



A passion for plants and paint

Whimsical art invites viewers to step inside the garden

BY JANET CAGGIANO
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Don't stand too close to Timothy Martin's botanical paintings, or they may just suck you in.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. "That's what I want," Martin said. "It's an invitation to come inside the piece and relax."

Martin, a former construction worker as well as an art teacher, uses oil paints to reinterpret objects, such as chairs and benches. The whimsical pieces feature everything from a tiger taking a nap on a lily settee to a family of rabbits nestled together on a daffodil bench.

"I want my paintings to always be a surprise," said Martin, 58, who

lives in Hunterdon County, N.J. "The closer you look, the more you see."

Nearly 30 of his paintings are on view through May 28 in the Education and Library Complex at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden. Garden officials saw Martin's work at the Philadelphia Flower Show last year and invited him to come to Richmond.

Look closely and you'll spot a waterfall flowing into a vase of white tulips, chairs with pansies as legs, teapots and goldfinches on soft seats, country scenes painted in a basket of roses and sheep grazing on a Queen Anne bench.

"The first thing my horticultural eye sees is the accuracy of the botany in the paintings," said Tom Brinda, the botanical garden's assistant director. "He's taken his knowledge of garden design and history and woven

it all together. If I could create a setting like that here at Lewis Ginter, I would."

To find out more about Martin's passion for plants and paint, we chatted with him while he was installing the Lewis Ginter exhibit.

How do you come up with your ideas for your paintings?

"My wife [Janis-Burenga] and I live in a farming community on five acres. Every morning, I walk our two dogs by the creek on our property. I try to see something I hadn't seen before — an element I can bring home and work into my designs."

When did you become interested in painting?

"I was finger painting since I was a kid. I always wanted to be an artist. My father bought me my first paint-



"Garden Party — Pewter Poppy"

Martin Exhibit
Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, 1000 N. 1st St., Richmond, Va.
10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily through May 28.
6-\$10.
LewisGinter.org or (804) 644-1234
www.timothymartin.com or (880) ext. 203.

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When did you become interested in painting?

"I was finger painting since I was a kid. I always wanted to be an artist. My father bought me my first painting box when I was a freshman in high school. He knew I'd never be a mathematician."

Why botanical art?

"My grandparents had a farm in New Jersey, and I used to spend my summers there. My grandmother was the original Earth Mother. She loved plants. Her excitement was instilled in me."

What did you do before becoming an artist?

"I painted on and off most of my life . . . mostly landscapes and portraits . . . and spent two summers in Italy. I taught elementary school art [after graduating from Trenton State in 1971], worked in advertising, was a dental ceramist and did construction work."

How did you get your big break?

"In the late '80s, I painted my first chair for a show in New Hope [Pennsylvania]. It was a wing chair made of wings with a bird's nest as the seat. At that stage, it was a pun. It was an idea I was playing with. It was a literal interpretation of a word.

"But people loved it. I thought I had something here. In 1993, my work was chosen for a Tiffany's window display in Manhattan. Then my work went to a gallery in London."

Why has your work become popular?

"It's something different. I think it goes to that comfort element. People associate chairs with comfort. But these aren't really chairs or seats. They are part of the environment I love to create."

How much do your paintings cost?

"That first wing chair painting sold for \$400. Now it would go for about \$8,000. Most original paintings are \$4,000 to \$30,000. Reproductions are less - from a couple hundred to a couple thousand."

Timothy Martin Exhibit

Where: Lewis **Ginter** Botanical **Garden**, 1800 Lakeside Ave.

When: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily through May 28.

Admission: \$6-\$10.

Details: www.lewisginter.org or (804) 262-9887.

The artist: www.timothymartin.com or (609) 397-4880, ext. 203.

Contact staff writer Janet Caggiano at jcaggiano@timesdispatch.com or (804) 649-6157.

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