

Flair for Faux & Magic Murals

BY E.T. ROBBINS

Turning artistic passion into a business isn't easy. Some artists worry about selling their art, while others worry about selling out. Indeed, it's a delicate balance between the two. But Brenda Blatchford Cirioni has always been good at juggling.

Faux finishes pay the bills while murals feed her soul. Both types of work make up MaisonArt, a business Cirioni started in 1994 after spending years painting by day and waiting tables at night. Cirioni recounts the evening when a customer triggered her entrepreneurial spirit.

"I met someone who had gone to art school and started a painting company. She was showing me her portfolio and I'm thinking to myself, 'I could do that.' So, that's what I did."

Getting to that point wasn't easy. Cirioni started her formal education at New England School of Art, in Boston, in 1972. She lasted three weeks before finding the curriculum too regimented. She visited The Museum School of Fine Arts in Boston and fell in love with the loose, creative atmosphere. Personal problems, however, sent Cirioni home to Rhode Island. Eight years passed. Then art began beckoning again.

Cirioni returned to The Museum School of Fine Arts in 1980. After completing her degree, she opened a studio in Boston's South End while working in a restaurant at night. Her medium was oil on canvas or oil on paper. Her subject? Landscapes. Although she had some commercial success, Cirioni says there was more to it than that. "I was doing it for the love it."

Cirioni met her husband in 1987, married, moved to the suburbs, and had a son, Evan, in 1990. Suddenly, Cirioni encountered a new problem.

"I found it impossible to paint. I was still working at night, so I had him [Evan] during the day. For me, I really need time to paint because my painting really comes from inside. It takes time, concentration, and focus and you don't really get that when you have a little one running around."

In 1994, Evan was getting ready to enter school. Then came that fortuitous evening when Cirioni met a fellow artist working on her own. Cirioni decided to turn her own love of art into a business. "I'm a real optimist and I just thought, 'it's going to work.' It will come."

Cirioni says both faux finishing and murals are options for homeowners, but she prefers working on murals.

"A mural is basically a painting on a wall. A faux finish is a treatment; it's a technique. You don't have to be creative to do faux finishing. I don't want to say anyone can do it. The tricky part of being good, I think, is getting the right colors and the right techniques for the room. You don't just go in and paint everything with one brush."

Cirioni says there are times when she'll tell clients that they don't need faux finishing or murals.

"I was in a house today and there was a lot of clutter. It's a busy, active house. I told her [the client], 'You don't want decorative painting in here. You have so much going on that just having a beautiful, solid color for the background is all you need.'"

Does Cirioni miss her studio days? She says it's a trade-off, although she recently acquired space in Maynard.

"The studio days were great because I love to paint. I love to paint probably more than anything. But they can be very lonely and I didn't get the connection that I get now with MaisonArt."

Cirioni points out that she still gets to paint when doing murals, including the occasional landscape. She describes one client who had a narrow, dark, 15-foot hallway. The client hated the hallway and was thinking of adding stripes.

"I said, 'No, you don't want stripes in a narrow hallway.' She kept saying, 'I want this to feel bigger.' So I said, 'How about I paint a landscape that just goes on for miles?'"

The client mentioned that she liked American painter Thomas Hart Benton. Cirioni did her research.

"I looked at some of his work. I found a sketch that he had done of a view from Martha's Vineyard. It had the farmland, rolling hills, and then the ocean and sky, and I thought that would be great."

Cirioni was pleased with the results, which took her close to two months to finish. She says the joy is in watching the creative process unfold. MaisonArt's tagline is "Turning the Ordinary into the Extraordinary."

"That whole area is now an environment. They're not walking down their hall anymore. They're on Martha's Vineyard."

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