

a horse of a different color

story & photos by janet moran

Karen Kersten's first memories of drawing go back to age 3.

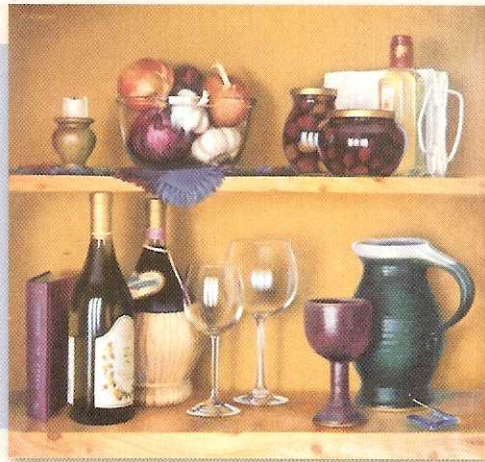
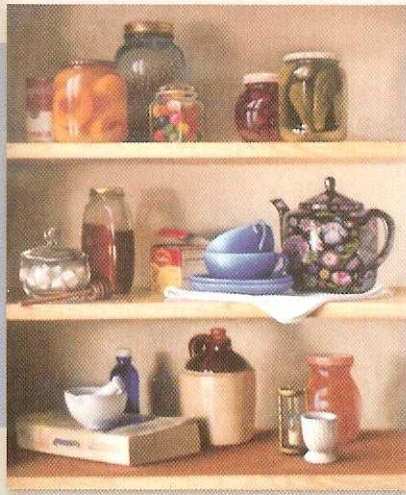
"It (the figure) had a head with legs attached — no body — and I thought 'something does not look right here.'

"I was a drawer," remembers Karen, "who never

seemed to have enough paper as a child. My sister and I were always drawing things on scraps of paper."

Watching Karen paint now is similar to viewing an experienced ballerina and athlete. Her stance at the easel is at once focused, steady and intense, her





Focused and graceful: Karen Kersten is both artist and horsewoman. Her works include: "Natasha and Cheetah" (far left), "Shelf Life" and "Cabin's Cabinet" (above), "Jackie and Alex" and "Emergence" (bottom right).

hands firmly hold her palette and brushes; she is fully prepared to interact with her canvas. Yet she is also gracefully gentle as she moves forward to stroke and then ever so slightly retreats to evaluate what is in front of her. One knows the image is in her mind as her hands feel the expression she wants to create. "It is not just the subject I'm painting; it's the way I feel when I think about it."

A professional artist, Karen works with several mediums, but particularly enjoys the challenges of expressive portraiture, the symbolism and design of still life and the pleasures of creating nature in landscapes.

"I paint lovely things to pass along the pretty things in life. There is enough ugliness around us," she says. Oil painting is her favorite medium, but she also uses pigment chalk, colored pencils and stained glass to express her ideas. In addition to commissioned projects, she is also an exhibitor at various galleries, a participant in juried art shows, an instructor and an avid equestrian.

"Horses taught me to draw,

as I always loved them and wanted to express my love for them — I wanted to get it right," she said. "I feel like I have come full circle in my life because I can now paint them the way I want."

Her equine oil paintings attest to the excellence for which she has been striving. Karen not only paints horses, she also owns two horses, "Chewy" an Arabian and "Vinny" a Friesian (named after, of course, Vincent Van Gough). She shows the same desire "to get it right" in her dressage riding, driving training, trail riding and endurance riding as she does in her painting. Hours of instruction and practice have resulted in impressive results, but "there is always more to learn," she says with a broad smile.

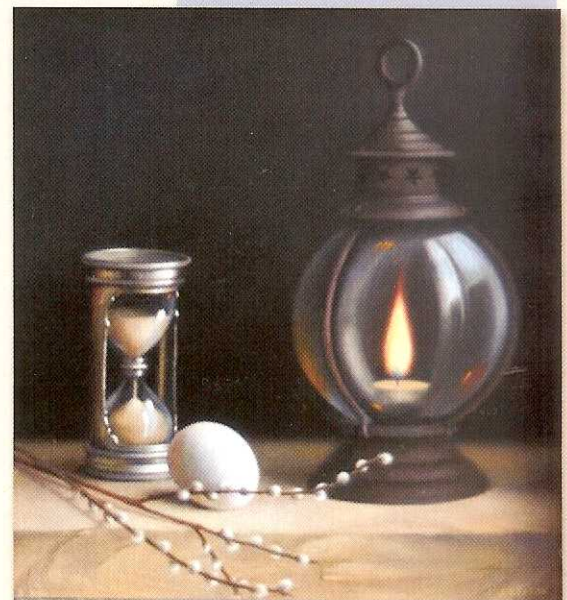
Married after high school to husband Keith, art was not an active part of her life for many years. She worked as a dental assistant while Keith attended and graduated from the Culinary Institute of America as well as the University of Minnesota. Karen always enjoyed craft projects at home and took

classes occasionally to learn different techniques, but she had not yet discovered her true calling artistically.

Soon two children, Amy, now 32, and Dan, now 28, were born and Karen was a stay-at-home mom. But, the need to express her creativity in greater depth could not be denied any longer.

While at home, Karen began her stained glass work in a home studio. For six years she studied the medium and created commissioned lamps and windows. Once Amy and Dan were in school full time, she returned to her work as a dental assistant. But she knew that once again in her life she "had to get it right."

After a visit to a communi-



ty college and a career assessment class she met an artist in graphic design who happened to have an interest in portraiture. Karen had found her future career.

In 1992, she began taking a few classes at the Patricia Jerde Studio of Fine Arts (later to become the Minnesota River School of Fine Art). Soon, with the support of her family, she enrolled full time and studied at the school for five years. Her days were filled with "hands-on" draw-



ing and painting instruction as well as work in her studio at the school. She studied still life, landscapes and figure drawing, but her emphasis quickly became portraiture. "I knew I was done with being a formal student when Jerde asked me to become an instructor." For the next six years she taught drawing and painting.

In 2004, Karen and Keith moved to Pine River on the Whitefish Chain, painting daily in her personally designed home studio. "My art is a lifestyle for me. It structures my life — finding time for my studio work and my horses. I'm always looking and thinking 'would I like to paint that?' I'm always looking for something to paint."

Karen's painting style is the 16th century "classical realism," practiced by such masters as Leonardo da Vinci, Jan Vermeer and John Singer Sargent; modeled after the "French ateliers" in France, Italy and Russia. Popular before the Impressionists, the style emphasizes the use of color, value, hue and composition. Present day artists also painting in this style are Jeff Larson, Russell Norberg, Joe Paquet and Richard Schmidt. Karen has had "Master's" classes with Joe Paquet and Jeff Hurinenko. Hurinenko was also a primary teacher for Karen at the Hurinenko Paquet Studio in St. Paul.

When asked about her "inspiration," the normally extroverted artist becomes quietly thoughtful and looks out her large window. "It's all visual for me," she says. "It is the visual that inspires me to express it with oils or pencil."

Karen's studio is filled with visual expression. Gorgeous frames surround canvases depicting still lifes of fruit, hanging pots and books as well as verdant landscape scenes, but a visitor is immediately drawn to the two large portraits of Dan and Amy.

One can see Karen's passion for people. "I want to capture a bit of that person on canvas without words," she explains. Yet, each canvas seems to tell the viewer a story about the subject that is instantly understandable. "I faithfully paint what I see — seeing subtle variances of the eye reveals the subject's character." As a teacher of painting and drawing, Karen enjoys



Mixed media: Besides oils, Karen works in pigment chalk, colored pencil and stained glass. "Zach and Anna" (upper left) was done in oils.

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working with students who have a desire to learn. "I am adding a facet to their life. I give them a tidbit that can make them happy."

Karen believes her artistic talent is a very special gift. "God gave me this gift, I am honoring His gift to me. I appreciate that I am able to use it," she said. She accepted her "gift," but has worked hard to "train her eye," to "master the handling of paint and materials" and is ready to view other artists who, "are better than I am, as I can always learn from them."

The message board at

Benvelle Equestrian Center, where she rides and boards her horses, frequently displays small sketches with congratulations, reminders or greetings for other stable clients. Her other art pieces can be seen at Mary Tuomi Gallery, Brainerd, Aunt Bea's, Crosslake, Benvelle Equestrian Center, Pequot Lakes, Lakes Latte2, Pequot Lakes, Four Winds Horse Center, Brainerd and Carver Bearder Art Gallery, Minneapolis. Karen can be reached at: kkersten@uslink.net or 218.543.6977.

Janet Moran

Janet Moran lives in Nisswa. She enjoys equine- and people-oriented photography, horseback riding, gardening and cooking. Jan is a volunteer with the Mounted Eagles Therapeutic Riding Program, an organization that provides riding opportunities for adults and children with physical, emotional and developmental challenges.



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