

Collaboration

Text and photography by Mary Kaliski

Despite living hundreds of miles apart, Mark Murphy and Mary Grady O'Brien have forged a complementary relationship that taps their individual talents and works well for them.



Mary and Mark have forged a mutual admiration society.



Mary and Mark collaborated on this room full of furniture.

"We make each other better," said Mark about working with Mary. Quite some time ago, the year being vague for them both (1990 or so seems to be the consensus), Mary and Mark embarked upon a collaboration that has only grown stronger over the years. "We started on small boxes then graduated to larger pieces," said Mark. Admiring each other's skills, her painting and his craftsmanship with furniture, they wanted

to create work that would be enhanced by each other's talents.

"He's not interested in painting and I am not interested in making furniture," said Mary. "But we certainly admire and appreciate each other's work. I was not going to get tools and cut wood and he was not going to buy paints, but together it works."

"Recently we did some Hitchcock chairs," said Mark. "We did not have one particular chair in mind so I said, 'Do what-

ever you like.' When they came back I was blown away. Each chair was different.

"We always discuss things on the phone and decide what we are going to do," said Mark. "She'd point out a piece and I'd say, 'That's nice, but another has more interesting woodwork.' We'd go back and forth until we found the one we both liked."

"We are both attracted to American (furniture) and like the same time frame," Mary added,



Two sizes of decorated chests stand next to a rod back Windsor chair that features both a curved top along the back and "ears" along the back splat.



Mary's dolls pose on a c. late 1700-early 1800 settee. The chair is called a sack back because a burlap sack would be used across the back to keep out the cold. Mark made the furniture and Mary did the decorative painting.

"but Mark has a lot of other interests."
 Although their alliance has



been on pieces of Americana, Mark is urging Mary to become comfortable with painting on his Japanese furniture. "I have not convinced her yet, but we'll see."
 "My heart is in folk art," she responded. "Mark likes the Japanese style and wants me to do screens with him. I tend to like explicit patterns. Mark likes to work outside the box. He nudges me. Once he changed something on woven seat chairs we were working on. I said, 'You are really making me struggle,'

but it worked out very well. The closer to the original, the easier my job is, but Mark challenges me then I challenge myself."

There apparently are some loopholes in this harmony. Mark had a picture of a cow he asked Mary to reproduce on a pole screen. "She said, 'I don't like to paint cows,' but she did, and it turned out beautifully."

The ownership of the work has never been an issue for Mary and Mark. "I think we consider the sweat factor," said Mary.

"When we go to a show we bring all we have. If it is more about the painting, she's the owner," said Mark. "When I do boxes for her, Mary basically just gives me credit. When we do chairs they are more work for me so I generally keep the chairs. Ordinarily though, we have a record and then split it."

"I always keep one of the limited edition pieces, but otherwise we sell what we make," said Mary.

Mark makes the furniture in Oregon and puts on the background color. He ships it to Mary in Illinois. She does the decorative painting before sending it back to Mark, who does the aging and adds the hardware.

"The aging is difficult because I don't want to ruin Mary's painting," he said. "It is very important that the paint is dry, otherwise



The green chest replicates a Mahantango Pennsylvania Dutch chest from the early 1800s.

the aging will soften the paint."

In the end, there is a lot of give and take between them with the agreement that "I won't ask him to do a piece that he does not like and he won't ask me," Mary commented. "The piece we decide on has to be exciting to both of us." ■

All furnishings are 1-inch scale. Mary Grady O'Brien, 847-433-6062. Mark Murphy, 503-325-4112.