



Jonathan H. Kent personally puts the final touch on every re-created canvas with varnishes and other techniques. LARRY DAVIS / Los Angeles Times

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Turning Forgery Into a Fine Art

■ **Consumer trends:** Jonathan H. Kent's Re-Creations of Impressionists & Old Masters has a clientele of decorators and celebrities. 'People think better a good re-creation than an original that I can never afford.'

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

On Robertson Boulevard south of Melrose, among the shops offering fine linens, designer furniture and Italian pottery, there is an awning announcing Jonathan H. Kent. The window display would catch the eye of anyone even mildly aware of art galleries in Los Angeles, because it is filled by a large canvas of a woman holding a bundle of callas, a painting by Diego Rivera that is on prominent display at the Norton Simon Museum of Art.

One pauses to take a closer look and notices other pictures familiar from museum visits and art history books: Henri Rousseau's jungle scenes, George Stubbs' fox hounds, Sir Thomas Lawrence's apple-cheeked children. Lots of saucy girls by Renoir. These are neither posters nor photographs, but paintings and suddenly one realizes that the lot of them are genuine fakes. Re-Creations of

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KENT

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Impressionists & Old Masters, as Jonathan H. Kent calls his business.

Kent himself is eager to explain. But instead of the plummy English accent you might associate with such a name, he speaks in heavily accented Italian. It turns out that Giovanni Papini, his real name, has re-created himself, moving here from Rome four years ago to start this operation. Business has been steady. While contemporary art galleries all over town are cutting back, he is doubling the size of his quarters.

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Kent, who is uncomfortable with his real name, explains his confidence in this gallery of artificial art by citing predictions from the erstwhile bestseller "Megatrends 2000," by John Naisbett. Quoting from the book, Kent asserts that the public's interest in art and museums is escalating, yet we live in a world that is largely re-created.

"Film and television are re-created life," he says. People "have re-created cheese without the fat and eggs without the cholesterol. People must be ready to accept a re-creation of art that is museum quality."

Herein lies the rub. The originals may be museum quality but the copies certainly are not. They are competently rendered from reproductions. Kent refers to the method as "alla prima," which means without the aid of a slide projector. Individual painters who are proud of their handiwork often sign their own names—K. Rogers where it should say Jean-Honoré Fragonard—and an annoyed Kent has to have them removed.

Copyright is not a problem, Kent says, if a painter has been dead for 50 years. In the case of a Picasso, however, Kent changes scale and some details so the reproduction is not exact. All works are labeled "re-creations" on their backs.

Prices for paintings generally range from \$500 to \$3,000 and Kent has a clientele of decorators and celebrities. He says Whoopi Goldberg just bought an Impressionistic painting, although she could not be reached for confirmation.

There has been much critical writing of late dissecting the notion of originality in art. But a visit to the home of re-created Impressionists and Old Masters might cause those die-hard followers of Jean Baudrillard to recant and

plead for mercy. For one thing, the masterpieces are conveniently re-scaled to fit a modern home. The duplicate of Picasso's statuesque life-sized "Les Femmes d'Alger" could hang in an apartment dining room. A copy of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" is about the same length as a sofa, which is to say about half the size of the original.

The Botticelli and a copy of Fragonard's "The Swing" have been sold to clients in Japan. Some 25% of Kent's business is done with what he calls a Pacific Rim clientele. Another 30% is done with interior designers. Forty percent of his work is custom-ordered by people who want specific works of art.

Kent is not unique in this business, which he readily acknowledges. There are variations on this copycat theme in galleries with operations in New York and Europe; indeed, museum shops often re-create decorative objects as well as the masterpieces from their collections.

"Copies have always been sold," he acknowledges with a twinkle in his eye, "unfortunately as originals."

Snappily outfitted in checked sport coat, tan slacks and expensive brown loafers, Kent is a convincing salesman. Originally from Milan, he studied painting with a master in the south of France.

"He taught me to make paintings look old," says Kent, who personally finishes every canvas with varnishes and other techniques. Proudly pointing to an unfinished pseudo-Renoir, its colors still too obvious and bright, he explains that his painters' work requires his final touch.

As Papini, Kent ran a similar operation in Rome for 25 years. Four years ago, he divorced his

wife and moved to L.A.

"I decided to change my life and find new horizons." This improbable beneficiary of the cliché of the freestyle Southern California life is now 58, but looks a decade younger. He confesses fondness for sports—swimming, windsurfing and rollerblading. *Rollerblading?* "Oh yes, I keep my rollerblades in the car and after work I go to Venice to skate."

Kent opens bound photo albums to reveal the interior of what he calls a \$20-million home. The room is dimly lit and glamorously furnished with what may or may not be antiques. Hung high on the walls in gold frames are the dark, glossy surfaces of canvases that look vaguely like some hard-to-place Old Master works. Asked if clients confess that their paintings are copies, Kent shrugs a little and allows that they probably do not.

If Kent's clients can afford multimillion-dollar homes, why not invest in real art? Clients "may need eight or 10 paintings and it becomes very expensive. Auctions are difficult unless you know what

you are doing," says Kent.

"In my gallery, there are about 100 paintings, which gives them a good choice."

Kent's entrepreneurial instincts have led to some intriguing results in the area of market research. "The pictures are carefully chosen to follow the taste of the people. I put in a computer all my sales. I discovered which sizes and subjects I sell the most and which colors. Yellow does not sell. So I removed yellow from my life. Red, green and blue sell."

