

The Muralist

How artist Dana Holliday brilliantly deceives the eye and mastered the art of self-reinvention

BY CYNTHIA ADAMS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMY FREEMAN



Dana Holliday is witty and likes occasional tomfoolery — but the Thomasville artist is not fooling around when it comes to houses and the decorative arts. Trompel’œil (French for “deceive the eye”) is something painter and muralist Holliday has mastered; along the way, she is also mastering the art of self-reinvention.

“Dana is just so incredibly talented,” says Peter Freeman, of Freeman Kennett Architecture in High Point, who worked with the artist professionally on Hillbrook, one of High Point’s most ambitious residential restorations.

The affable Holliday herself is a bit of trompel’œil, in that she appears to be perpetually laid-back. In truth, the international traveler and sought-after artist lives a revved-up, highly caffeinated life, pedaling in high gear. (Literally and figuratively; she is an avid cyclist.) Holliday is not even still when painting.

On a sunny day in downtown High Point, Holliday swings into Starbucks at the wheel of a British red Mini Cooper, wearing a breezy tunic top splashed with color like an artist’s palette. She orders iced coffee, fully leaded, and while stirring it with a straw, discusses a pending cycling trip in Italy. In two days she and a close friend will pedal their way from Verona to Venice — which is more than 120 kilometers in the June heat.

Her laughter peals as Holliday admits she hasn’t yet packed. Given she



sometimes lives out of suitcase between out-of-state mural clients and global trekking to far-flung destinations, Holliday also has holiday packing down to a science.

The artist — who has developed quite a following for her murals, historically-correct restoration work, decorative furniture painting and faux finishes — is checking off items on her bucket list, having just closed out an exhibition of photographic works a week earlier of images she shot last year while in Nepal. The scenes were starkly beautiful in muted tones. All of her photos were arresting; all sold well, but none was created for commercial appeal alone. These were works of the heart, whose sales were earmarked to benefit Nepalese quake victims.

There is, she admits with a giggle, a lot of hippie in her.

The North Carolina native travels widely, both for work and pleasure. Travel, Holliday says, is how she renews her creativity. Her work as a muralist has netted commissions around the country, where she creates convincing, artistic scenes in the homes of the well-heeled, even out West. Close to home, she recently won a competition to create a mural on a building in downtown Thomasville. The mural's scale is sufficiently large to require a cherry picker to hoist the petite artist into the air.

On her personal time, Holliday leads art events to teach disadvantaged women to execute some of the faux finishes she has perfected.

As jovial as Holliday is, given her quick smile and ready laugh, there is another, more serious aspect that she says was underscored by life events.

Life looked deceptively good from the artist's perspective. Then, two years ago, her marriage began unraveling, and things took a disastrous turn two weeks after her 50th birthday. While working on a massive project, 13 feet by 26, Holliday took a step back to reflect for a moment and fell, severely breaking her right wrist.

"It was August 26, 2013." The date is one she won't forget — the artist is right-handed. Holliday's response to the disaster? "I got up the next day and started painting with my left hand. I had roughed the project in before I fell."

Had she ever painted with her left hand? "Uh, no." Yet she did, and finished the project on time.

She opens a notebook and points to a furniture showroom with walls filled to replicate a quaint cityscape. This was the work she completed using her non-dominant hand while her right wrist was encased in a cast. "I got tougher," she says. Holliday started doing pushups and yoga to strengthen her broken wrist.



The finished scenes appear convincingly perfect — a sunny downtown fiction of her own design, with incredible detail. The work didn't suffer a whit.

"I think it (the physical struggle) released something in me," she admits. "I love what I do, and I had a job to finish and had to do it. I feel like the guy in *True Grit*," she says laughing merrily, evoking the tough character Rooster Cogburn. "Anyway, I can now paint with my left hand. I got my cast off right before furniture market in October."

Recently, Holliday undertook a project with the nonprofit group Caring Services, teaching people to paint. She marvels at one coincidence — among them is one ambidextrous student she met through the organization, who is also able to paint with either hand. "I told her, 'Honey, that's OK!'"

Frequent commissions for home and corporate projects mean that Holliday has murals sprinkled throughout the Triad and out-of-state. Of course, furniture market is a mainstay client, but so are Triad businesses. Her portfolio is full of colorful examples. Many are residential, but she gets her share of corporate commissions.

"I did a mural on crusty concrete at the old Adams Millis headquarters. I did a Japanese landscape, a mural in 3-D at the Pavilion at the International Furnishings Center." Holliday also painted a "huge mural" for Deuterma Law.

And then, there is the extensive work that Holliday undertook at Hillbrook, an Emerywood house in the historic neighborhood.

Actually, it is a mansion.

Currently owned by Stephen Ponds, Hillbrook is a 1930s Norman Tudor designed by Luther Lashmit for textile baron Comer Covington. (Lashmit was a Winston-Salem architect who is better known for designing the Graylyn manor house for tobacco baron Bowman Gray.) Hillbrook was a long-term project that included extensive mural work, faux painting in numerous rooms and wallpaper restoration during a full, jaw-dropping renovation.

"I did the Ponds' house, murals and wood graining," says Holliday. The Emerywood mansion is a four-story standout among her most ambitious works. It is also a showcase of the artist's skills.

Holliday helped achieve Freeman's vision for a newly designed downstairs bar. With Freeman's concept and Holliday's painterly talents, it became a trompel'œil signature within the elegant house. In a once gloomy service room, a clock was created to disguise pipes — and the effect is delightfully, convincingly Art Deco.

"She hand-painted the Art Deco "circus tent" in the bar and helped with re-touching. Dana is and has been an invaluable resource for us whether the project







involves a mural, a faux finish or a creative texture,” says Freeman.

Freeman oversaw the exhaustive restoration of Hillbrook, including the gardens. He worked closely with the artist and credits her with exceeding the high standards that Ponds had for the project. “Dana did a wonderful job capturing the spirit of a Norman Tudor Revival landscape in the Hunt Room mural,” says Freeman. “The landscape and the manor house depicted in the scene are reminiscent of the original wallpaper in the room.”

Holliday’s next commission is for the Davidson County Historical Museum and then she will commence work for a boutique in Apex.

But she wants to design her own line of original wallpaper and has plans to pursue that interest this year. She also wants to move more toward abstraction. Mural work is usually literal; the artist in her is craving to stretch more. “My sister-in-law compares me to O’Keefe or the Impressionists,” Holliday says.

And now, mindful of her bucket list, she also wishes to return to serious painting, which for Holliday means working in oils.

Her artistic career was launched after completing a fine arts degree at UNCG while still in her 30s, following the births of two sons. Initially Holliday plied her skills as a decorative painter for the home furnishings company As You Like It. “I was doing a lot of furniture painting for an Italian furniture company.”

She says she finessed her skills there, learning the intricacies and technique of her craft. Not content to rest on her laurels, Holliday, with a bulging portfolio, made contact with a renowned British artist who is a muralist and faux painter, and sought him out.

“I took a weeklong mural class in England with Graham Rust . . . it was on my bucket list,” Holliday says. When she showed him her finished works from back in the States, Rust seemed incredulous that she wanted to study under him. She laughs, saying she still enjoyed it, and appreciated the affirmation of a fellow muralist.

Also on Holliday’s bucket list: “To go see James Taylor. And, I want to travel more. Also, I want to do more canvas time.” (In artist’s speak, this means she intends to do more private painting on canvas versus massive walls.)

She comes from a globe-trotting family. After Holliday went to Costa Rica to an Omega Institute yoga event, her mother, not to be outdone, hiked the Camino Real alone. Then her brother went to Ecuador.

The high-spirited family lives on a sprawling compound dotted with their individual homes on a 62-acre farm in Lexington, in a place first settled by their Bavarian ancestors.

When she isn’t jetting off on a goodwill trek or adventure, Holliday is plotting her next creative or spiritual escape. “I seek inspiration when I travel,” she says. Last year, she took the trip to Nepal prompted by her experiences in Costa Rica.

In Nepal, Holliday shed a vestige of her old life as well. “I took my old wedding band and left it there,” Holliday chuckles, as if the band of gold were alms paid to a nation for a gift. “It (Nepal) inspired my painting.”

She turns pensive, discussing the aftermath of a devastated Nepal, a place that deeply influenced her. Holliday had planned to return this year, but given the devastation, will instead place that energy into doing works that might be of benefit to the victims. The tragedy inspired her to have a summer art show in June at The 512 Collective art gallery in High Point, with proceeds going to Nepal relief. Again, this was her way of paying forward a place that enriched her creative spirit and emboldened her to keep ticking experiences off her bucket list. Her life isn’t only about the art she creates, but about the art of living itself.

“When I die, I want them to say, ‘She cared. She inspired.’” **OII**

To see more of Dana Holliday’s works go to www.danaholliday.com.

Cynthia Adams is O.Henry’s contributing editor.

A SLICE OF Burgundy in Stoney Creek

*Artist Dana Holliday custom paints a mural for
Francophiles Sharon and Tom James*

By Cynthia Adams • Photographs by Amy Freeman

Sharon and Tom James didn't like the idea of retirement, per se, but as they left their corporate lives, opted instead for a grand *rearrangement*. This was a rearrangement with a stated purpose: to pursue *joie de vivre*. Both agreed to retool and reboot, and they knew exactly how they would do it—by living in two residences, one on each side of the Atlantic. So, Tom, once a corporate executive, is now a financial adviser and an assistant professor at High Point University. Sharon, formerly a hospital administrator in Chapel Hill, travels internationally with a firm that accredits hospitals worldwide.

The Jameses rearranged their work lives in order to summer in Burgundy, France. For a few months each year, Ancy le Franc is a refuge that affords them this luxury. Their ancient Burgundian townhouse, filled with French antiques and treasures, is a traditional 18th-century village house. It most expresses the couple's mutual admiration for culture and history.

"From Ancy le Franc you have easy access to an embarrassment of cultural, architectural, gastronomic and spiritual riches," the Jameses explain in an online vacation rental post. "As the famous food writer Mireille Johnstone has written, 'The pre-Roman crypts, Roman ruins, monasteries, fortified cities, castles and Roman and Gothic cathedrals still seem to grow out of the land according to some natural law.'" In short, it was nothing like Stoney Creek, where their permanent home backs up to a golf course.

Five years into their experiment in life rearrangement, the Jameses discovered a way to import a bit of Burgundy to Whitsett, thanks to the talents of artist and muralist Dana Holliday.

While working abroad for various large corporations, Tom had made frequent business trips to France and Italy. He scoured for a home. Approximately an hour south of Paris, he found Ancy le Franc was accessible and attuned to a different pace. Here was a

place where things stopped during the lunch hour and villagers enjoyed a table wine, or *vin de pays*, with bread, butter, radishes and *pâté*. Ancy was also a place where the wine fields were an easy drive away, and where golden fields of mustard grew—the very scenery that dazzles viewers during the Tour de France.

Once the Jameses discovered the townhouse, "We completed the purchase in August of 2002," recalls Sharon. It still features a slate roof, stone flooring on the first level, a restored limestone fireplace and original beams. It was even chosen as a featured home on the Fine Living Channel television series "Around the World in 80 Homes." The rusticity of the place was enchanting for them both. And as an avid collector, Sharon was excited by the variety and access to French antiques, especially furniture, pewter and *faïence*. Tom, already fluent in French, spent part of a summer with Sharon in Nice in 2013, while they took an intensive conversational French course. Both were besotted with France.

Here in Ancy, as their entry at vrbo.com, a vacation rental site, says, "you have a recipe for the perfect escape to one of the most ancient and beautiful regions of France." Although the village is compact, it is large on charm and everything is within an easy walk. There are boulangeries, butcher shops, restaurants, a bar and grill, wine bar, a newsstand and bookshop, and a village park. During the Tour de France, support teams for the famous pelotons had sped right past their windows.

Better yet, the townhouse lies within the shadow of an exquisite Renaissance château. The Château d'Ancy le Franc, with its architectural beauty and manicured grounds, is a short walk away. The Burgundy Canal is mere minutes from the Jameses' doorstep. "Watching the boats on the canal or walking and bike riding on the renovated tow path is a favorite pastime of our guests," says Sharon.

The Jameses would return in August to their traditional neighborhood in Stoney Creek and resume their work lives. Their







suitcases were filled with tokens of their summer life, such as antique linens picked up at brocantes and a few French toiletries and wines. Yet the Jameses couldn't walk outside their door, turn right and stroll to the canal, or visit the bakery for a baguette.

Enter an *O. Henry* magazine article on the work of artist Dana Holliday, who is also a professional muralist. Last spring, Sharon James began to turn the article over in her mind and reached out to Holliday. She had always imagined a mural in her dining room, which already features a striking Louis Philippe mirror. Now she began to think about what that mural might provide — a bit of France permanently brought home to the States.

Sharon felt Holliday could help her achieve her goal. She contacted the muralist last May, just before leaving for their annual French idyll. The artist and the Jameses had a conversation, getting a firmer sense of how the project could proceed.

"First I met with Sharon and saw her living space and went over how much area she wanted covered," says Holliday, "and what accessories would remain, and which ones to work around. For example, their huge mirror and the fancy French barometer." Working with sketching paper, Holliday prepared a virtual layout of the mural. "It took me a day to sketch and I painted her a sample on canvas with colors that would be used in the painting."

The mural sample itself was an instant hit, and Sharon framed it for her home back in France.

The Jameses suggested they would provide pictures of favorite French scenes so that the muralist could incorporate them. In the interim, Holliday would begin her preparations and review photos as the couple shared them from France. They took pictures with their cellphone, one during a hot air balloon ride, and others of Ancy and beyond. Holliday sketched them into the design.

How difficult was it to synthesize those in a realistic way?

"The village they live in is right in front of the Château d'Ancy," says Holliday. "I wanted to put their home in but not the whole village. Getting the perspective and placement were tricky."

It was a large project, but hardly Holliday's largest. She has completed a 30-foot mural in downtown Thomasville. Working through the logistics, Holliday plotted how the mural would work dimensionally, and wrap around the room.

"I also had to show the backside of the Château and the Burgundy River flowing through. That's the fun part of creating the illusion. Another biggie is making sure I set it up so it can be seen properly. For instance, there are two doorways (in the dining room) and it's like reading a book for me. There has to be a flow of view."

Sharon left Holliday a house key so she could begin work during their absence. "She was out of the country a lot," the artist recalls, "and I had to rely on my gut instincts. It was a very personal mural, so I left the last third incomplete until they returned."

Once fully worked out conceptually, the entire mural required eight days of painting. "It is monochromatic," but Holliday says in order to achieve the end result, she mixed and matched about six color tones. "I essentially used the wall color base and mixed that with varying umbers and ochres."

"It is reminiscent of Zuber wallpaper. It is quiet yet so beautiful," says Sharon. "Most of these images are ones we had photographed and sent to Dana. For us, this is what makes it special. She even put in Angora goats, horses and Charolais cattle that are typical of the area, so they bring back memories of places, friends, or things we have done."

What did Holliday like best about the mural once completed? "It's subtle yet striking feeling. Most of all that Sharon and Tom loved it! That's the most rewarding."

Sharon praises the muralist in turn. "She exceeded all of my expectations," says Sharon. "Tom said it was one of the most fun and rewarding projects we have done in the house."

Last fall, a group of 20 friends were invited for a French-inspired cocktail party, complete with pâtés, French cheeses and wines, to see the completed mural. It drew admiring reactions from guests, many of whom were well-traveled and had lived abroad themselves. Jack Hull, for one, is High Point resident and former antiques dealer. "He once taught interior design at Old Miss, Radford and Old Salem," says Sharon. Hull called it "extremely well done" and toasted his longtime friends, the hosts.

"He liked the placement of the images, the fact that it was well-conceived in relation to where you were viewing it. He especially liked the execution of the trees and how they lent a perspective," says Sharon.

Todd Nabors, who works for Thayer-Coggin furniture, and holds a fascination for spaces that reflect the passions and personalities of their owners, commented to me in a later email, "This room was already beautifully appointed with fine antique furniture and silver, but the murals make dining in this room a truly special experience." He goes on to observe how "the rich taupe color takes a cue from the

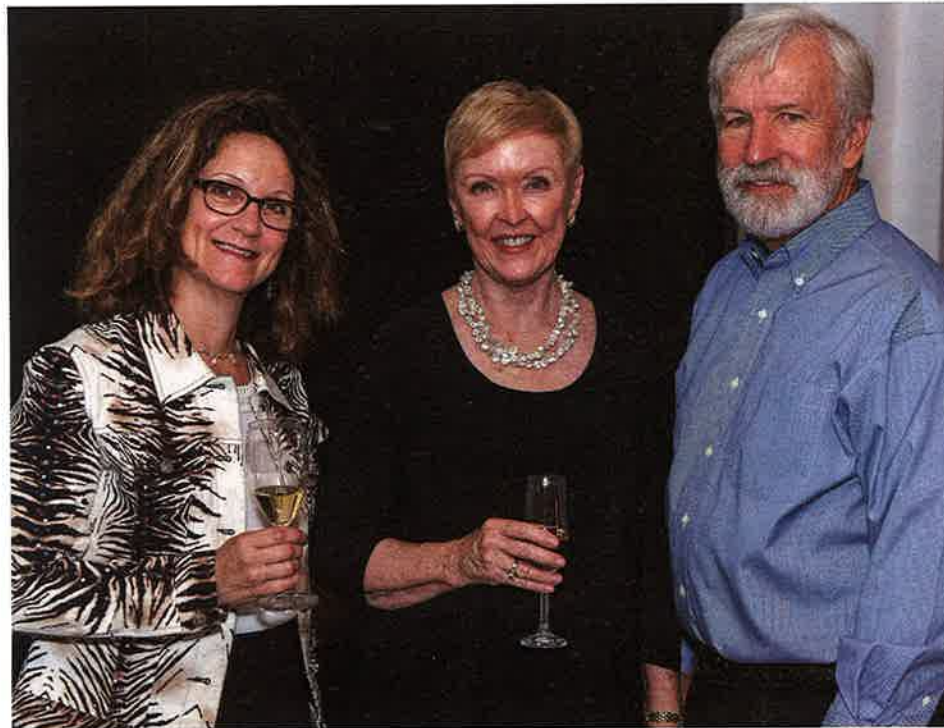
grisaille tones of period, French paper by Zuber, but the finely rendered imagery of hot air balloons drifting over the Renaissance style château at the heart of the village of Ancy le Franc transport the viewer into the charming landscape of the owners' summer residence. It's a magical effect."

As for the woman of the hour, Holliday arrived from High Point, where she was racing to complete murals for furniture clients in the run-up to the furniture market. Holliday joked about emptying the Jameses pantry while working there. "I was staying onsite and working through lunches. The starving artist!"

In response, the Jameses playfully presented Holliday with a can of mixed nuts, set off with a festive bow.

Later, in seriousness, Sharon sought the words to express the pleasure she takes in the artwork. "Beautiful. Exquisite. Compares to a rare French wallpaper, except this is much better!" says Sharon. "It really does add so much to the dining room, and I love its simplicity overall. I can discover new things I missed just by standing and gazing at it for some time. And, now, we feel as if we are never far from France and Ancy le Franc!"

Cynthia Adams is a contributing editor for O. Henry. When she went to Ancy le Franc, she had to settle for a Tour de France flag and some fridge magnets as reminders of her trip.



Dana Holliday, Sharon and Tom James