

Business

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Local artists have designs on tile trade

Award-winning company hopes to grow

By LAURA RUANE
The News-Press

Stephanie Dittrick and daughter Candace MacNutt work in a cramped, non-air conditioned warehouse in central Fort Myers.

But their hand-painted tile murals are comfortably ensconced in some of the most elegant homes and businesses in Southwest Florida, as well as a few other parts of the world.



DITTRICK

Their company, Agape Tile, recently received a first-place award for residential tile art at Coverings 2000, the international tile and stone exposition held in May in Orlando attended by thousands of people.

With that recognition, they are hoping to find an investor and expand their artful enterprise.

"I've never had the time or resources to do the marketing," Dittrick said. "This opens up new possibilities."

The award-winning mural is a re-creation of Monet's painting, "Lady with a Parasol." The 5½-by-6½-foot mural graces the wall behind a bathtub in a private home in Sarasota.

Armed with a magnifying glass and a high-quality print of the Monet masterpiece, mother and daughter "duplicated every brush stroke," MacNutt said.

"We came in every day, and worked on it for a month. It was hard."

It also was a \$6,500 job.

Agape Tile's typical project ranges from \$5,000 to \$10,000, according to its Web site (www.agapetile.com). However, MacNutt said they can work with smaller budgets.

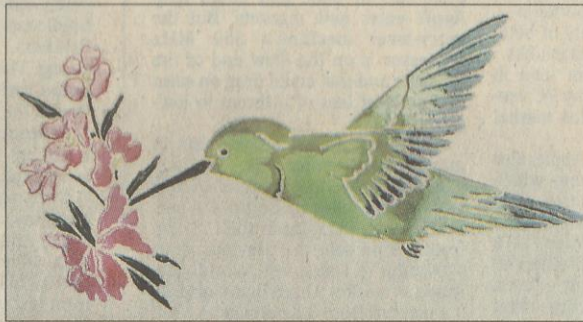


TIDES ON TILE: Candace MacNutt of Agape Tile paints another section of a beach mural that will be going into a repeat customer's kitchen.

ART AS BUSINESS

Stephanie Dittrick's tips for making an art business work:

- Don't believe you can't make a living in art.
- Don't get into a rut just for repeat business. "Most of ours are one-shot deals."
- Find a niche. Dittrick's is painting glaze-on-glaze tiles.
- Be upfront about payment expectations. Dittrick charges a fee for initial sketches and collects 60 percent of her total payment before she starts painting. The balance is due upon completion of her work — not when the tile is installed by subcontractors.
- Seek venture capital. "I'm planning on it this year. If we had done this in the beginning, it would have lessened the pain."
- Don't give up.



BUZZ ABOUT TILE: One of Candace MacNutt's finished creations on tile is this hummingbird, which she says is fairly easy to paint.



Photos by TODD STUBING/The News-Press

GLAZE-ON-GLAZE: Agape Tile's Candace MacNutt applies coloring to tiles that will form a beach scene mural in a customer's kitchen. The ink that she uses is a glaze that is the same substance as the tiles.

ART: Tile has more durability and color

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Interior designers, swimming pool builders and tile installers are sources of business referrals. The company did facade murals for the Palm Court building in Cape Coral as well as for a Publix supermarket in Boca Raton.

On a smaller scale, Wild Side Gallery in Key West sells individual tiles they have painted.

A business slowdown in 1997 spurred Dittrick and MacNutt to try other mediums, including canvas. At the Hofgarten Brauhaus in downtown Naples, the duo replicated a portion of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, as well as scenes of Italy and Christopher Columbus' New World journey. The building houses a restaurant and various offices.

"We wanted to bring some European culture to this country," said owner Susanne Schache, who's from Germany. "Customers love it."

However, "glaze-on-glaze" tile painting remains the company's chief niche.

With the glaze-on-glaze technique, the tile is glazed once before painting, and then re-glazed and baked in a 1,900-degree kiln.

Egyptians practiced this art more than 3,000 years ago, Dittrick said.

She sees a growing interest in this form of mural art because it's more durable than most other mosaic forms, and the colors are more vivid.

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