

BUSINESS

Artist and art merge at Stowe frame shop

BY LISA MCCORMACK

Coco Dowley has a three-part recipe for success: her skills as an artist, an expansive selection of picture frames, and customer service.

She brings them all to her business, Coco's Frame Shop and Gallery, located in a former granary building off Thomas Lane in Stowe.

Her shop is filled with frames in every imaginable style and color, and a small gallery of her colorful, whimsical artwork, which often features dogs, cats, and birds.

Dowley is a nationally recognized textile artist whose work has appeared on everything from Hallmark cards to calendars to cookie jars. She says her artistic experience helps her to guide customers looking for the perfect frame to complement a favorite photo, painting, or piece of memorabilia.

As a child in Syracuse, N.Y., Dowley loved to design, paint and create things. She attended Parsons School of Design in New York City and graduated from Syracuse University with a degree in textile design.

After college, Dowley moved to Kansas City to work for Hallmark Cards. She spent three years there, first as an art director and then as an artist.

Dowley designed greeting cards, giftwrap, paper plates and other party accessories. The benefits she received as a Hallmark employee — including workshops and access to a design library — helped her to develop her skills.

"It was like graduate school," she said.

After deciding she didn't want to be in the corporate world, she became a free-lance artist, designing things for companies that produced greeting cards and party supplies.

Her original, bright-colored, upbeat designs made her a sought-after artist, but left her dissatisfied.

"I was working 60 to 80 hours a week," Dowley said. "I was an artist machine. I wanted to do more with my creativity."

Dowley decided to license her work and formed a design company, Coco Dowley Designs. Licensing her work allowed her to receive royalties for her designs, rather than selling them outright.

"The nice thing about licensing is that you can do so many different products," Dowley said. "Once you create the original artwork, it's an



PHOTO BY GLENN CALLAHAN

Coco Dowley puts her artist's sensibilities to work at her frame shop in Stowe.

investment. Art from a calendar, for example, can be put on dinnerware, throw pillows, show curtains, or dimensional sculpture items."

Products with her designs have been sold at Bed, Bath and Beyond and other major retailers.

Dowley moved to Vermont 18 years ago and lived in Burlington and Charlotte before settling in Stowe in 1995.

She opened the shop in November 2005 after working at another frame shop and out of her home. She and

an employee staff the store.

"Being an artist, I did framing for my own artwork," Dowley said. "I realized there was a large need for a great frame shop that offered a very wide selection and great customer service."

Dowley takes a hands-on approach to framing. She walks around her studio with clients to gauge which types of frames they're drawn to. Then, she asks them about their home decor to make sure the frame they select will look great on the wall.

"I want to help people take something that is very important to them, preserve it in a way that it will last for many years, and have it be a fun, exciting process," Dowley said.

Many clients are overwhelmed by the shop's selection: more than 1,500 frame moldings and hundreds of mats.

Dowley looks at several elements when selecting a frame and mat. Sometimes a mat will play up a dominant color in the artwork; other times, it will bring out a more subtle color. Frames usually depend on the size of the artwork.

"A frame is an accessory," Dowley said. "It should complement, not overpower, what you're framing. It should bring out the subtle nuances."

One client, for example, brought in a piece of artwork she had picked up in Italy. Dowley found a frame that echoed the architecture in the artwork.

When she's not framing, Dowley is happiest when she's creating.

"I love to create artwork," she said. "I love to mix colors. I can mix colors (acrylics) all day."

In addition to her textile design company, Dowley experiments with different mediums, including collages made with handmade papers, to which she adds buttons, feathers and beads, and three-dimensional artwork made from recycled materials.

Her artwork is on display at Frog Hollow Galleries throughout Vermont.

Later this month, Dowley will join the Helen Day Art Center board of directors. She is excited about the Stowe art center's educational program and would like to offer art classes using computers.

She's also expanding the services at her frame shop. Among other things, she has ordered new printers that will allow her to produce limited-edition prints for local artists.

"Being an artist, I know what they're looking for," Dowley said. "I can work to get the color just right or capture the subtle nuances of their art."