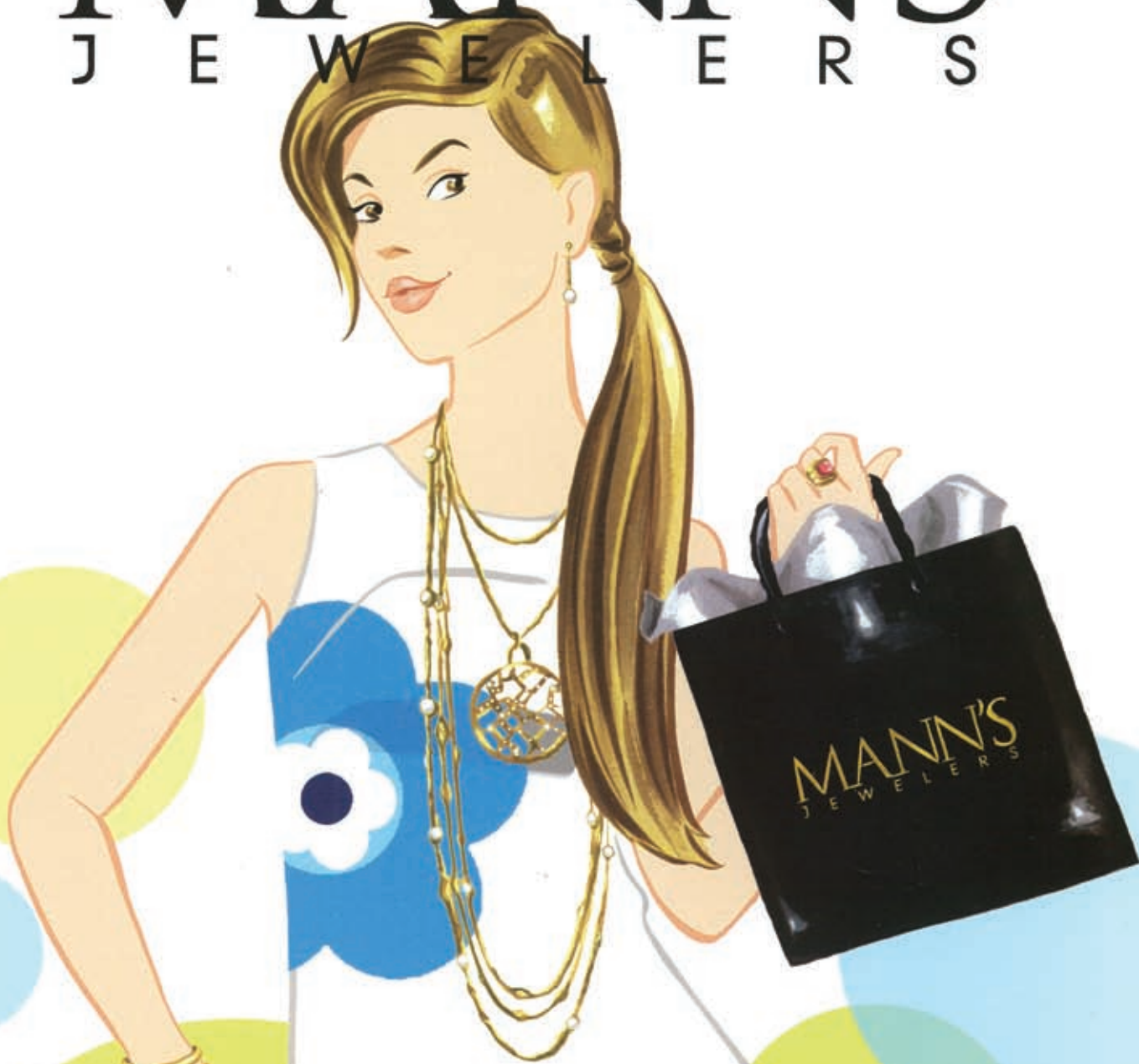


MANN'S

J E W E L E R S



Rick Muto: Bringing the Renaissance to Rochester

BY PAM SHERMAN

Rick Muto is a native Rochesterian who has devoted his career to changing the landscape of art in Rochester. Muto is a humble artist, focused more on the artists' process than on recognition. Now, after over thirty years of working in Rochester, he is about to be recognized internationally for his brilliance in re-creating a legendary Steinway piano for the great piano-maker. This self-described craftsman is a jewel that shines in Rochester. Nancy Mann, of Mann's Jewelers, says, "Rick is a world-class muralist who quietly enhances so many of Rochester's public and private spaces."

Rick Muto almost didn't choose to be an artist. As he explains it, when he was graduating from West Irondequoit High School in the 60's, his counselors discouraged him from pursuing art. Muto says, "It was a different generation." As a result, he quelled his burgeoning passion and took the conservative route, majoring in Russian language and literature at SUNY Oswego.

But he couldn't stop completely, so he continued drawing and painting independently. It wasn't until his senior year that he decided to take a ceramics course. An art professor, Paul Garland, saw

Muto's innate talent and encouraged him to take a studio design class and to double major in art.

Before he could finish that dual degree, however, tragedy struck Muto's family when his younger brother became ill with leukemia. Rick put his dreams on hold to help his family. But the experience of losing a loved one changed Muto's life forever, and he decided he had to pursue his art any way that he could.

Still, realizing dreams takes hard work and perseverance. Muto started out his career working in a traditional job in a furniture store, which turned out to be a prophetic move. The store recognized Muto's design talent and often let him design displays. At the same time, Muto developed an interest in design and furniture and began to teach himself the skills necessary to make a living as an artist.

For Muto, that meant studying and restoring furniture and antiques. He loved learning about textures and surfaces, and taught himself how to marble and grain. As a result, designers around Rochester began to demand his services. Over the years, he constantly reinvented himself, as a decorative artist, landscape artist, and finally, muralist.

Then, in 1990 Nancy Mann, who had worked with Rick over the years, contracted him for what would become one of his most prominent public works, Mann's Jewelers. Muto was asked to come to the construction site.



Rick Muto and his legendary Steinway piano

Irving Mann told Rick that "how jewelry is presented is very important." Mann said, "We need your help, please bring the Renaissance to Rochester."

Today, one of Muto's most stunning accomplishments is the ceiling and walls at Mann's Jewelers. His fascination with the technique of Trompe L'oeil is evident in the painting. The gods play with jewels as cracks in the heavenly firmament reveal stars. Cherubs play among the riches, while a whimsical salamander peaks from bricks on the wall.

This painting became, at the time, a bellwether for Muto's burgeoning career in murals and public art work. After the Mann's mural, among the projects Muto worked on in Rochester were the murals at the corner of Dewey and Lexington and School No. 4's mural in which Muto memorialized the teachers and students at the school. Today, students learn the history of their community through programming at the Dewey and Lexington mural. Muto says, "My community involvement is expressed in my art."

Muto is especially proud of the mural in the Bausch & Lomb boardroom. To create the mural, a visual history of Bausch & Lomb, he had to extensively research the company and its timeline. Corporate Secretary Jean Geisel says, "He spent hours in the corporate archives to show the history of the company in detail. We loved his vision." And his vision has resulted in a "wonderful piece of work," according to Geisel and all who enter the room.

But even with his career accomplishments, Muto regards the pinnacle of his career, to date, his work on the 100K piano for Steinway's

Mann's Jewelers ceiling mural



Legendary Series. Stuart Lipp, Steinway's project engineer agrees. Lipp explains that the piano was originally produced in 1903 as a gift to the Theodore Roosevelt White House. It is called the 100K because it was the 100,000th piano produced by Steinway. The original artist was Thomas Dewing, a 19th century impressionist.

Lipp explains that the Legendary Series allows Steinway to introduce modern clients to great works of art from the past. This piece was the first piano given to a President by Steinway, and to date, there have only been three Steinway White House pianos. The original 100K piano now sits in the Smithsonian Institution.

Muto received this special commission as a result of his relationship with a local finisher, Greg Johnson, who was contracted by Steinway to gild the piano. Johnson, who worked with Rick on many residential projects, knew Rick could handle such a large-scale project. Stuart Lipp says, "What drew us to Rick was that he was actually making a living as an artist. He understands how to work with clients and deadlines. He is not only highly skilled, but highly professional. Muto's background in

furniture refinishing was a bonus."

Rick conducted extensive research on this project. He discovered that the original artist's wife painted the casing with her husband. So, Rick engaged his daughter, Margot, an accomplished artist in her own right, to work with him on the piano. Muto proudly says, "Without her, I wouldn't have been able to finish the project."

Muto loved recreating another artist's work. "As a self-taught artist, it is great to intensely study another artist's work." The piano's casing is gilded gold surrounded by a painted pattern. The piano's cover painting depicts the 9 muses and the scribe, 10 beautiful women in diaphanous dresses dancing across the top. Today the piano is being readied for sale. Other pianos in the Steinway Legendary Series have sold for over \$650,000.

Despite Muto's belief that he has reached the height of his career, it is apparent that the Steinway is just another highlight in a career that expands and grows with every new challenge. Muto says he has new goals, including continuing to paint for clients in Rochester and afar. He also continues to paint for himself, working on landscapes and more often, figures. His next dream is to design his own piano for Steinway, a Rick Muto piano. As he says, "Being an artist is a compulsion. You can't get rid of it." Which means Rick Muto will be working to beautify Rochester for years to come. ♦

