

Furniture As Canvas

Two Richmond painters use history and inspiration to transform furniture into art

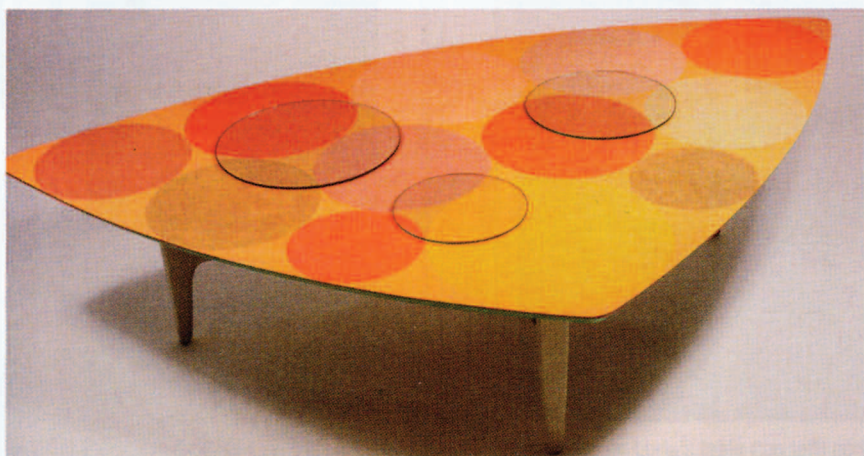
BY TINA COPLAN

Before Catherine Roseberry and Rob Womack became partners in life and work, Roseberry came home one day and noticed that the knobs on the kitchen stove had turned red. She was amused. Womack, who had painted the knobs, then began painting bigger household objects—small tables, a kitchen utility cabinet. Soon after, he brought home a quirky table and chair from a flea market; channeling the pieces' folk-art style, he painted them in a crazy-quilt pattern. "That's when I thought about how the idea could be applied to other furniture—what you might do with a 19th-century chest or what approach might work on a 1960s coffee table," recalls Womack, who was later joined by Roseberry in the process.

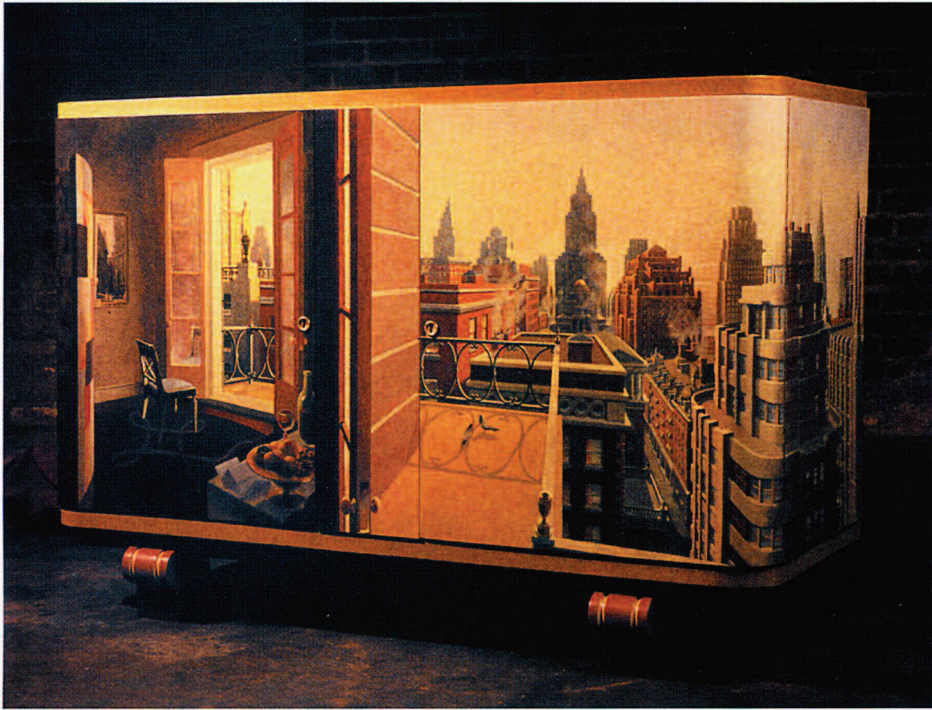
Twenty-five years after that first eureka moment—and the couple's marriage—they continue to pursue this ingenious art form together. "Right from the beginning we had an interest in art history and furniture design and how we could link them," says Womack, who first learned about furniture periods during high school, when he worked for an antiques dealer. He and Roseberry met while both were studying painting at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, where they continue to live and work.

Their business is called *Coloratura*, defined as musical ornamentation for voice, especially with trills and runs. "We like the word—its reference to embellishment and color, and how jazz musicians have adopted it," Roseberry says.

Their paintings on furniture play on themes inspired by each piece. However, as independent artists, Womack and Roseberry follow different drummers. Roseberry's compositions mainly portray women's narratives, while Womack's work responds to the period when a piece was made. "I like doing research, finding out what was happening at the time in painting and applied arts—



Although most of their work is done on already-existing pieces, *Ofrenda al Mar* (top) is an exception. Commissioned for an apartment in Miami Beach, this folding screen—made with stained glass and enamel paint on wood—was inspired by the sea and sky. *Ouija* (above), incorporates a 1960s coffee table. Its shape inspired Rob Womack to paint an arrangement of circles and colors on its surface. Glass circles reminiscent of a Ouija board complete the piece.



textiles, ceramics, furniture, architecture,” he says. “That context, or an image, triggers an idea.”

In one of Womack’s most ambitious schemes, an Art Deco chest becomes a streamlined canvas for a sweeping urban panorama set in the 1930s. Vintage photographs of Rockefeller Center and Times Square, paintings by Edward Hopper and George Bellows, and graphic designs of the period all pass through the artist’s filter. The work’s evocative atmosphere and realism belie the fact that, as Womack points out, “It’s a fantasy. All my architectural pieces are imaginary, with a dream-like quality.” The piece, entitled *All Sound*, is part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Renwick Gallery collection.

Roseberry’s paintings relate an evolving personal and universal story about the female condition, sometimes harsh, but often rendered in soft pastel tones. On a chest of drawers from the 1940s, a woman peers from a window, eyeing a baby reaching up in another direction. Called *Evasive Joy*, the piece was inspired by Roseberry’s reflections on her own ability to bear a child. Roses with thorns embellish the picture, a nod to religious symbols in Madonna-and-child paintings, as well the artist’s own name.

In the studio located in the couple’s 19th-century home, an untouched chest awaits its destiny. With popped veneer, missing wood pieces and stains, it is prime material for their specialized art. “We would never touch a piece with an original patina or one that could be restored,” explains Womack, “but it has to be salvageable. We’re very selective because of the amount of time we’ll invest.” A simple coffee table takes four to six weeks; a highly complex design can take nine months to complete.

After repairing a piece, the artists apply up to 10 coats of interior enamel paint as a base, sanding between each coat. The fine painting is depicted with artist’s brushes, followed by two protective coats of varnish and wax. The finished, hand-polished surface is hard and durable enough for everyday use.

About half of Coloratura’s business is commissioned and generally involves furniture already in a client’s collection. Richmond residents Howard and Coral Gills had admired the artists’ work for years before deciding to commission a piece.



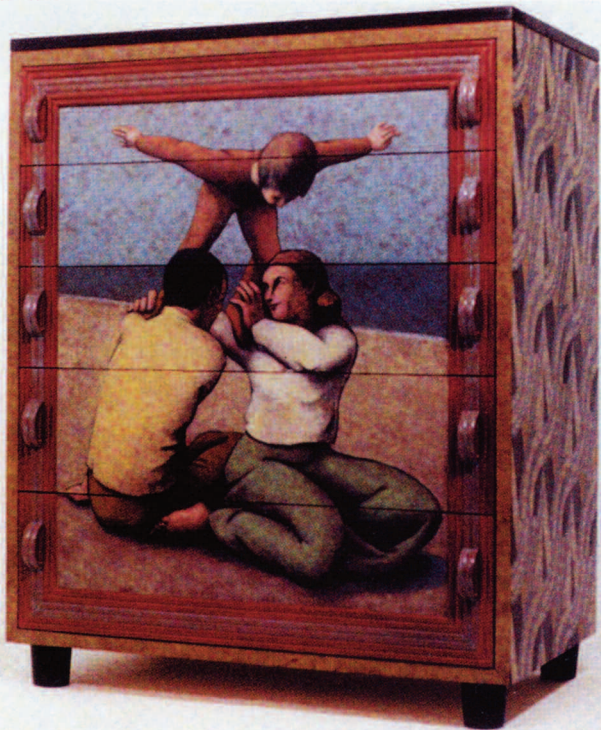
An Art Deco chest was the inspiration for *All Sound*, a panoramic 1930s cityscape painted by Rob Womack (top). “The challenge was weaving the colors and textures of an era into the painting,” he says. *All Sound* is in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Titled *Memoria*, a fall-front desk (above and right) depicts through paint the postcards and souvenirs of a trip to Italy, circa the 1920s, when the desk was made. Commissioned by a Richmond couple, the painting also includes references to the family’s personal history.





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Rob Womack and Catherine Roseberry (above) share a studio in their 19th-century Richmond home. Roseberry's compositions tend to be personal in theme, as in *Balancing Act* (right), which she describes as "a personal metaphor for the awakening independence of our own child." Similarly, *Elusive Joy* (top right) explores the relationship between mother and child, inspired by such artists as Raphael and Mary Cassatt, as well as by the artist's own feelings about child-bearing.



Womack and Roseberry visited the couple at home, discussed the clients' interests and experiences, and helped select a fall-front desk inherited from Howard Gills's grandfather. The artists returned a week later with books and reference materials; they indicated in general terms that the theme would be Italian. Three months later, when the finished piece was delivered, Coral Gills recalls, "We were delighted. We were giddy."

Titled *Memoria*, the desk had assumed a double life as a cabinet of curiosities—real interior cubby holes and trompe l'oeil exterior ones are filled with imagined souvenirs that might have been gathered on a trip to Italy in the 1920s—a period of time when Howard Gills's family did, in fact, travel there on a Grand Tour of Europe.

Incorporated among facsimile Majolica ceramics, Venetian glass and postcards with accurately rendered historic stamps, other trompe l'oeil objects relate to the clients' personal history. "They are meaningful only to us and our family, but beautiful to everyone who sees them," Coral Gills observes.

Asked about the artwork's appeal, she chuckles and repeats a friend's comment: "It will give your children something to fight over after you're gone."

For more information on Coloratura, call 804-321-0022 or visit the Web site www.coloraturafurniture.com. ❖

Writer Tina Coplan is based in Chevy Chase, Maryland.