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Photos by FABRIZIO COSTANTINI/Special to the Free Press

Mike Kelly of Grosse Pointe Woods Kelly works on his current project, a classic roadster in his basement studio. Kelly said the portraits are a natural extension of his interest in art and his early work in automotive design. He charges \$300-\$2,000 for portraits.

Art inspired by steel and wheels

Works memorialize beloved vehicles in detailed portraits

By NATE TRELA
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

As a portrait artist, Mike Kelly has to pay incredible attention to detail. He knows that people who commission him to create portraits of their loved ones want something memorable, something flattering, something they can show off.

And in more than 20 years, the subjects of his paintings have never complained about the way they look up on the wall.

Then again, cars really can't criticize.

Kelly is one of a small number

of artists who specialize in automotive artwork. Some sculpt, some include cars in the middle of intricate scenes, and some, like Kelly, create images of people's beloved collectible cars.

"There are so many people that specialize in people portraits," Kelly said. "But there are people who are just as proud of their cars as anything else in their lives."

Kelly, who also works as a communications manager for an automotive parts supplier, said the portraits are a natural extension of his interest in art and his early work in automotive design.

He started out doing portraits for friends, and word-of-mouth gave him a steady base of customers for several years.

"People would see the renderings he would do and they'd want him to do illustrations of their vehicles," said Ernie Stroud, the manager of a Mayflower Corp. plant in Norwalk, Ohio, who used to work with Kelly. "I had a '66 GTO convertible that I would have loved for him to do a rendering of, and I'm sure I'll look him up when I build another one."

Kelly, who charges \$300-\$2,000 for portraits, depending on the size and complexity of the

project, cut back on the number of portraits he did while his children were growing up. But with his two sons off at college, he spends more time in the basement of his Grosse Pointe Woods home, listening to National Public Radio as he brushes on acrylics and watercolors.

One of his favorite pieces depicts a man's collection of three Corvettes from different angles. The portrait was given to the man by his daughter as a Father's Day gift, and Kelly kept a print to show to potential customers.

Making the portraits is a time-consuming process. After more than 30 hours of work, Kelly was

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only about 80-percent done with a depiction of a 1932 Ford Deuce that he planned to exhibit.

"Some of the detail can be pretty mind-numbing, but it's a relaxing time for me," he said.

Tom Hale, a Farmington Hills artist, said the market for automotive art is limited. Automotive companies will often contract with artists for special projects and parts suppliers regularly request automotive art to hang on walls, but finding individuals who will commission an artist to do a portrait of a car can be tricky.

"It's kind of a unique area to work in," said Hale, who has worked full-time as an automotive artist since 1985. "But we all probably do better outside of the state than in it. I don't know why that is, but my feeling is that a lot of people that work in the auto industry are certainly able to purchase automotive art, but they're around the cars all day, and that seems to make them not want to

take it home."

Unlike Kelly, Hale shies away from doing commissioned artwork for individuals. Instead, he wants to help automotive artists receive greater recognition for their work. Hale was a founding member of the Automotive Fine Arts Society, an international organization of 26 painters and sculptors who feature automobiles in their work. He also chairs the art show at the Meadow Brook Concours d'Elegance classic car exhibit.

"It's one of the largest shows of automotive art in the country," Hale said. "I'm probably a little different than other automotive artists, in that I prefer to do pieces of artwork that feature cars, not work on commission."

"There is some frustration in having to work to get the credibility and recognition for automotive art, but we're getting there."

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Photos by FABRIZIO COSTANTINI/Special to the Free Press

Mike Kelly of Grosse Pointe Woods creates a portrait of a car, applying an opaque watercolor as he works in his basement studio.