Like many first-time home buyers, my husband and I were excited about our new house, but all the plain white walls daunted us. We didn’t have much money, yet I wanted to decorate in a way that expressed our personalities. Mass-produced art just wouldn’t do.

So we waited. We stared at blank walls and waited some more. Eventually, I hung up a couple of dented art posters from our college days and some family pictures. Original art, which is what I craved, was out of the question.

Or so I thought.

One day a few weeks later, my mother and I were in her attic, rummaging through some old silver. My eyes fell upon an oil painting propped up against the wall. The scene was one I knew well—a cluster of old hardwood trees from our family’s first house. In front of the trees was an old toy crane that belonged to my brother.

My father has been a stockbroker for nearly 20 years now, but when I was young he worked as an art instructor. The landscape of my childhood had been his inspiration. The years had not dimmed the vibrant green of those trees, and the very paint strokes themselves brought back a host of memories.

His studio, curiously, had been our laundry room. How could I forget the
smell of turpentine—which he used to clean his brushes—mingled with fabric softener? I remember watching him painstakingly mix his colors and explain to us their various properties.

Payne's gray was one of his favorites—a color that could be gray, black and sometimes even blue. My brother and I served as models for him and his students many times.

Looking at that old picture, I knew what our blank walls needed. My mother and I did a little more digging and found a pencil sketch of our family's old rocking chair, a seascape, and a whimsical watercolor portrait of myself, dressed in Victorian clothing. A few of these pieces needed new frames but the works themselves were priceless to me.

Back at my house, my husband and I hung the art and a curious thing happened. All of our hand-me-down and flea-market furniture seemed suddenly to belong. Our home now had far more than decoration for its white walls. We had conversation pieces, and I was surrounded by memories of growing up in a household that valued art and creative expression.

Best of all, my renewed interest in my father's work has brought us closer. It has also revived his old passion. Recently my husband and I added a patio to our garden. To celebrate this addition, my father gave us a hand-painted birdhouse inspired by my second favorite artist—Claude Monet.

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Ashley, a free-lance writer based in Raleigh, North Carolina, spends her free time daydreaming in her patio garden.