

Taking the Challenge

Cynthia Borman Has Navigated Her Ship Brilliantly in the Profession of Fine & Decorative Arts



Cynthia Borman is the artistic visionary behind Classical Decorative Arts.

“**A**LWAYS CHALLENGE YOURSELF.” That is the succinct yet powerful philosophy that has guided Cynthia Borman’s multi-faceted career in the fine and decorative arts.

Cynthia is the artistic visionary behind Classical Decorative Arts in Homewood, Ill. Since founding this business in 1992, she has developed an impressive resume of commissions in both the United States and Europe. Intertwined with her artistic talent is a love of history that enables her to create stunning period reproductions for her clients. Her work encompasses such specialties as historic stencil reproduction and design, Old World marbling effects, and expansive ceiling murals in the style of 18th-century Baroque masters.

Serving as the basis of her career is solid foundation of fine art educa-

tion, training and exhibition experience that has encompassed more than 30 years. Those years have formed the basis of an amazing career odyssey that has taken her from a rural Illinois community to the artistic inner circles of London and Paris.

The journey that took her toward a new artistic career began in the mid-1980s, when she was living in the small town Peotone, Ill., a bit of a distance away from Chicago. Cynthia, by then a mother of five, had already had significant artistic success, exhibiting her fine art at several major juried shows—including one of the best shows in the state of Illinois. Being both artistic and practical, she decided it was time to make some academic commitments to ensure her future.

“Every Saturday, I took the train from Peotone to the American Academy of Art in downtown Chicago to

pursue my art education,” Cynthia explains. “I did that for seven years. At the same time, I was working toward my associate’s degree at Joliet Junior College. Then I continued to pursue a paralegal degree at Chicago’s Roosevelt University. I kept them both going. I figured, ‘Whatever ship came in. . .’”

Fortunately, for the decorative artisans community, the ship that came in was the artistic one. Cynthia founded Classical Decorative Arts and began doing the type of work that would gain her great notice and influential connections.

One of the most influential individuals that Cynthia has met in her career was the renowned U.K. artist Bill Holgate, who sadly has passed away in 2002. Mr. Holgate was in Chicago in January 2000 to conduct some classes in conjunction with Windy City Stu-

by DIANE CAPUANO, executive editor

dio (which has since become the North American School of Decorative Arts). Cynthia had the good fortune of attending these classes. "Bill invited me to dinner, I showed him my portfolio, and then he personally invited me to Salon," she reports.



Cynthia's work, above and below, was on display at the inaugural gala for Chicago's Beverly Arts Center.



Salon, as many in the profession know, is a prestigious international gathering of professional painters, held on an annual basis. Cynthia jumped at the chance to attend what proved to be an invaluable mentoring and networking opportunity. During her attendance at Salon, Cynthia had the opportunity to further her acquaintance and friendship with Mr. Holgate. "I was fortunate enough to exhibit side by side with him at Salon in 2000 in London and 2001 in Paris," Cynthia reports. "He was a wonderful man. I can't say enough about him."

Cynthia also attended the Salon in San Antonio last year and at press time was preparing to go to the 2003 edition of Salon, taking place in Bruges, Belgium. She finds Salon to be an incredibly worthwhile experience. In addition to public exhibits, the event features private sessions that allow the painters to

work and interact together. "Everybody shares," Cynthia says. "You can ask questions of any of the masters, and they will stop and answer you."

While extreme talent is on display at Salon, what is notably absent is any trace of ego. "There are no judgments at Salon," Cynthia says. "In fact, people are hardest on themselves. I came back from Salon humbled by all of the talent I've seen, but the result is always a desire to improve myself."

Cynthia also appreciates the fact that Salon gives her the opportunity to share her expertise with those just getting started in the decorative arts. For instance, in San Antonio last year, she was able to help a woman who had come to the public exhibit on the subject of how to select quality brushes. "It's a really great experience being able to help people who are just starting out," she says. "That makes it all worthwhile."

Also at Salon in San Antonio, Cynthia shared her love of history by conducting a lecture on the subject of Ancient Roman Villas, centering around the Pompeii and Herculaneum periods of design. Cynthia has delved into the Pompeii and Herculaneum periods as a source of inspiration for her own clients. The historical accuracy adds to the ultimate results that her clients receive.

"Because of my love of history, I do a lot of research," she says. "It's important for me to get it correct, or at least try, because if I don't get it right, someone is going to know. Doing the research is what gives me my inspiration. It makes the whole development of the project easier for me."

Facilitating her research, Cynthia has an extensive library of reference books in her home. "That way, if I get inspiration at two in the morning, I can open a book and start to sketch," she says.

One of her early projects, for instance, was inspired by the work of

the great architect Louis Sullivan, whose work gained prominence in the later part of the 19th century. "I read a book about him several years before, and I eventually came back to use it," she reports.

When she does divert from true historical accuracy, she always does so with an informed sensibility. "For instance, in one project, I did use the Pompeii and Herculaneum styles together. I also combined fine art painting from different eras. While not strictly accurate, it worked. And the client was gracious enough to trust me," she reports.

Even with historical references on hand, Cynthia takes her cue from the likes and dislikes of her clients. "I talk to a client and try to get a sense of who they are—what they like and what they don't like," she says. "While clients may take my judgment, I always remember that it's their home and they're the ones who are going to live with it."

Fortunately, Cynthia seems blessed with a gift for recognizing what her clients want. "When I go into a room, in many cases, it's like divine intervention," she says.

However, Cynthia concedes that she does run into clients who are somewhat demanding. "But that's OK, because working with them helps to push my brain," she says.

Even though these clients are "demanding," Cynthia is cautious not to categorize them as "difficult." In her estimation, "There's no such thing as a difficult client. There are clients who have a definite idea of what they want. If they love the final result, they don't remember the hard road it took to get there."

Cynthia's work encompasses both residential and commercial spaces. In most cases, her commissions come to her via referrals from satisfied clients. "I tried advertising, but it doesn't work," she says. "All of my work is word of mouth." And while



Supporters of the arts were exposed to Cynthia's work at the Beverly Arts Center.

Cynthia has plenty of clients these days, she does concede that marketing at times "is kind of like pushing a snowball uphill."

Sometimes, however, an event occurs that helps to push the snowball ever-higher up the slope. Such an event occurred in September 2002, when Cynthia exhibited her work at the Beverly Arts Center of Chicago, a new \$10-million, state-of-the-art facility that includes a 420-seat theater, dance studio and visual arts gallery. Cynthia's exhibition was unveiled at the inaugural gala of the Beverly Arts Center. Patrons of the arts attended this spectacular gala celebration, which featured Cynthia's exhibition in the second-floor visual arts gallery as well as major performances by the city's talented Taiko drummers and innovative Hubbard Street 2 dancing troupe in the main-floor theater.

It was quite a public relations coup for Cynthia to have her work prominently displayed at an event attended by so many passionate supporters of the arts. Entitled "Inside the Artist's Studio," the exhibition was a venue that allowed Cynthia to share the notes, sketches and most intimate thoughts that occur during

the creative process. "Most clients do not see the formation of the idea," she said. "What often occurs is quite a strong concept to begin with and *voilà*...the finished project. The goal of this exhibition was to draw the viewer into the magic, wonder and often the hard work that takes place from start to finish."

The exhibition also enabled Cynthia to communicate how artists become so preoccupied with their work that they can think of virtually nothing else. As is the case with many artists, she points out that when she seems distracted, "I'm not stupid...I'm busy."

After being a life-long student of fine and decorative arts, Cynthia is eager to share her knowledge with up-and-coming artists. She will be teaching trompe l'oeil classes in the fall at the Faux Design Studio in



The Beverly Arts Center exhibition allowed visitors to get inside the mind of the artist.



Two views of a room that Cynthia created in the style of architect Louis Sullivan.



Elmhurst, Ill., for owners Sheri Zeman and Jacek Prowinski. As Cynthia explains, it's a way to give back for the help she's received along the way. "There were a lot of people along the way who helped me out, and I'm more than happy to do the same thing for others coming along," she says. "We don't get where we are alone. There is a lot of support. It's true that in the arts, there is a lot of competition. I choose not to dwell on that. You never know when you're talking to the next Michelangelo or Mary Cassatt."

A nice affirmation of her decision is that one of her children, Bill, has followed in his mother's footsteps and currently has a career as a decorative painter. Another son, David, regularly assists Cynthia with prep work and equipment on some of her larger assignments. Two additional sons and a daughter have pursued careers outside of the decorative arts.

Keeping with her philosophy of "always challenging herself," Cynthia is contemplating a potential new life direction that may involve an extended trip to Egypt. The possibility of this trip came about rather serendipitously after Cynthia visited the Art Institute of Chicago to attend a lecture on the subject of 18th-century Pharaohs. At the lecture, Cynthia made the acquaintance of the curator of an Egyptian exhibit. Cynthia learned from the curator that, the Oriental Institute in affiliation with the University of Chicago is looking for staff artists to work at the Chicago

House in Luxor, Egypt. It is the artists' job to sketch and document the antiquities there. While it will be a minimum of a six-month commitment, Cynthia is giving serious thought to it.

Certainly, such a move would be in keeping with Cynthia's willingness to try new things. Whenever new opportunities arise, she reminds herself how far she has come from her days in Peotone, Ill. "All I had when I left Peotone was a lease on an apartment, a car payment and faith in myself," she says. "And now look where I am. If anyone had told me back then that I'd be going to such wonderful places as London, Paris, Bruges and possibly Egypt, I wouldn't have believed. But it's where I should be."

The journey of the last 30 years has been wonderful, according to Cynthia. There have been a few twists and turns in the road that have made the journey all the more exciting. Cynthia would encourage anyone to go on their own personal journey of artistic self-discovery. As she can attest, "Even seemingly dead ends can become endless trails of wondrous adventure." **TFF**

Visit Cynthia's Web site at www.classicalbycynthia.com. For Cynthia's upcoming classes in trompe l'oeil, contact the Faux Design Studio in Elmhurst, Ill., at (630) 832-1951.



Cynthia is ready for new challenges.