

History in Tile

by Diane Daniel (January 2, 2010 News and Observer)

Lifelong North Carolinian Anna Quinn has combined her love of history and architecture to create a line of coasters, trivets and wall hangings. For almost a decade, Quinn and her cousin Elise Atkins, both of Raleigh, have made gift items that celebrate all things North Carolina. The work, under the name Lithic Designs, is made by transferring photographs or artwork onto marble tiles.

The idea to promote her home state in such a fashion came from her mother, Elise Dyer, who also lives in Raleigh.

"My mom had gone on vacation in Kentucky, and she'd bought a couple of tiles similar to what I do now. She said, 'You have to figure out how to do this, and I can sell them in my store.' " At the time, Dyer owned a gift shop in her then-home of Washington, a historic riverfront town in the eastern part of the state.

"From my background, I knew just enough to figure it out," said Quinn, who was looking for part-time work after the birth of her and her husband's first child. (They now have two daughters.)

For Quinn, 44, it also was a chance to mine historical documents and photographs of her state. "I've always been a big history buff," she said.

Immersed in history

Quinn grew up in Matthews, just southeast of Charlotte.

"We lived down a dirt road with just two other families. Nearby were pit holes from the gold rush days. We kids would spend time looking for gold, but of course all you'd ever find was fool's gold."

A natural artist, Quinn drew

and painted all through school, and studied archaeology and studio art at Wake Forest University, graduating in 1988.

For several years she was a contract archaeologist working on federal highway projects, which were mandated to first check for any significant remains.

After a few years, her interests took her above ground. "I decided I was more interested in buildings and the whole concept of shelter," she said.

Quinn went on to get a master's degree in architecture from N.C. State University, and then she worked for Davis Kane Architects in Raleigh for several years.

As a stay-at-home mom, she saw the tiles as a great opportunity to keep her hands in historical research while earning an income. Atkins came on board a couple of years later.

"The first things I did were a lot of images of Little Washington," she said of the name Washington residents use to distinguish themselves from the nation's capital. "They were the first town named after George Washington, in 1776. They're very proud of that fact."

From there, Quinn started to include other towns and themes.

"From the beginning I decided I just wanted to do North Carolina images," she said. "If you don't limit it, you'll have thousands of pictures from all over the world."

She started to gather copyright-free images, as well as photograph her own.

"Even back when I started, the Library of Congress had a lot

of stuff online already," she said.

Local landmarks

Her collection includes lighthouses, universities, golf images, boats, trains, and tobacco-themed historical photos. She also has a collection of cities and towns that includes Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill, Apex and Cary, as well as coastal, mountain and other Piedmont locations.

On the back of the pieces, she and Atkins place labels that identify the image and when it was taken.

As a Wake Forest and NCSU graduate, Quinn jokes that she's annoyed that her top-selling image comes from UNC-Chapel Hill.

"As much as I hate to say it, it's the Old Well," she said. Images of lighthouses run a close second.

Tiles graced with Duke Chapel and N.C. State's Memorial Bell Tower do well too.

One of her personal favorites is Chatham Street in Cary from around 1900.

"It's really cool, and I was so excited when I got it. But it hardly ever sells."

Along with mining archival photos, both she and Atkins take photos wherever they go.

"I do edit them, taking out power lines and brightening up the images," Quinn said.

She also does custom work, which could include children's drawings, or photos of homes, family members, and pets. Of the dog breeds immortalized on tile, the most popular "far and away" are Cavalier King Charles Spaniels," she said. "I don't know what it is about

that breed and their owners."

Preserving history

Although Quinn is a talented artist, she has made only a few tiles using her drawings but has considered doing more.

Over the past decade, Quinn has kept her hand in architectural work. Her most recent project is with Ruth Little of Longleaf Historic Resources, researching historic homes in Madonna Acres and Longview Gardens, among four Raleigh modernist neighborhoods being considered for listing as National Register Historic Districts.

"Part of what we're doing is photographing the houses, so it's helping with my photography skills," Quinn said.

People are always asking Quinn how she gets the images on the tiles, but she keeps that a secret. "We don't tell anyone exactly how we do it," she said, "and I haven't seen anyone do exactly the same thing." Some people assume that the name Lithic has to do with lithography, but it is defined as something related to stone or rock.

Quinn has experimented with other materials. "The designs will go on glass, and look really cool, but they scratch off easily."

One place she'd love to see a row of her tiles is behind a kitchen sink, she said.

"I'm still waiting for the person brave enough to do a backsplash. That could really look great."

Send suggestions to diane@bydianedaniel.com.

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