



PAINTINGS COURTESY STUDIOPET (TWO ON LEFT) AND BEST IN SHOW (TWO ON RIGHT)

Including Fido in the Family Photos

From paintings to photography, pet portraiture lets you showcase your love for an animal companion

By Gabriela Marks



Pets are often considered members of the immediate family, particularly in the Bay Area, where more than half of the households at least one animal companion. So it's no surprise that these pets are getting their very own professional portraits.

"I have a lot of clients looking to commemorate and treasure their furry friends in a piece of art," explains Stephanie Lam, the artist behind Los Gatos-based StudioPet, a company that creates portraits of your furry family members. "As a pet lover, it's great to see people showing their affection for their pets in such a creative, unique way. As an artist, it's encouraging to see more of the general public taking an interest in original art."

For those who can afford it, a custom pet portrait is a distinctive way to express your love for your animal companion. Portraits are popular nationwide, but particularly so in the Bay Area, where pet owners spent almost \$1.5 billion on pet-related expenses in 2007.

"Portraits are a very special and unique item," explains Richard Shiu, co-owner of Best in Show, a San Francisco pet products store that offers custom pet portraits. "You really need to be completely devoted to your pet to make this investment."

Picking a portrait style

Once you've decided to immortalize your pet, it's time to decide which kind of pet portrait to order. There are various types available, including photography; acrylic, oil or watercolor paintings; pastel paintings, which are done in chalk pastels on watercolor paper; and custom paper portraits, which are created using carefully placed handmade papers.

Shiu says he gets the most orders for dog portraits and one pet per portrait is more popular than several pets in one piece. Lam agrees.

"Most of my orders are for dog portraits, although I paint cats, birds, horses and other animals too," said Lam, who visits with local clients to meet and photograph their pets before starting to paint.

"I love this part of the process because I get to absorb a sense of the animal's personality that I can later use in the portrait."

At Best in Show, you can get the process started with advance payment and several photographs, which you email to them. The process generally takes four to six weeks and costs \$250 to \$600, depending on the size and type of portrait.

Display your devotion

Although the type of portrait is an important decision, so too is its placement in your home. Many people hang their custom pet portraits in their living rooms, according to Shiu and Lam.

"I regularly receive requests to have the background colors match the decor of a home," says Lam. "Most of the time clients have a spot already picked out in their home for the portrait."

Karen Adams, a dog breeder in Salt Lake City, Ut., ordered a 30-inch-by-30-inch custom oil-on-canvas painting of her Frenchie, Tyrone, from StudioPet, which she hangs in her dining room.

"I have a lot of French bulldog paintings, but I never had one of my dogs before," explains Adams. "I always wanted a painting that just captures the expression of my dog. Looking

at that painting, it's just like looking into his face."

Many pet owners, like Adams, order custom portraits as artwork for their home, while others order a portrait as a way to remember lost companions. About 10 to 20 percent of Lam's clients are ordering a portrait to commemorate a dog that's passed away. Some also order portraits as gifts for loved ones and their loving creature companions.

"Everyone approaches it differently," explains Lam. "But they're very much in love with their cat or dog. The most unusual request I received was to have the dog's actual fur embedded in the portrait."

Shiu says one of the less typical requests he received was from a couple visiting from the

U.K. via Las Vegas, where they got married and were honeymooning.

"They made a side trip to San Francisco to shop specifically at Best in Show because they saw the paper pet portraits on our site," he says. "They ended up ordering one of their dog and I shipped it to the U.K. Now that's a devoted dog lover."

Whether you order a custom portrait as a commemoration of a beloved pet or a gift to yourself or others, it's all about capturing the essence of your pet.

"It's an honor, really, to be the person chosen to translate the adoration and love a person has for their pet onto canvas," said Lam. "I love being part of that process."