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The delicate art of framing

By **SUNNY LOCKWOOD**
TOWNS CORRESPONDENT

For the past 19 years, John Allred has been framing art, photographs, textiles and other treasures for clients across the nation. And he's been doing his meticulous, conservator-quality work in a small, unassuming house at 8172 La Plaza in downtown Cotati.

This 792-square-foot house was built in 1890 and housed Cotati's first fire chief. Today it holds 2,000 frames, archival mats and other museum-quality supplies. Pictures of clients like Phyllis Diller and the Grateful Dead adorn the walls, along with awards Allred has garnered over the years.

"People who stumble upon us here say we're the best kept secret around," said Allred, who does ordinary framing but specializes in family heirlooms, fine art and collectibles.

Tall, blue-eyed and soft-spoken, Allred himself is a pretty well-kept secret. With a short gray ponytail and lengthy white beard, he could pass for a hippie. In fact, he was a San Francisco hippie in the 1960s. He went on to manage the band Mandala and a 600-acre cattle ranch in Calaveras County, ink and paint animation cels for movies such as "Roger Rabbit" and "Inner-space" and earn bachelor and master degrees in psychology.

"Once I married and had two children, I got focused with my life," said Allred, now 68 and no longer married.

For 20 years he was a marriage and family therapist with a private practice in Marin.

"I was doing holistic work before it was profitable," he said with a smile.

When Allred retired from counseling, an artist friend asked him to design the lighting for an upcoming exhibition. They went to the place where the show was to be held and found that none of the paintings had been framed.

"All these painted canvases were sitting around and the frames were stacked up, and everything needed to be assembled. My friend asked me to help, so I did," Allred said. "And I liked it. Framing was fun."

He later saw an ad for a production framer in a Novato shop, applied and was hired. He soon was doing everything in the shop, but his meticulousness frustrated the shop owner.

"He wanted me to turn out the



Professional Framing Services owner John Allred, right, talks with customer Lenny Miller who was picking up an order earlier this month at the shop in Cotati.



John Allred attaches a canvas to its frame, left, and shows a keepsake photo in a custom-made frame

framed artwork faster," Allred said. "It was, after all, a production frame shop. He had more than one serious discussion with me out in the parking lot."

After a couple of those pointed discussions, Allred decided to open his own shop in a Novato mall. Business was good, and the customers were famous. "I did a lot of work with Tommy Johnston of the Doobie Brothers," he said. "He would bring 40 or 50 things to be framed, photos with Elton John or with the band, or pictures of B.B. King. And lots of family pictures. He was great to work with."

The Grateful Dead also hired Allred to frame artwork, posters, album covers and photos.

"I knew Tim Harris, who did the band's album covers, because we had worked on ani-

mated films together back in the mid-1980s."

Allred, Harris and graphic artist Dewey Reid were independent contractors for George Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic, painting thin, plastic cels for film animation. Several cels can be required to make one frame of film, he said.

"We'd sit at our light boxes and paint these little, tiny areas on animated cels, cel after cel after cel. Ten to 14 hours a day, painting with tiny brushes and ink. Lots of deadline pressure. The hours were bizarre. I didn't enjoy the pressure, but the money was good."

Another famous customer was Phyllis Diller, who hired him to frame the canvases she painted and sold. "She put a lot of heart into her work," Allred said. "She

did whimsical portraits, kind of New Age, modernistic, semi-abstract. She was gracious and genuine and polite. I halfway expected a Hollywood-jaded person, but she was kind and humble."

They corresponded for years, and about a year before her 2012 death, Allred said she wrote to say, "I'm painting madly and enjoying brisk sales."

Many of his customers lack the name recognition but make up for it with unique stories. A conservator in England sent Allred a 15th-century needlework he had restored. Figures and faces had been stitched on silk and framed in such a way that the glass touched the faces. Over centuries, the glass had worn off the tips of their noses, and mats had compromised the fabric.

"Because the needlework was

UNUSUAL REQUESTS

Among the many unusual things Allred has framed:

- Collection of historic gaming coins.
- Early California brothel ephemera, such as crib numbers.
- 18th and 19th century French artwork for an author writing a book on French History.
- Guns and swords.
- 15th century Chinese textile.
- Pictures of a ship, its manifest and the family that sailed on it, all from the 1920s.
- 13.5-foot-long, 18-inch-tall photograph of Lake Tahoe, framed without mats.

on silk, it could have no calcium carbonate in the mats or backing," Allred said. "Calcium carbonate breaks down silk. I rematted it and built a display system that would assure that no glass would touch the piece."

Allred uses materials that are compatible with each specific piece of art, whether it is a textile, photography, painting or paper-borne document or etching, choosing from materials such as rag mats, UV protective glazing (glass or acrylic) and museum grade, acid-free mounting and backing boards.

"You can't see the difference and it's a bit more expensive, but in the long run, the artwork will survive the years," he said. "How the piece is held in place also is critical. I cook my own wheat-starch paste. Jarred pastes have ingredients that make it difficult for a conservator to remove if the piece needs restoring."

But Allred said he even considers ordinary requests satisfying.

"I like working with my hands," he said. "I use my art background, my psychology background, everything goes into what I do. My favorite part is working with the folks who come in. When they walk in, they have something that's important to them."

"And it's really a neat feeling to know that I have a hand in making sure future generations will be looking at this picture, or letter of immigration, or the textile their grandmother did. It does my heart good to know I'm a part of that."

John Allred's Professional Framing Services is located at 8172 La Plaza, Cotati, 795-2791, professionalframingservices.com.

BETH SCHANKER / The Press Democrat

Photos by Sunny Lockwood