



▲ Novak offers a unique way to preserve and showcase cherished objects like this vintage Yashica video camera.

— INNOVATORS —

When Walls Talk

The Heirloomist turns the story-filled mementos of people's lives into stunning modern art.

by **Andrea Bennett**

IF THESE walls could talk, what tales would they tell? Photographer Shana Novak has found a way to answer one of humanity's favorite musings through her business, The Heirloomist (theheirloomist.com), which turns treasured keepsakes into uniquely meaningful framed works of art.

Novak, a commercial still-life photographer for big-box stores, was already an expert in bringing objects to life for her clients when a longtime yearning to engage in

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significant personal work converged with the gift of her grandmother's sterling silver, providing the impetus for her first Heirloomist piece.

"My grandmother was the keeper of the family stories. She liked keeping all sorts of weird and cool and valuable things tucked away," Novak says. "You can barely grasp the stories behind all those years of tables that silverware sat on. Arranging them into this interesting piece of art was symbolic of my grandparents' life together."

It was a watershed moment for her. "Having these still-life commercial skills and applying them to the objects she had kept over the years made me realize, 'Oh, I can use my skills from my job to do something deeply meaningful,'" Novak explains.

Since her work on The Heirloomist began, Novak has become a living receptacle for her clients' stories, absorbing them as she strives to capture the essence of what makes each keepsake special to its owner in her photographs. One of her favorite images is a large-scale letter written in delicate cursive. "It's a letter that a grandmother sent to her granddaughter in the '80s," Novak explains. "She talks about a nice boy from down the street who comes to help her on the farm. The girl ends up marrying the boy in the letter and keeping the letter. We made a big print of it for their house."

Novak's commissions have ranged from a four-foot-tall Champagne cork for a dining room to a dog collar to the combat boots worn by ABC News correspondent Bob Woodruff, commissioned as an "Alive Day" present by his wife, Lee, to commemorate the day he survived being hit by a roadside bomb in Iraq in 2006.

Among the most popular objects are stuffed animals, which Novak says are some of the most difficult subjects to photograph. "We'll spend hours getting the expression just right," she says. "Sometimes I have to ask




▲ A 40"-tall portrait of a husband's marathon medals, given as a Father's Day gift

▼ The tattered but treasured cap of a late family member

them, 'Are you going to behave yourself on set? What am I going to do with you?' They don't show up camera-ready, and you don't want to make a huge print for a kid that scares them."

Commissioning an Heirloomist piece is simple: Clients send an item to Novak's studio in Manhattan's Chelsea and select a size for their artwork from her website. (She can also accommodate bespoke works.) She photographs the heirloom within a few days, sends proofs to clients for approval, returns the heirloom with insured tracking—and soon clients have their own visual story, framed and ready to display.

"Everyone has special things that tell a story. It's a universal concept," she says. "These objects can be a cool reminder of how the world works in mysterious ways." 



ALL IMAGES: COURTESY OF THE HEIRLOOMIST