

# Fine art tile murals find niche in Montana

By Mack McConnell

Upscale homes are popping up all over the Gallatin Valley. As the number of fine homes increases, so does the demand for a fine art product fairly new to Montana. On a small ranch south of Manhattan, Debbie Porter creates high-quality hand-painted tile murals to meet that demand.

The style of the mural is described as “naturalism” with an emphasis on realism.

Although tile painting is not new, fine art overglaze enamel painting has been relatively rare in Montana because of a lack of demand.

That has changed. Debbie and a small group of other artists are now hard pressed to keep up with orders for fine murals.

Debbie and her husband Gary ranched in the Saco-Hinsdale area before they moved to the Gallatin Valley in 1978 to expand their embryo transfer business. They transfer frozen embryos from genetically superior cattle, usually Angus, to host cows all over the world.

Ranching is a sideline for the Porters now. “We still have about 20 cows here,” says Debbie. “We’re not making money on them but ranching gets in your blood so you keep doing it.”

During a business trip to Louisiana, Debbie became acquainted with an overglaze enamels artist.

“As soon as I saw what that woman on that ranch was doing, I new it was what I wanted to do,” Debbie says. When she returned home, she began lining up suppliers for the materials she was going to need. That is when she discovered the Montana China Painters Art Association.

“There are a lot of people in that organization and about three fourths of them live in rural areas,” says Debbie. “They mostly do ‘giftables,’ paintings on bells, tea cups and things like that and they sell most of their items in bazaars and fundraisers. They were very helpful to me.”

Debbie refined her glazing and mural techniques while attending two years of classes at Montana State University-Bozeman. Ten years ago, Debbie talked to an interior designer in Bozeman about her tile murals. That’s when she began receiving custom mural orders. Most of the murals end up in upscale kitchens and bathrooms. They can also be found in other areas in the house, like on fireplaces. They are considered fine art and are priced accordingly.

“The price depends somewhat on the amount of detail in the work,” Debbie says. Her son, Randy, who has a degree in marketing, has taken over that activity.



*Artist Debbie Porter*

“Randy’s really gung ho about it,” Debbie says with a smile.

Making overglaze murals is a very slow and painstaking process,” says Debbie. “That’s one reason a lot of artists don’t do it. The layering when you paint between firings is a very technique intensive process. Each piece is fired at least three times. It’s not what you would do in ceramic painting.” The process Debbie uses originated in Europe and has been in practice for centuries. It takes a lot of tools, kilns and machinery to start from raw clay and proceed to a work of art. Debbie has an art studio in her house and her workshop full of equipment is just across the back yard from the house. The equipment includes several kilns. The clay mixer is an old bread machine from a bakery in Malta.

The project Debbie was working on when she was interviewed in September was a mural for a table top. The mural was purchased by Valley Electric Cooperative in Glasgow. The co-op donated the mural to the Action Committee for Rural Electrification auction which was held September 29 during the Montana Electric Cooperatives’ Association annual meeting in West Yellowstone.

Debbie’s mother, Marge Yeska, serves on the Valley Electric Cooperative Board of Trustees.

“I remember a few years ago going with Mom to Washington, D.C. along with a lot of other co-op representatives,” says Debbie. “I was impressed by how articulate the co-op people were and how attentive the people in Washington were. We had an especially informative session with Senator Baucus. Mom really cares about the co-op. She feels a huge responsibility as a trustee. She was really proud when she finished the courses to become certified by the national co-op organization.

“Gary and I were raised in co-op families so we got an education in what they are all about. And we were on co-op lines ourselves when we lived on the Highline.”

For more information about PHD Tile, call Debbie at (406) 282-7487 or Randy at 1-800-531-7809 or (406) 580-9466 or e-mail [phdtile\\_customworks@hotmail.com](mailto:phdtile_customworks@hotmail.com).



*This tile top table with art by Debbie Porter was sold at auction during the MECA Annual Meeting.*