

by Dorothy C. Pollen

Photographs
by the author

"Dean of Decôr Painting" — shown in his studio-shop, so well-known to American dealers in antiques that he doesn't even have a sign out. (Unusual shape or function is what Ompir seeks in his continuous search for workable articles. In his 300-year-old, rambling farmhouse, he paints on old English tea cans that bring \$150 and more on the retail market; old tavern signs range from \$85 up for wholesalers.)

DEEP in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts, a master craftsman and artist is at work. He is Peter Ompir of Sheffield, Mass., a man who enjoys what he is doing and is happy in his way of life. He has only two complaints — the bitter cold New England winters and the lack of time to complete his endeavors before they are snatched away by the nation's dealers.

Mr. Ompir is a free-hand painter of distinction. He works on nearly any article that is attractive and functional "and just a little different". Commodes bearing his design may be seen in the antique departments of Neiman Marcus, Magnins, or Macy's, or any of the other top national department stores. He frets only because he can't keep his work up with the demand.

It all began back in the Depression days of the early 1930s, when this tall and talented young man left Pennsylvania for New York City.

"Of course, in those days no one could afford to have their portrait painted," Ompir smiles. "So I turned to painting anything I could get my hands on, from cigarette boxes to anything old or new. I sold them through an agent."

"When I had saved enough money, I rented a car to get out of the city heat and came up through New England, where I would pick up a one-of-a-kind antique to work on," he recalls.

A student of the Art Institute in Chicago and the National and American art academies, it has never occurred to this gentle man to do anything but paint.

It takes nearly two weeks to complete one of his choice pieces. First, the bold-base, flat paint must go on in two or more coats. Then the design of fruit or flowers, a comic mannequin, or brilliant bird is worked out. Antiquing is the next in the series of steps, followed by coats of thin varnish.

Ompir says those who take short cuts in the hand-painting process will find that the paint flecks off after a short time. With the waiting between coats for necessary drying, rubbing and sanding, it is a slow and loving creation.

Ompir mixes all of his own colors, with the possible exception of the bold reds and yellows. Rich color in design is necessary, for antiquing changes the hues in the final product.

Recently, Ompir has worked on

some particularly well-made, tip-top tables about 18 inches in diameter, which he discovered being reproduced in a small woodworking shop in Vermont. The wood is maple. These colorful conversation pieces not only enhance the decor of any home but are functional as end tables or for occasional use. The wholesale prices of these tables, bearing his designs in muted blues and greens accented with bold yellows and reds, range from \$50 up.

Chairs decorated by Peter Ompir may well be the discriminating collector's joy soon, for he no longer paints them. He explains that the area for design is too limited.

Modestly, he explains he must sign all his work now, because many people are collecting furniture or appointments wearing his plump purple grapes or peachy red apples.

An Oregon newspaper has called Ompir the Dean of American Toleware. His friends have urged him to write a book on his methods or to hold classes for prospective young artists. He declines with a bemusing smile and says, "After all, my technique is just plain hard work and patience."