



Multiple Perspectives

TAKING ART TO THE WALL

by PATRICIA KUTZA

photo by SCOTT J. WREYFORD, SR.

SHE'S BLESSED with creative talent, has a rolodex brimming with appreciative clients, and her sales figures couldn't look rosier. What's a girl to do? If you're Cathy Hartgraves, you pull up roots and start over. In truth, it was more of a U-turn than an exit that this Stockton designer of art-to-wear apparel took when her successful business, Designs by Cat, reached the tipping point.

"I was selling to about two hundred fifty stores, and at the point where I could do very well by simply replicating my most popular styles on a mass basis," explains Hartgraves. "So I enrolled in a stenciling class, exactly for the purpose of finding a technique that would be quickly reproducible yet look hand-painted." Instead of finding the perfect technique to mass-produce her clothing, Hartgraves found something entirely unexpected.

"I met a group of artists who stenciled walls for the home décor market," she says. "I loved the feeling of once again creating one-of-

a-kind pieces." Hartgraves soon found herself stenciling walls in her own home, and eventually decorating the interiors of her garment business clients' homes.

After selling the garment business to one of her workers, Hartgraves has operated a thriving interior design business since 1997, also titled Designs by Cat. She decorates walls using the impressive repertoire of skills she's mastered—faux finishing, marbling, stenciling, and also the art form of *trompe-l'oeil* (French for "fool the eye"), an ancient technique that harkens back to the Roman ages and uses the power of optical illusion to suggest three dimensions. It's particularly effective in home interiors where the depiction of an imaginary object such as a door or window, or even an entire landscape, on a wall can transform a room, changing its perceived dimensions in interesting and unexpected ways. »

A Touch of Tuscany

While the *trompe-l'oeil* technique has been embraced by many cultures, Hartgraves says she's particularly fond of its incarnations in the Italian tradition.

"I had the great opportunity to study with the Italian master Luca Battini when he gave a workshop in Ripon," she says.

When she is in the conceptualization phase of a new project, Hartgraves says that she tends to gravitate to all the texturizing techniques that are integral to the Italian style of embellishing walls and other surfaces.

Hartgraves also likes to give free rein to her imagination, and her portfolio of interiors reflects a sensibility that can range from comedic to formal to whimsical; a wall washed with color to a detailed, ultra-realistic mural. One of Hartgraves' local *trompe-l'oeil* wall paintings evokes a french door framed in ivy. The mood is bright, and the image is welcoming yet private. For another project, Hartgraves transformed an entire dining room into an Italian piazza. In a music room, she covered the ceiling with a mammoth guitar. Visitors to a room that showcases her art may think her work takes many weeks to produce, but it's actually a much shorter duration, she says.

"I do the project in stages," says Hartgraves. "First I prime the surface areas, then create the design. For faux finishes, I use water-based acrylic paints. They are non-toxic, odorless, and my clients don't have to move out of the house while my projects are underway."

It's the type of business that can find Hartgraves commissioned to create a large project one day, and planning a smaller scale, creative art piece the next. "I also work with two design firms that

decorate model homes," she says. "So I might be asked to create a mini mural in one home, or decorate an archway in another." With all this work, she's not shy about asking for help. "I had one job where I had my entire family working with me," Hartgraves laughs. "My husband prepped the walls, and my sons did some faux finishing. They've not yet graduated to actual art design."

Room for Multiple Opinions

Homeowners can be a picky lot, but Hartgraves' collaborative approach allows both her clients and herself to express their own vision. "It's all about what my customers want, and what I think will work," she says. "I often key off of the existing colors in a room, and make it all come together. I also like to create effects that will enhance existing architectural elements in a room. When I was commissioned to transform that dining room [into an Italian piazza], I expanded [the] motif onto the room's ceiling because it's an important feature of that space." After working on many different homes on assignment, Hartgraves senses that timelessness and a reverence for Old World ambiance is a trend that's here to stay.

Not that Hartgraves wants to stay in one place for too long. In her spare time, she's ramping up a new business designing a line of hand-painted wedding runners, matching table runners, chair drapes, and other accessories to make possible the concept she envisions of decorating a wedding as if it's one glorious piece of art. Whenever she can eke out any more spare time, there's also all the fun that happens riding on the back seat of a Harley with her husband behind the wheel. "That's when I like to just kick back and take pictures," says Hartgraves. SJM



Hartgraves' Italian Piazza mural

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Designs by Cat, (209) 477-3940

View Hartgraves' designs in person at the following Stockton businesses:

REFLECTIONS SALON AND SPA

6231 Pacific Ave., Ste. 3-A

SALON CIARA 2303 W. Alpine Ave.

REGALO BELLO 6231 Pacific Ave.

GALLETTI'S 425 Lincoln Center