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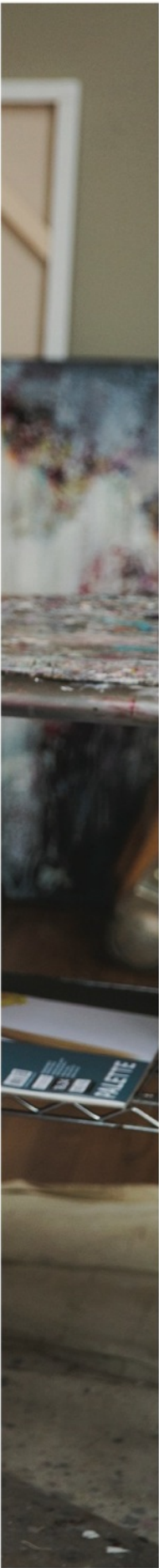
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historical art

Meet Minnetonka mixed-media artist Jillian Lee





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Written by Hailey Almsted • Photos by Rachel Nadeau

Historical Art

From star-studded Los Angeles to the cityscape in New York City, artist Jillian Lee has done commissioned artwork coast to coast. The pieces are a sincere snapshot of Lee, a creative hailing from Esco, Minn., whose passions include art, French history and dance.

Though painting isn't something Lee ever imagined as her career, fine art has become just that. Since 2010, the 41-year-old mom of two has showcased her pieces in galleries around the country. She has collectors worldwide, from Canada to Europe, all the way to Australia, and has been featured in *House Beautiful*, *Interior Design*, *Traditional Home* and *Luxe* magazines.

Lee's also published one book, and is in the midst of her second. Her first book, *Art of Enchantment*, focuses on four of her collections from 2011-2015. *Muse*, currently in the works, is a more journal-style book that presents an intimate look into her processes and inspiration.

Lee currently resides in Minnetonka,

and has enjoyed a successful creative career, both in and out of fine arts.

Art Origins

Lee's always been creative. She grew up a dancer, and even intended to study dance and theater at the University of Minnesota. But it wasn't until she took her first world history class at the university that she found what she calls her true calling.

"I dropped everything," Lee says. "I basically decided [on history] and kept taking classes. I got enough to start majoring, and the rest is, well, history."

With the opportunity to study abroad in Europe, Lee took to the incredible architecture and museums, even citing her travels as inspiration in her artwork. And after graduating with studies in French history and art history, she started working in interior design, and began creating 3D renderings—the process of creating a 3D, photorealistic image—for her clients.

"The renderings were my favorite



part; I sort of thought, 'I should be doing this,'" she says. "So I started practicing drawing in the evenings and weekends. I just decided that's what I wanted to do."

Lee started her own rendering business and partnered with her first gallery nine years ago. "I ended up leaving my full-time job, and started focusing on fine art at that point. It's crazy," she says with a laugh.

Before leaving the design-firm world a decade or so ago, she started creating marker drawings of her renderings, and would then paint the renderings with gouache (an opaque pigment made from watercolor and

acrylic). Clients ended up framing the pieces, and that's when she had another revelation—"Again, I thought, 'I should be doing this,' so I started working on canvas," she says.

Instead of spending hundreds of dollars on store-bought canvases, her husband, Jim, built them for her. "I'd go to the lumber yard, and I'd build frames and stretch canvases," Jim says. "We really started from scratch, to save money, and it's been a slow progression of her working hard and being lucky."

Creating her art
Lee enjoys being able to express her

passions in so many different ways on canvas, whether it be in floral depictions, historical dresses or ballet costumes.

"I could paint 100 different things if I had time for it," she says.

Considering the fact that she wasn't always painting or drawing, most of her techniques are self-taught. Each piece uses media like acrylics, oil pastels, gouache, layering and texturizing, and tar gel (an acrylic polymer used to get the dripping effect). These techniques are used to create the exceptional fine art pieces that Lee is known for.

Her love of history and dance



Grotta Azzurra,
at left

Emeline,
at right





shines through in her work—with her main inspiration coming from historical women and their dresses, as well as ballet costumes. “I love fashion as art, and I see that as an incredible art form itself,” Lee says. “The couture and ballet costumes, I love combining all of that together. It’s often in the back of my mind when painting.”

But it’s the floral additions that tie all of her paintings together, though by no means was that on purpose. She wasn’t much of a drawer growing up, but always doodled flowers in her notes. She

adores flowers and admittedly loves the romantic notion of floral depictions in the dresses or abstract of her paintings.

Though she used to go off of historical photographs and costume imagery when creating a new piece, she lets the painting guide her now—“I started painting and I just kind of feel it and go for it,” she says. “I paint freely, and I work them a lot until I feel like it’s right. It’s a lot of guiding.”

Her husband, Jim, adds, “It’s pretty unique in how she uses the colors and blends them... History and lit-

erature come out in her paintings... It’s really just beauty in general.”

A family affair

Outside of painting, Lee lives a fairly quiet life, spending most of her time with her husband and two daughters, who have an affinity for painting.

Her daughters, ages 3 and 5, have practically been in her studio since they were born, and they’ve always enjoyed being there. Before they began painting, they would take crayons and color on the back of her canvases. “Clients loved that,”



Lee says. Now, they tend to paint on the front of the canvas before Lee works on them, and they both continue to create pieces of art on the back of the canvases. "In a way, we're collaborating," she says, chuckling. "But the clients still love it and get excited about it, and [my kids] really get into it."

Jim adds, "[Their relationship] is a little volatile... Our older daughter goes through a canvas in two minutes, but our younger one can doodle in one corner all day long."

After giving birth to her first daughter, Lee painted "Olympe," which marked the first large-scale dress that she ever paint-

ed. That's when she knew she wanted to keep doing dresses. "Emeline," one of her recent paintings, is another large-scale dress, and one of two originals that she's kept. "I'm very hard on myself, so I cannot have a lot of my own artwork in my home," she explains.

Though she recognizes that not everyone will adore her work, she's hoping that people "feel something" when taking in her pieces. "That's what art should be. I want the people who [like my work] to be swept up into the romantic, old world ... I hope they feel a deep connection and it stirs them emotionally," she says. She often thinks that

art (not just her own) should transcend everything, including politics and religion. But for her work, she says it's all about the romance of life and for people to be taken into a beautiful world.

"I would say dancing was my first art, but when I paint it's so physical," she says. "It's the same excitement of how I felt when I was on stage dancing. It's the feeling of creating something that you're having fun with, and you love, and hope it communicates [to people] in a certain way." ♦

Jillianleefineart.com