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## A BRILLIANT MOBILE ART STUDIO

This Maine landscape artist uses his Ford van as his painting headquarters.

By Fred Stafford

The Hollywood version of artists typically has them working in exposed-brick lofts with high ceilings and skylights. But four walls and a skylight are too confining for Maine artist Charles Thompson. He much prefers to work outdoors out of his mobile studio: a Ford Econoline van. He just opens the rear doors, sets up his easel behind and uses the cargo floor as his seat.

"I love painting" says Charles. "And I've always enjoyed working outdoors. The only time I can't paint is in the rain. For the cold winters up here, I've got a big fur hat and battery-powered socks."

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Charles created his first Ford mobile art studio in 1980 as a student at Notre Dame University. "I found a '78 Econoline in Elkhart, Indiana, for just \$3,000," recalls Charles. "I told the guy selling it I loved it, but it was brown! He said, 'Yeah, but it'll grow on ya.'"

And grow on him it did. His wife, Mary, lovingly dubbed it Ole Puddin' because of its chocolate-brown color. "I drove Ole Puddin' until 2000 and put over 200,000 miles on it," says Charles with a smile. "We had a lot of fun in that old van."

He went on to earn his MFA from Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia in 1982. "When I graduated, I decided I wanted to paint outside," Charles recalls. "So I just took Ole Puddin', opened the doors and cut my teeth painting on the streets of Philly: all city scenes."



Making a living off the canvas proved difficult, so while painting was Charles' passion, teaching art became his livelihood. In 1987, he packed up his van and moved to occupy various teaching positions throughout Maine. In 1999, his big break came when he was hired to be the head of the art department at University of New England in Biddeford, Maine.



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Not long after his arrival at UNE, it became evident that it was time for Ole Puddin' to be put out to pasture. By then Charles could afford to buy a brand-new van—a 2001 Ford Econoline—and outfit it the way he wanted. “I ordered it with a cage to keep things from sliding forward and with straps on the sides so I can keep any size canvas I want from falling down.” And as much as he loved his chocolate-brown van, this time he chose black.



After 15 years, his current Ford van, dubbed “Betty” by his children, is still going strong. “I got 20 years out of the first one,” says Charles. “So I figure I’ll get 20 years out of this one before I buy another. I got one more van left in me!”

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