



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

PRISCILLA WARREN ROBERTS (1916–2001)

Home of the Artist

Oil on wood panel, 35 3/8 x 29 1/4 in.
Signed (at lower left): Priscilla Roberts
Painted late 1944–early 1945

RECORDED: P[riscilla] Roberts, “Retrospective” [typescript, 1985?], pp. 8–9, 10 illus. // 1946 (New York: Grand Central Art Galleries, 1946), p. 27 illus. as “My Studio”

EXHIBITED: Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 1946, *Painting in the United States, 1946*, no. 215, illus. plate 80 as “Interior (Home of the Artist)” // Grand Central Art Galleries, New York, 1948 // Grand Central Art Galleries, New York, April 18–29, 1961, *Priscilla Roberts*, no. 14 // Dulin Gallery, Knoxville, Tennessee, 1962 // IBM Gallery, New York, 1963, *Realism: An American Heritage*, no. 45, as “Home of the Artist” // Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, New York, 1997, *The Discerning Eye: Masterpieces from Katonah Collections* // Grand Central Art Galleries, New York, 1981, *Priscilla Roberts: Magic Realist*, p. 9 no. 4

EX COLL: the artist; to [Grand Central Art Galleries, New York, 1946]; to Corporate Art Collection of International Business Machines of New York, 1946–68; to [Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York, 1968]; to private collection, 1968 until the present

An American artist associated with the postwar tradition of Magic Realism, Priscilla Roberts has been described as an “artful conjuror of phantom, apparition, memory and desire”—a creator of haunting and highly suggestive paintings that “provoke the viewer into contradictory thoughts which evoke faint echoes of a dimly remember dream” (Jeremyn Davern, “Introduction,” in *Priscilla Roberts: Magic Realist*, exhib. cat. [New York: Grand Central Art Galleries, 1981], p. 6).

Born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, Roberts was a daughter of Charles Asaph Roberts and his wife, Mary, an amateur painter. When Roberts was still a child, her family moved to New York, where her father was a partner at Cravath, Swaine & Moore, a prominent law firm. Her interest in art developed

during her girlhood, when her mother compiled a scrapbook of advertisements from *Good Housekeeping* magazine to distract her while she recuperated from a bout of acidosis.

During the mid-1930s, Roberts spent a year studying at Radcliffe College before transferring to the Yale School of Art. In 1937, she enrolled in classes as the Art Students League of New York, working under the painters Charles Courtney Curran and Sidney Dickinson. Following this, Roberts honed her skills at the school of the National Academy of Design (1939–43).

Upon completing her studies, Roberts remained in New York, where she found work as a commercial artist. However, feeling constricted by the constant deadlines, she decided to become a full-time painter instead, going on to rent a studio in the Van Dyke building at 939 Eighth Avenue in the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood. Intent on creating paintings imbued with personal and symbolic significance, Roberts turned her attention to meticulously rendered still lifes and interiors that, in their painstaking technique and careful manipulation of light, reflected the influence of the Dutch Baroque painter Jan Vermeer, whose work she admired at the New York World’s Fair in 1939.

Like other painters of her milieu who also worked in a precise representational style, such as Paul Cadmus and George Tooker, Roberts acquired a reputation as a Magic Realist. However, Roberts stood apart from her cohorts in that she imbued her paintings with a sense of enigma and quietude through her skillful handling of chiaroscuro and in her penchant for creating unorthodox groupings of ordinary, man-made objects, ranging from furniture, musical instruments, dolls, and candles, to old letters to clocks, hourglasses, figurines, and even death masks. Her highly detailed paintings depict an unreal and oftentimes ambiguous environment—sometimes haunting, sometimes playful—meant to elicit an emotional response in the viewer. A non-conformist who followed her own path in both her life and art, Roberts chose to ignore the label of “Magic Realist,” preferring to define her approach as an alternative aesthetic that she described as “Arch Realism.” (As quoted in Rob Schweitzer, “Priscilla Warren Roberts: Painter, Animal Lover, Dies at 85,” *Wilton Bulletin*, August 16, 2001. See also *Priscilla Roberts [1916–2001]: Arch Realist*, exhib. cat. [New York: Keogh & Riehlman Fine Art and Lois Wagner Fine Arts, circa 2000].)

In the spring of 1946, Roberts joined Grand Central Art Galleries in New York, the legendary artists’ cooperative that would handle her work for the rest of her life. Two years later, seeking a respite from the bustle and bustle of the city, she settled in the Georgetown section of Wilton, Connecticut, where, as in New York, she would roam the local antique stores, thrift shops, and flea markets in search of objects and bric-a-brac for her paintings. In keeping with her independent spirit, Roberts lived alone and worked at her own pace, often taking over a year to complete a picture, as was the case with *Plumage* (1950; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), which was a full fifteen months in the making. To be sure, Robert is quoted as saying, “I have no other life but art, and I am blissfully happy” (as quoted in Davern, p. 8). Although her paintings sold regularly, Roberts spent so much time creating them that she was not a prolific artist. It was not until 1961 that Grand Central Art Galleries had

enough canvases to mount her first solo exhibition—a show that, according to the gallery’s director, Erwin C. Barrie, showcased “her unusual manner of combining realism with overtones of whimsy and fantasy” (Erwin S. Barrie, [Introduction], *Priscilla Roberts*, exhib. cat. [New York: Grand Central Art Galleries, 1961, n.p.).

Robert exhibited intermittently in group shows in Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. In New York, she was a regular contributor to the annual exhibitions of the National Academy of Design, where she received the Julian Hallgarten Prize in 1947 and the Proctor Portrait Prize in 1969. In 1951, Roberts was elected an associate member of the Academy and six years later she became a full academician—the only woman accorded that honor during the 1950s. (See David Dearing and Isabelle Dervaux, “Challenging Tradition: Women of the Academy,” *American Art Review* 15 [August 2003], p. 167. Roberts is represented at the National Academy of Design by *Alchemy* [1957]). In 1985, Roberts moved to Redding, Connecticut, one town west of Georgetown, where she died on August 5, 2001.

An early work in Roberts’s oeuvre, *Home of the Artist* is one of her few interiors, a theme she explored less frequently after 1950 since they took so long to create. (See letter from Priscilla Roberts to the current owner, March 24, 1991, copy in Hirschl & Adler Galleries archives.) According to the artist, she painted it soon after having executed *The Unmade Bed* (1944–45; location unknown), a “very messy bedroom scene” that upset her staid parents so much that she wanted to make amends by creating a more “dignified interior” (letter from Priscilla Roberts to the current owner, n.d., copy in Hirschl & Adler Galleries archives).

In *Home of the Artist*, Robert depicts a portion of her studio in the Van Dyke building in which she arranged “a compilation of all the latest treasures I’d acquired in the neighboring Hells [*sic*] Kitchen Junk shops” (Roberts letter, March 24, 1991). Indeed, employing a tightly cropped design that establishes an immediate connection between the image and the viewer, Robert presents us with a view of a section of a narrow room adorned with an assemblage of objects, some of a utilitarian nature, others purely decorative. Juxtaposed in a narrow space illuminated in the upper right by a softly glowing light emanating thorough an adjacent window, each component of the composition bears a note of individuality, whether it be the violin lying on the settee, the small book propped up like a tent on the nearby table, the cuckoo clock, or the tiny statuette of the cat that occupies the central register, its presence adding a whimsical note to the image while attesting to the artist’s well-known love of felines. (An animal lover, Roberts, at one point, lived with thirteen cats. See Davern, p. 5.) According to Roberts, the statues of the pheasant and the duck were two of her earliest thrift shop purchases, while the “somewhat peculiar perspective” of the scene was due to the fact that her studio only ten or twelve feet across (Roberts letter, n.d.). Certainly, the image represents a world unto itself, rightly intended, as the title suggests, to reveal an aspect of the artist’s personal biography. (Many years after completing the work, Roberts noted that at the time she painted *Home of the Artist*, she took a rather “dim” view of titles and may have actually titled the piece *My Studio*. See letter from Priscilla Roberts

to the current owner, [1983], copy in Hirschl & Adler Galleries archives. Her recollection was correct, since the work was reproduced in the Grand Central Art Galleries yearbook of 1946 under this alternate title.)

Home of the Artist made its debut at the Carnegie Institute's exhibition, *Painting in the United States, 1946*, in the autumn of 1946. As well as demonstrating the artist's technical virtuosity and highly personal nature of her art, this intimate painting holds a special place in Roberts's career: it was one of the first paintings she took to Grand Central after joining the gallery and the first work of hers that sold. (Roberts letter, n.d. At the time of the Carnegie Institute exhibition, the work had already been purchased for the Corporate Art Collection of International Business Machines of New York. See letter from Gloria Sullivan, IBM Gallery of Science and Art, to the current owner, July 11, 1983, copy in Hirschl & Adler Galleries archives).

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