



Etienne does pet projects, too

By Susan Bryan
Special to the Mercury News
RING Suzanne Etienne a fabric swatch and she'll paint you a picture to match.

The Los Altos interior-designer-turned-artist sells her bright, bold works for up to \$3,000 each. Her paintings deck the walls of some of Hollywood's most famous stars: Christie Brinkley, Linda Evans, Dudley Moore, Harry Belafonte. Not to mention the San Francisco digs of author Danielle Steele. And her art is sold by Country Life in Los Angeles, C. L. McRae in San Francisco, Hilary Thatz in Palo Alto and The French Connection in Los Gatos.

Etienne cringes when she remembers how she made the switch from interior designing to painting. "I bought this painting from the design center for a client, and it wasn't the right color so I added more paint to pull out the peach. Isn't that terrible?"

Now clients bring Etienne wallpaper or fabric swatches and ask for paintings to match. "They'll bring me fabric from a sofa or pillow," she explains. "I'll pull the colors, so that, say, the rust is the same color rust." Or Etienne will design a wall mural that pulls together all the colors in a room's design scheme.

This artist breaks all the old rules separating art and decor. "There's a lot of snobbery that says you should do your art and then arrange around it," Etienne says. "But I fill a tremendous need that decorators have to find the right something for that 24-by-35 hole on the wall. They need something pink and green, and they want it happy."

Etienne doesn't believe in dreary art. "All of my art is happy," she says. "Why not? I was educated in the Picasso era, when everything had to have meaning, and depth, and all that. To have something cheerful and happy was just less than art. Those people wanted to be on the cutting edge of a new idea. When an artist is able to do that and gain some notoriety, and cut off an ear, then his or her works are going to be worth millions of dollars."

Etienne has no pretensions about art. She simply says, "People respond to my work. It makes them feel good. You can find ugly wherever you go. Why not surround ourselves with beauty and joy?"

As a teen-ager growing up in San Leandro, Etienne's idols were fabric designers, not artists. "I admired Edith Head, the Hollywood clothing designer who made those dramatic strapless gowns in the '50s movies," she says. "And I liked Vera, the fabric designer who put the little ladybug on her things."

After graduating from San Jose State University with a degree in fine arts, Etienne worked for seven years as a graphic artist. She designed fliers and ads for two local electronics companies, Dalmo Victor and Watkins Johnson.

When she married Saratoga attorney Robert Etienne and moved to the Santa Cruz Mountains to begin a family, the artist began painting big, bright murals for children. She made her first works on 4-by-6 plywood for her own kids, Jack, (now 17) and Nicole (now 16). "I did great big huge animals," she says, "things kids love, like dinosaurs, snakes, barnyard creatures."

After Etienne and her family moved to

Art to

Match



Etienne designed this fake window and scene of Filoli, set behind real shutters

Los Altos in 1978, she taught art for five years at St. Nicholas Elementary School in Los Altos Hills. "But when I went into the junior high classes and my kids pretended they didn't know me, I knew it was time to get on with my own life," she says.

To Etienne in 1983, getting on with life meant starting an interior design business. "I had been helping friends and thought I might as well get paid for it," she says.

Suzanne Etienne Designs remained a decorating firm for only three years. "At the design center, I kept seeing all this art that I thought I could do better," she says. "And I was frustrated because I couldn't find the right painting for the right wallpaper, or whatever. So I started doing both painting and design. But you can't do art piecemeal. So I chose art."

Without changing her firm's name, Etienne began painting full time in 1986.

Although her watercolor and acrylic paintings look light and airy, Etienne works intensely. "When I paint, I paint," she says. "It's all-encompassing. It's like a lover."

Etienne's painting style is continually evolving. "I'm doing bigger and bigger things," she says. "And they're less fussy. I like bold colors and contrasts. The more secure I become in my own ability to create, then the more my own true nature is coming out, and that's exciting."

"I think if I had my way I wouldn't paint any canvas smaller than 6 feet by 8 feet," she says. "I'm serious. I have a large husband, large kids, large dog. I love large."

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Artist focuses on paintings that make clients happy

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Etienne's delight with large-scale art is paying off. She's just sold her largest painting yet for \$7,000 — more than double her usual price. The dramatic, 4-by-12-foot waterscape was ordered to harmonize with the mauve and seafoam green decor of a doctor's office in Los Angeles. Etienne's impressionistic scene of dappled, blue/green water is so big, it's divided into three pieces, with two small panels flanking a large central one.

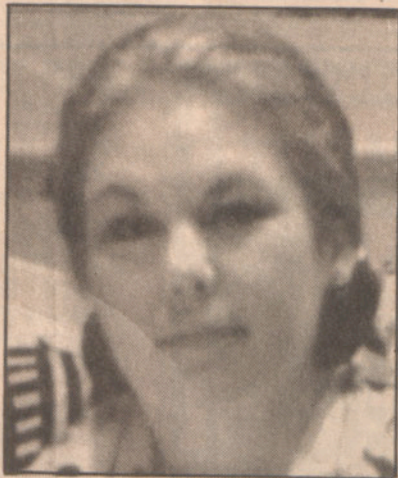
Etienne is thrilled by the freedom the large canvas gave her. "The artists I'm inspired by now are Matisse, Monet and David Hockney — not that my work looks like Hockney's, but I like his ability to put pattern and color on in abandon," she says.

Influenced by Matisse

The bold patterns of the French painter Matisse clearly influence Etienne's art. "I've been saying for two years that the Matisse look in fabric is going to be really hot," she says. "A friend who has just come back from Paris says I'm right. There are all these fabrics coming out with Matissey patterns: bold colors with heavy black outlines. Next year we'll be inundated."

Asked whether she's more inspired by fabric designs or famous artists, Etienne hesitates. Then she says with a laugh, "You mix it all up and you call it cake — it's like $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Monet, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped Matisse . . ."

The lively watercolor on the card Etienne uses for publicity was inspired by a C.L. McRae collection of country fabrics. "There's a lot of black in the fabrics," she says, "so I wanted to get some black in the painting. The vase is



“I fill a tremendous need that decorators have to find the right something for that 24-by-35 hole on the wall.”

— Suzanne Etienne

black, but it doesn't match any of the swatches. My paintings kind of happen as they go. I don't know how they're going to end up most of the time."

Some paintings bring Etienne surprises even after they're finished. "I did a blue and white watercolor with a cat," she says, "and a woman bought it because the cat looked exactly like hers. Then she had me redo her entire kitchen in blue and white to match my picture. That's the opposite of what usually happens."

But even in the blue and white kitchen she designed, a fabric sparked Etienne's creativity. For curtains, she chose a Pierre Deux fabric with a blue floral border. When Etienne painted the corner cupboard, she picked up the floral border design. But she did not repeat it slavishly. She made it her own by simplifying the lines and painting the flowers a playful pink.

Keeping busy

Now Etienne has so many private commissions that she rarely

has time to play creatively with her painting. "When I do special orders," she says, "I sometimes start worrying."

"One person started looking when I'd barely gotten the paint on the canvas, and I always paint my darks first. I had to say, 'I'm sorry, this is not the time to critique my work. If I get intimidated, you won't get my best.' When I am free to express, not having to please anybody but myself, I do my best work."

To free herself creatively, Etienne goes back to her days in children's art. "When I worked with kids," she says, "I constantly tried to get them to express themselves and move from fear to feeling good about themselves. And so when I paint, I try to alleviate fear and just do what feels good and what makes me happy. And that's what I'd say to anybody in art, 'Just do it. Don't dream anymore — just do it.'"

Freelance writer Susan Bryan lives in Menlo Park.