



THE ART SLEUTH

AUTHENTICATING AND COMMISSIONING
GREAT ART TAKES YEARS OF EXPERIENCE —
AND A SHARP EYE FOR THE PERFECT DETAIL

BY MARY ELLE HUNTER



Have you ever wondered who selects the artwork that enhances the walls of upscale hotels and corporate offices, or, for that matter, advises the owners of splendid residences on which painting or piece of sculpture is the perfect choice for a particular setting? Meet Debra Rhodes Smith, a Pinehurst woman with a fascinating career of offering fine art services and compiling art collections for major corporations, as well as for private individuals.

Art has always been a part of Debra's world. She studied art throughout her youth and at Alfred University, where she first majored in art education. A later switch to business administration brought her closer to her pre-graduation goal of becoming a museum curator. But that path was transformed when she was offered a position at New York's HMK Fine Arts, then an internationally known fine art print publisher. She quickly advanced through the company and began to interact with commercial interior decorators on various projects.

"I discovered a niche of working with interior designers for hotels and corporations," Debra says. "One in particular encouraged me to go off on my own and start my own consulting business. I took that advice, and Marsh & McLennan, a prominent insurance firm, became my first client."

In subsequent years her list of clients became quite diverse — from Neiman-Marcus and Comcast to American Airlines and British Airways, where she met her husband, Bill Smith, a senior executive of the company. She has also acted on behalf of luxury hotel chains, such as Hyatt, Renaissance and Marriott.

Debra Rhodes Smith expanded her fine art services to another dimension when she enrolled in New York University's Fine Arts Appraisal program, and became a member of the Appraisers Association of America. She has also been accredited as a Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practice (USPAP) appraiser.

The USPAP standards, legislated by Congress in conjunction with the Appraisal Foundation in Washington, D.C., are used by the Internal Revenue Service, insurance companies and other regulatory and administrative entities. These standards include a stringent set of criteria, providing a yardstick for art and other types of personal property appraisals.

The USPAP appraisal is a legal document, Debra explains, totally different from off-the-cuff verbal type valuations. She goes on to describe an experience where she was asked to appraise artwork consisting of a suite of limited edition prints that had been a gift to a nonprofit organization, who wished to liquidate the prints and use the proceeds to strengthen their operating fund. The prints (lithographs) were on paper by a modern well-known artist.

"I was a bit leery of the true value, as this artist had often been the subject of fakes. As I examined the work, I noticed that the watermark on the paper was 'a little off' so I took a photograph of the watermark, submitted it to Arches, the company who had produced the paper, and

Top right clockwise: Fin Restaurant at the Tropicana in Atlantic City, NJ. Detail of the original mural by Paula Montgomery. Glass fish. Mural in place at Fin. Above: Art expert Debra Rhodes Smith.



Right to left: Moroccan Suite at the Tropicana. Art and accessories at the Southwest Suite. Bedding ensemble at the French Suite.



Michael Mahan and Debra Rhodes Smith

asked for verification. The reply I received was that it was an imitation, and I was faced with the unpleasant task of telling the client who had hired me to do the appraisal that the suite of prints was not appraisable and why. Whoever had created the bogus prints even went to the trouble of attempting to knock off the watermark as well.”

Her work schedule can best be described as a “proverbial roller coaster.” In addition to her appraisal requests, she never knows what the next phone call will bring, and “out of the clear blue sky, a project drops into my lap.” New inquiries for her fine art services are supplemented by calls from clients with whom she has worked previously.

Her talent is having a sense of recognizing precisely what the client is looking for. “With only a few bits of information, I often can tell exactly what will fit in the setting.”

For instance, Debra had a call from a designer who was working on a celebrity dressing room, and needed accessories and furnishings. “I immediately thought of the look made famous by the renowned interior designer Dorothy Draper, and her successor, Carleton Varney. Besides coming up with several decorative items, I located some unique chairs to be placed around a table — in pristine white with silhouettes of Audrey Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe imprinted on the back panels. It was just the right touch for a celebrity dressing room.”

Over the course of her career, Debra Rhodes Smith has amassed a significant catalog of resources, which she is constantly updating and expanding. During the years she lived in New York City, she acknowledges she frequently limited her resources to the metropolitan area.

However, since she and her husband moved to Pinehurst ten years ago, she relies on the Internet to a greater extent, and is able to deal on a much

wider scale with artists and craftspeople across the county and around the globe.

Nevertheless, in two current cases, she found the right resource in Moore County. She had been contacted by the Hyatt organization, the first hotel chain with whom she had worked. They were seeking artwork and accessories for guest rooms in their newest luxury boutique hotel, the Andaz, being built on Fifth Avenue across from the New York Public Library.

“One of the projects was an unusual request for a footbath to be placed in the shower stall in each guest bathroom. Originally it was thought that they should be made of cloisonné, but that idea was discarded, and stoneware was substituted.”

Actually, the project was put on hold for more than a year due to the economy, and then, just when Debra received a purchase order to go ahead, the original craftsman suddenly wasn’t available. Seeking a replacement, she turned to the Internet, and saw a webpage featuring a spokesperson for the Seagrove Potters Association, who happened to be Michael Mahan. As the cliché goes, the rest is history.

“I commissioned Michael, who has been creating pottery in the Seagrove area for twenty years, to come up with a prototype of a ceramic footbath bowl eighteen inches in diameter and weighing seventeen pounds, with a beautiful glaze similar to graphite. William Paley, the senior designer on the project, called it an outstanding interpretation of just what they were looking for. It is not only functional, but it is a beautiful fine art piece. Michael has been working on the creation of 198 of the footbath bowls, with 75 of them completed by the end of June, and the balance due in August.”

The other instance of finding a local artist to work on a special project revolves around the Tropicana Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City, also

previous clients of Debra Rhodes Smith. She was asked to “refresh” some high-end two and three bedroom suites that she had first worked on in the mid 1990s. Then, for a new restaurant called “Fin,” the Tropicana people wanted to have two square columns in the middle of the room decorated with murals like ones they had seen at another location where the columns were embellished with figures of Cirque du Soleil performers.

“A short time ago I had commissioned Paula Montgomery, a well known Sandhills area artist, to do a mural at the Overlook at Pine Knoll for St. Joseph in the Pines,” Debra says. “So I immediately thought of her for the Tropicana job, and presented her sketches of a mermaid mural, which were enthusiastically accepted. These comely creatures are depicted in deep blue waters surrounded by various denizens of the sea. The entire mural for each column is seven feet tall by nine feet wide, and they are painted on heavy-duty canvas, which is applied around each column like a durable wall covering.”

Another request for the restaurant was for some blown glass fish which would appear to be floating on a wall. Debra got in touch with FusionZ, a California company that specializes in designing and wholesaling hand-blown art glass created in this country and abroad. The

end result was the installation, which she supervised on-site earlier in the summer, of a school of thirty glass fish, blown in Czechoslovakia. Anywhere from nine to sixteen inches long, the fish are dramatically balanced along one wall of the restaurant, affixed by use of unseen rods.

Locally, Debra Rhodes Smith has worked extensively with interior designer Michelle Gowan. “People who have moved to the area from other parts of the country are interested in repositioning the artwork they have brought with them, or even adding to it,” she observes. “The light here is different, or they want art that blends in with the overall design of a new home, or they would like to simply change the framing of a piece.”

The home which Debra and Bill chose in Pinehurst reflects their own particular taste in artwork. A focal point in the tastefully furnished living room is a large painting by Jan Wunderman, an expressionist whose work Debra admires. “Even though some of our visitors may not like contemporary art, they are always taken by the soft fusion of colors in the work,” she says.

In other rooms distinctive paintings, sketches or prints by foremost American and foreign artists are exhibited, and the great room has an

impressive display of large framed photographs taken by Debra, representing images of memories from the couple’s travels throughout the United States and abroad.

Their latest journeys have included a Baltic Sea cruise, as well as a New England cruise, and earlier this spring, with another couple, they spent time on the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, the collection of 468 holes of championship-caliber golf at eleven courses across Alabama.

Her travel on business has declined substantially, compared with what her schedule was when they first moved to North Carolina, thanks to the wonders of the iPhone, e-mail and the Internet. “I can work late at night or early in the morning, doing research, and selecting pieces for a designer’s or client’s consideration. This way they can review proposals at their leisure, and my actual on-site meetings are kept to a minimum.

“Aside from those few trips, the business traveling I do is to important shows of fine arts organizations or the American Craft Council, and the occasional nostalgic trip to New York City, where I make a tour of the museums and galleries, soaking up the city ambience for a few days before returning to the very comfortable life we enjoy under the Carolina blue skies.” PS

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