnews critic Pamela Hammond found the overall exhibit "generated less by the maturity of the work than by the fame of its creator."

Other celebrity painters might have been glad to rate any kind of a mention in the New York Times. Art dealer James Corcoran defended Lynch in the press, saying: "Artists tend to be so dedicated that they have a hard time with the idea that someone could do art-and do it well-while maintaining a career in another field."

Actor Dick Gautier ("Get Smart," "When Things Were Rotten") is a painter and caricaturist who has written two books on the subject, "The Art of Caricature" and "The Creative Cartoonist." Says Gautier: "Often actors have three or four months when they don't work at all, and many people use that time to paint. They're often not getting the

gratification they need from the business."

Gautier also points out that celebrity painters are nothing new. Several decades ago, according to him, one group of actor-painters met regularly to work together and critique each other's work. They included Ralph Bellamy, Henry Fonda, and Claire Trevor.

"One interesting thing I've noticed," he adds, "is that very few people (in the industry) are abstractionists. Most of them paint fairly straightforwardly. Painting in abstract makes you look like a dabbler or a dauber unless you're already an artist."

"Maybe if I'd been better at it and had more style, I might have turned to art for a full-time living. My wife also reminds me that I probably would have starved."-Jonathan Winters in the introduction to his book of paintings, "Hang-Ups."

Being a lesser Hollywood light-the type of celebrity who appears on "Hollywood Squares"-doesn't preclude a chance of achieving some success as an artist. Elke Sommer was once known mainly as the star of '60s films like "Boy, Did I Get a Wrong Number," but her naive-primitivist canvases have been shown in several dozen one-woman shows around the United States and Europe.

Sommer, who with Curtis is one of the most successful celebrity painters, had her first show at L.A.'s McKenzie Gallery in 1968 (under the pseudonym "E. Swartz"). Since then, she's produced limited-edition collectors' plates, and hosted an instructional show, "Painting with Elke Sommer," which aired on PBS in the mid-1980s.

"I paint peasants with big hands and feet," Sommer said in *Collectibles Illustrated*, explaining that this was her memory of the working people among whom she lived in Germany.

Comedian Jonathan Winters, a longtime painter, studied art for four years at the Dayton Art Institute. His acrylics are surrealist, with playful titles like "Two Birds Watching Doris Day's Cat and Dog Drown" and "Pathetic Black Moon with Awful Vase with Dead Flowers In It." Like Sommer's, they generally sell in the \$5,000 range.

For fans who can't afford the real thing, collecting glossy books is a good way to bring celebrity art to your coffee table. Winters' works were published in 1988 in a book called "Hang-Ups"-with, of course, a requisite launch party at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Up next on the celebrity art book scene: Frank Sinatra's "A Man and His Art," scheduled for November publication by Winters' editor, Random House's David Rosenthal.

Celebrity canvases, be they Fauvist or photorealist, tend to have one thing in common: They're expensive.

When rock star John Cougar Mellencamp held his first exhibit at Beverly Hills' Triangle Gallery last October, he claimed: "I've tried many types of paintings, trying to find some truth on the canvas, but as of yet I have failed to do so. It is probably too soon for me to be showing my work."

The modesty, however, didn't translate to the price tags on Mellencamp's paintings, which ranged from \$8,000 to \$25,000. He had been painting for one year.

[Illustration]

PHOTO: COLOR, "Scarlet Starlet" was one of 37 works exhibited on Donna Summer's "artist's tour." Price: \$22,000.; PHOTO: COLOR, Donna Summer was on hand for the invitation-only show.; PHOTO: "Girl in White Hat" and "Mother and Child" were among the works by Ann Sothern, below, in a showing at Elizabeth's Staircase gallery in West Hollywood. It was Sothern's first L.A. exhibit. / TONYA EVATT

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