

# It's only natural

Posted on February 14, 2012 • By [Molly Petrilla](#)



Timothy Martin '71

Little **Timothy Martin '71** sat balanced on top of the monkey bars after school one day when he had an epiphany. For months, the first-grader had been swiping clothespins from his family clothesline and carving them into miniature boats and figures. As he rested atop the bars, waiting for the school bus to show up and reflecting on his latest carving success, he thought, *Wouldn't it be great to just make things for the rest of my life?* “Now here I am, 63 years old, and I’m still playing,” Martin says. “That’s the way I look at my art—as something that’s as fun and natural for me as it was when I was a kid.”

Natural has a double meaning in this case. Dubbed “The Naturalist” and compared to “a modern-day Thoreau” with a paintbrush, Martin paints inanimate objects—chairs and musical instruments, mostly—into outdoor scenes and allows nature to envelop them. Under Martin’s brush, a patio chair’s legs and arms are made up of yellow and purple irises; sunny daffodils layer into a bright settee; a high-backed, stuffed armchair is formed from feathers, with three small blue eggs nested in the center of the seat; and clustered hydrangeas create an inviting teapot.

“I take classic forms and reinterpret them—bring them back into their organic state,” Martin explains. “What did the designer of a chair see when he was designing the first chair? He looked at nature for his inspiration. I’m reversing the process: I’m looking at the object and trying to see what the original designer was inspired by to create that shape.”



In 2000, Steinway & Sons commissioned Martin to paint one of their baby grand pianos.

Intertwining the material and natural worlds has gained Martin a loyal following and helped him land a number of high-profile clients. His big break came in the early 1990s when Gene Moore—the vice president of Tiffany & Co. who’s considered the father of modern window display—commissioned a series of paintings for the prominent Manhattan jewelry store’s front windows. Martin created a series of chair paintings—including a lush green lily pad chair with fish for legs—and later debuted his nature-meets-instruments series (think violins formed by sumptuous grape vines and French horns with flowers for bells) at Tiffany’s, too.

He built upon that new instrument theme in 2000, when Steinway & Sons commissioned him to paint one of their baby grand pianos. Not a picture of the piano, mind you. An actual piano. After working out a few logistics—how to make paint stick to that famously high-shellac surface, how to access the instrument’s underside—Martin created a rich summer scene with bright flowers and vivid green leaves and sunny blue sky. He was actually in the midst of painting that piano on 9/11 and, as a result, added two stalks of holly hocks on the lid to represent the Twin Towers.

Since the success of his Steinway project, Martin’s paintings have been featured at the Philadelphia Flower Show and by the Mona Bismarck Foundation in Paris. And just this year, his work appeared in the windows of the upscale retailer Hermes’ flagship store in Paris.

Despite his cosmopolitan success, Martin says he will always be “tied to nature—that’s the only place I’m comfortable.” He draws inspiration from long walks through rural New Jersey, where he both lives and paints. “I try to find something I’ve never noticed before whenever I go out,”

he adds. “It can be the way a shadow lays across a field or the way light hits something. I’m always looking for another key, another part of the puzzle, and I try to look a little deeper each day.”