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CRAIG BRAGDY DESIGN

Magnificent murals.



Writer Rowena Carr-Allinson

Myriad are the creations of **Craig Bragdy Design**, a company that specializes in murals—the conventional wall type, as well as ones made specially to decorate the bottoms of pools and fountains. The results are beautiful, especially the ones for pools; the vibrant colours and ornate designs shimmer when viewed through water.

Craig Bragdy Design has come a long way since its humble beginnings in the small town of Denbigh in North Wales. (The company's name comes from its first studio, which was originally a brewery; *craig* is Welsh for *rock*, and *bragdy* means *brewery*.) Today, the Craig Bragdy team works on vast projects, designing, manufacturing and installing handmade ceramics for everything from courtyard fountains and swimming pools to massive underpasses stretching across 3,000 square metres. The family-run ceramics business has grown from an eccentric couple's pottery hobby to an international organization with clients all over the world.

The couple, Rhys and Jean Powell, met at art school in the 1940s and started out producing small items like salt and pepper shakers. They soon moved on to murals, with the dream of eventually living off their art. By the 1960s, they had moved to the 400-year-old Brookhouse Mill in order to get more floor space, which was essential for their rapidly expanding murals. Then, after work dried up in the U.K., Rhys ventured to the Middle East.

"My old man was a colourful guy," Nick Powell, one of the couple's sons, says of his father, who passed away in 1994. "His plan was to earn enough to feed us and make a living. He went to the Middle East, knocking on doors." The contacts Rhys made would prove to be one of the budding company's lifelines, as it would eventually create projects in places like Dubai and Oman.

The business remains in the family; Nick and brother Shon have nurtured the expansion and, like their father, embraced new opportunities, while Jean, now a sprightly 82-year-old, still oversees the creative-design process. And although Nick says he can't draw, he admits he has the eye. "It's all to do with looking and seeing. I think I have a good appreciation of qualities required, and a recognition of things that will work." Nick attributes this to his genes and his upbringing. "Mum and Dad were always talking about the visual."

Over the past decade, the swimming-pool murals have become big business. Nick admits that their first one, 17 years ago, was tricky, and that "everyone was quite nervous about using a handmade product." The company has since gone on to win awards such as Best Residential Pool for a project in Florida.

To help clients visualize the finished product, the team delivers a presentation with customized artwork and three-dimensional impressions. Short movies are also used to show existing pools. As for future creations, cutting-edge technologies like computer-generated water are in the cards, so the client can see the finished product before a single tile is laid. The presentations are uniquely tailored to each client, says Nick. "Some are concerned with technical specs, others with the way it will look or timing, or even how it's made. We need to adapt, to adjust."

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Although they are occasionally approached with unusual ideas (depictions of alien tentacles and John Wayne among them), the most popular theme for pools is aquatic, including fish, coral and the undersea world. The design is concentrated on the floor, where the image is magnified and the water's ripples create an illusion of movement.

"Producing a design is a collective affair," says Nick. "Shon or I meet the client and brief the designers. Putting visual things into words is tricky. When you say things, you aren't sure how they are being heard.... We work on commission and we always listen, but we always make it into something we are comfortable with, too. There's a fine balance between creating your own work for your own satisfaction and working to commission."

In the factory, enormous slabs of clay are laid out side by side at different stages of manufacturing. A team of artists faithfully reproduces the chosen design on the sheet of clay that's fated to become a colourful pool floor before hand-cutting it into manageable tiles.

For a large pool, the process is labour-intensive and lasts about eight weeks. Each piece has to be numbered and coded. It is fired up to six times: first to bake, then again for a background layer of white so that the colourful glazes look brighter, and several more times to fix the colours. Some projects are long-term investments spanning several years. A project in Chicago that included two pools and a sauna, for example, took four years.

One of the company's recent innovations is relatively affordable handmade ceramics that fit with standard tiles for both swimming pools and wall murals. The idea is to widen the customer base, giving more people the opportunity to buy into Craig Bragdy's creations.

All in all, the last 40 years have been an incredible success story, one that's not lost on Jean. In fact, she has turned her extraordinary experiences into a book, a collection of stories about her life, her art and the people she has worked with around the world.

She recounts one of her favourite stories with a twinkle in her eye: "We were looking for a mermaid design for a client, but I wasn't sure how risqué it could be, so I drew hair and seaweed to cover [the breasts]. But I soon received a message which read, 'More revealing, please', so off came the seaweed!"

Thanks to her sons' business acumen and her inspired sparkle, Craig Bragdy has become an international brand name. The size of its creations and the logistics involved in each project are part of what makes this family business so impressive, but there's no doubt it wouldn't have happened without the touch of magic that comes from its creative force, the charming, soft-spoken woman with the kind smile and boundless imagination.

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