

Small Business PROFILE

Clients get on- and off-the-wall art

Local studio artists are masters of illusion

By Tammy Lieber
IBJ Reporter

If you flip through Blice Edwards Inc.'s portfolio in its Stutz Building studio, it's usually not hard to see where clients' passions lie.

One woman's bathroom looks like it came straight out of the "Wizard of Oz" movie set. Another client has a mural of a golf course covering his office wall.

Sometimes, though, it's a little harder to tell what drives people—like the woman who wanted her mudroom painted with figures from a turn-of-the-century bordello.

Whatever people can dream up to cover their walls, ceilings or even furniture, Blice Edwards makes a business out of painting it. The studio specializes in trompe l'oeil (French for "fool the eye") painting, which uses special paint finishes and light and shadow to create the illusion of three dimensions.

"Nothing is real—it's all paint," said co-owner Christopher Blice.

Blice, a restaurant industry veteran and self-taught artist, was doing contract artwork in 1993 when a client asked him if he could paint her bathroom in a jungle theme. Needing the money, he agreed to do it, then set out looking for help on the project. That's when he met Jon Edwards, who was working at a local prop-making company.

"Do you paint animals?" is the first thing I asked him," Blice said.

The two finished the client's bathroom and split the money before starting their own studio. Blice, the creative director, handles the business end and often develops sketches and concepts. Edwards, a graphic artist who graduated from the Columbus College of Art and Design, is the artistic director and oversees the actual painting.

"[Edwards] sits there and creates as he goes. He adds the extra touches that really personalize it," said Debra J. Smith, owner of Debra J. Smith Interior Design. She and Blice Edwards have referred each other's services to dozens of clients since 1995, when the two firms collaborated on an Indianapolis Dream Home. Blice said 75 percent of the studio's projects involve Smith.

"They always exceed my expectations," Smith said. "They are premium artistic painters. ... They have a great reputation."

Blice Edwards has found that reputation to be the company's best marketing tool. The studio spent \$12,000 a couple of years

Blice Edwards Inc.

Location: 212 W. 10th St.,
Studio A-250

Telephone: 972-1571

E-mail: BE4Art@aol.com

Founded: 1993

Founders: Christopher Blice and Jon Edwards

Owners: Christopher Blice and Jon Edwards

Service: artistic painting

Employees: two

Revenue (expected 1999): \$200,000

One-year goal: to have \$275,000 in revenue and to complete more work in the studio, rather than on-site

Industry outlook: Artistic painting has benefited from the housing boom, but it's also in demand for older homes when owners redecorate, designers said. Quality creative painting can also take the place of new furniture or other artwork.

ago on an advertising campaign that didn't net a single telephone call, Blice said. Since then, the duo lets their work—and their clients—speak for them.

"They are two of the most talented, creative people I know. They can take any ordinary item and make it look extraordinary," said Carmel dentist Starla Goldman, who first hired the studio shortly after it was founded to do a painting in her north-side home.

"Their prices were really low then and they were available whenever you wanted," Goldman said, laughing. Now the two can pick and choose their clients, and a themed child's room can cost \$1,800 to \$6,500, Blice said.

When Goldman moved to a house near 106th Street and Ditch Road three years ago, she sought out Blice Edwards again, this time to paint classic European-style murals on her dining room ceiling and on either side of a fireplace.

"Every time they put up a work, I think I've seen the best of their work. They just keep getting better," she said.

Rather than paint the mural directly on the ceiling in her dining room, Michelangelo-style, Blice Edwards painted sections of canvas in the studio, then glued them to the ceiling and sealed the finished mural, Goldman said.



Christopher Blice (left) and Jon Edwards recently painted a child's bedroom in Carmel to fit a Paul Bunyan theme.

The studio often uses that method as a convenience to the homeowner and to the artists, Blice said. It eliminates the need for painters to be in the client's house for days or weeks on end, but it also makes for removable art that can move to the next house or city with the owner.

Blice Edwards is the duo's main business, but both owners are active in other pursuits, Blice said. Edwards is also an amateur musician who sings in the Indianapolis Men's Choir, and Blice designs jewelry as a sideline. The pair also have talked to a local author about illustrating the author's children's books. Even if that

project doesn't pan out, Blice said, they would still like to pursue book illustration.

Although it might seem a stretch to go from a 10-foot-high wall to a 10-inch page, Blice thinks the company's experience painting children's rooms will translate. One recently completed playroom project in Bloomington reflected scenes from the life of Madeline, the popular children's book character who grows up in Paris. The walls of the room depict French cobblestone streets and shops, complete with a painted-on chalkboard outside a faux cafe.

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