

IN TEXAS HILL COUNTRY— COUNTRY— >>> WITH **LOVE**

More than just a gallery, Artisans at Rocky Hill is like one big family, with owners Anne and Barry Bradley the artists' biggest boosters

BY HOPE DANIELS

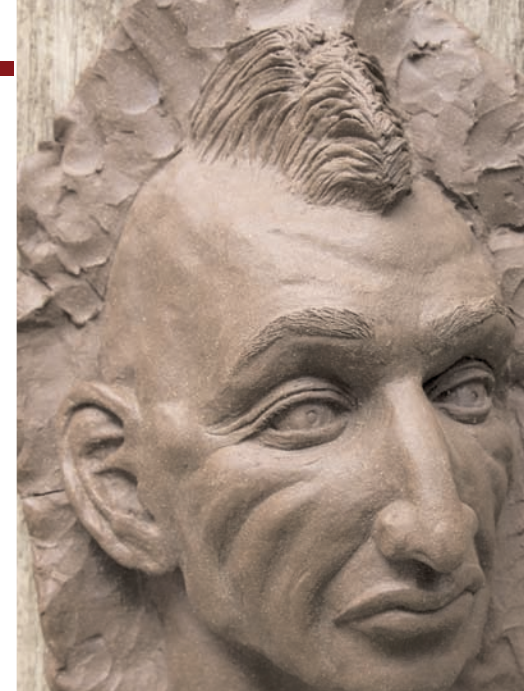
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AL RENDON

Artisans at Rocky Hill co-owner Anne Bradley admits she didn't go about planning her retail gallery operation by the book. It was more like, "Let's open a gallery," she laughs, to sell her husband Barry's handcrafted furniture and canoes.

The couple didn't do extensive research. They liked crafts and Barry had been a part-time craftsman since first learning wood-working as a boy, but neither had any formal training in the visual arts. And they latched onto the idea of opening a particular store in a particular place more as the result of an enticing opportunity than from a fully mapped-out plan.

Yet after five years of business in two locations, Artisans is not only doing well, it's thriving. Sales were up in 2009, 13% over the year before. The number of artists represented burgeoned from 18 to 91. And the gallery's location on Main Street in downtown Fredericksburg, Texas, almost guarantees a steady stream of customers.

All of which speaks volumes about the passion and commitment of both the Bradleys and their artists, whom the couple have worked diligently to make an integral part of their success. >>



A sampling of Texas Hill Country art and craft by Artisans artists (clockwise from top left): detail from "Old Warrior" clay sculpture by Sylvia Knust, of Bandera; "Flora" mosaic sculpture by Suzan Germond, of Austin; detail from "Horse Spirit," a mixed-media wall sculpture by Steve Hunsicker, of Bulverde; detail from "Fields of Glory," an oil painting by Pat Childress, of Boerne; "Zebra" by Alan Carr, of Fredericksburg, with flower sculpture detail by Deb Gioia, of Center Point, in the background; "Beguiled by the Devil," a 35x24-inch box elder wood turning by James R. Johnson, of Kerrville; detail from "The Judges" by rock artist Carlos Moseley, of Fredericksburg; and detail from "Homeward Bound," a mixed-media collage by Melissa Starry, of Fredericksburg.





In the garden, (left), kinetic artist Ralph Moresco, top, and copper sculpture artist Stevie Lake, bottom, show off some of their work. A floor display (above) includes two small mesquite tables by Lou Quallenberg tucked under a distressed oak table on kudu horn legs by Dan Pfeiffer. The room divider is a collaboration by Barry Bradley and Kathleen McBride who crafted the fused glass panels.



Owners Anne and Barry Bradley, in foreground, are flanked by (from left to right) staffer Sheila Bingham, artist Stevie Lake, staffer Kim Baethge and artist Melissa Starry.

“Artisans is the only place in town offering a diverse selection of fine craft alongside fine art, all made in Texas Hill Country.” —Anne Bradley



Fit for a king (or queen) is this adult-sized mosaic “Peacock Throne,” by artist Suzan Germond.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Artisans at Rocky Hill actually almost never got off the ground. As Anne tells it, the couple had been pestered for nearly a year by local developer Hal Guttery to consider renting one of his buildings in a pretty little complex of log cabins and rock buildings about seven miles east of town. And over and over again, they turned him down.

“Then one evening we found ourselves at Luckenbach sipping drinks and listening to music, and there, too, was Hal,” says Anne. “He told us he’d just leased a third building at Rocky Hill to a wine tasting room and implored us to at least come out and see the place.” Relenting, they took him up on his offer and fell in love with it.

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the Bradleys told each other.
And they immediately signed
a three-year lease.**

“It was a 1,500-square-foot stucco-and-rock building with a front porch and a yard, and it sat right next door to the incoming wine tasting room,” she says. “Perfect, just perfect!” we told each other.” And they signed a three-year lease.

Reality struck when they got back in the car. “How in the world are we going to do this?” we both said.” And rather than turning left to go home, they turned right and headed to Kerrville for the Texas Arts & Crafts Fair, where they reasoned that since

they were opening a “store that sold stuff made in Texas,” there’d be “lots of folks from Texas who made stuff.” By day’s end, they’d gotten several commitments, the first coming from Suzan Germond, a mosaic artist who is still with the gallery. Following a month-long flurry of activity and with 18 artists on board, Artisans at Rocky Hill opened for business.

TRANSITION TIME

“We were located in the perfect Hill Country setting with businesses that complemented what we were doing,” Anne remembers. In addition to a four-star restaurant and a women’s clothing boutique, the final two buildings in the complex were leased to second art gallery and the Fredericksburg Artists’ School. “But being located on a major highway had its drawbacks. Once the wine tasting room announced it was leaving, we knew we needed to as well.

“My artists wanted to go to Main Street, Fredericksburg, and told me they’d help.” So she put out word that Artisans was looking for new space. Before long, numerous landlords were giving her leads, the best of which turned out to be their current location: a 3,000 square-foot historic space on the west end of Main Street just a block from Market Square. “We left Rocky Hill with 36 artists on June 8, 2008 and reopened June 19 with 61.”

The biggest challenge? The interior’s rock and plaster walls. “I reviewed various professional hanging systems and realized they just wouldn’t work for us, so Barry and I devised a cable system with turnbuckles, chains and S hooks. Visually it disappears. And it was very inexpensive.”



A detail from Carlos Moseley’s “Long Ride Home.”

KEEPING IT LOCAL

If galleries could dance, Artisans at Rocky Hill would be doing the Texas two-step. Everything about it conveys an energetic sense of fun, from Suzan Germond’s mosaic throne stationed across from the check-out counter to Barry Bradley’s handcrafted canoe perched on top of a high ledge in the middle of the showroom floor.

The structure was built in 1900 as a grocery store and living quarters. Today, its huge storefront windows are filled with an ever-changing array of art, as well as lighting by neon artist Fritz Ozuna that’s guaranteed to attract attention. Inside, the gallery incorporates a spacious retail floor with soaring white plaster walls, extensive nooks and crannies for individual displays, and a center hallway that leads to a working (and craft-filled) kitchen, smaller gallery rooms for themed artwork and, at the very back, an enclosed courtyard for artist Ralph Moresco’s kinetic art.

The gallery represents just under 100 artists working in just about every craft medium as well as sculpture and painting.

If galleries could dance, this one would be doing the

Texas two-step.



ARTISANS AT ROCKY HILL

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- **OWNERS:** Anne and Barry Bradley
- **YEAR FOUNDED:** 2005
- **RETAIL SPACE:** 3,000 square feet
- **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 5 part-time, plus 30 artists who spend one day per month in the gallery
- **NUMBER OF ARTISTS REPRESENTED:** 91
- **MAILING LIST:** 1,100
- **MERCHANDISE MIX:** Ceramics, glass, paintings, furniture, home accessories, turned wood, mosaics, sculpture, kinetic art, neon lighting, textiles and mixed media
- **ADVERTISING/MARKETING METHODS:** Rack cards distributed to hotels, CVB and displayed outside gallery door, e-newsletters, and local playbill, newspaper and magazine ads
- **SPECIAL EVENTS:** First Friday Art Walk Fredericksburg, annual Holiday Celebration of Art and " 'Tis the Season for Jewels" trunk show
- **CUSTOMER SERVICE:** Layaway, no handling or service fees for shipping, personalized thank you notes

Rock and plaster walls create a perfect backdrop for Artisans' extensive selection of paintings. The mesquite partners desk is by Lou Quallenberg. A raku-fired clay horse by Austin artist Richard Hess is displayed prominently on top. "Rings of Change," a copper wind spiral (far right), is by Ralph Moresco; "Breaking the Surface," a mesquite and spalted pecan sculpture, is by Barry Bradley. Melissa Starry created "Go Fig-ure," (below) a mixed-media collage.

All are Texas artists, and nearly all of them live in Hill Country, a regional designation for 25 counties in Central Texas, including parts of San Antonio and Austin. As a result, the gallery is developing a growing reputation as a unique venue for some of the best two- and three-dimensional art by Hill Country artists in the U.S.

Rumor has it that Fredericksburg's locals never shop Main Street because of the tourists, Anne says, but "that's not true for Artisans. Easily fifty percent of our sales come from the local community." The other half comes from the more than 1.5 million international tourists who make their way to Fredericksburg every year.

To make things easier on her employees, Anne regularly updates a how-to book placed near the checkout counter covering everything from security and lighting to layaways and gift certificates. "I also keep a 'bio book,'" she says, "with biographies of every artist we represent. It helps staff familiarize themselves with our artists, and we can copy them for customers to take home with their purchases."

Anne also takes the time to get to know the artists personally. "About a third of my artists work one day a month in the gallery," she says. In exchange, she accepts a reduced commission on those artists' sales. But the benefits far outweigh the contract. "I learn about them, their families, their art and their techniques," she says. "They learn how I promote them, and I can promote them while they're here. That's the fun part."

In addition to the artist-community she's cultivated at the gallery, Anne oversees the day-to-day operations with five part-time staffers. And with her husband's retirement this year from

full-time teaching, she hopes to get more help from him. "I know he'll spend most of his time in his shop, though, doing his art," she laughs. "But that's okay with me. Barry's work has always been one of our best sellers!"

LOOKING BACK, PLANNING AHEAD

"We've been very fortunate," muses Anne when asked about the impact of the economy on Artisans. "We're in a very busy tourist town, and apart from the first four months of 2009, the economy hasn't affected us too badly. Barry and I have also worked hard to create something unique—Artisans is the only place in town offering a diverse selection of fine craft alongside fine art, all made in the Texas Hill Country."

Any advice for other gallery owners? "Stay positive, keep smiling, love your work and the people who entrust you with their art. If a gallery takes care of its artists and communicates with them often, the artists will take care of the gallery," she says. "They'll tell everyone to go see their work there, they'll pass out gallery info at their shows, they'll bring in family and friends, they'll link their websites to yours, and they'll love the gallery and take ownership in it."

"Believe me, I know, because it's happened to me," she adds. "If they feel welcome by those who own it, they'll keep your gallery doors open for business. It all boils down to mutual respect."

"My bonus?" Anne concludes. "Wonderful friendships." ■

Hope Daniels is the editorial director of NICHE magazine.

