

Finishing touch



TRACY POWELL/BUSINESS JOURNAL

Mark London, Sandra Kiss London and their dog, Chessy, stand before some of the handpainted sample boards they use at trade shows. The three go to the Brighton studio each day where Sandra creates new designs while Mark works on other business matters.

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Husband-and-wife team peddle their faux-finishing products via the web

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Is it art or just a trick of the eye?

Brookline resident Mark London and his wife, Sandra Kiss London, say the faux-painting techniques that can make plain old wallboard look like marble, exquisite rare woods, linen, aged venetian plaster or just about anything else haven't been getting the respect they deserve. And they're betting that more people will recognize this as art and therefore be willing to pay a little more for their premium products.

"We're raising the bar for faux finishing. We want it to be respected by architects and designers," says Sandra in the couple's Brighton painting studio, which they also use for an office.

Faux finishing has been shrouded in mystery, with secret recipes that are guarded by the pros, says Sandra. And she believes their line of "Faux Like A Pro" products — glazes, decorative plasters, varnish, waxes, natural earth pigments and various application tools — can help change all of that.

"We want to demystify faux finishing and take out all of the secrets and the confusion," Sandra says. "It is a market that is flooded with poor products, as well as misinformation."

She should know. Sandra had her own faux-finishing business, working in high-end homes and businesses, for more than 10 years before launching this business.

Her husband, Mark, who was working as a free-lance corporate web designer, built a web site for her business in 1997. And soon, with about 900-1,200 visitors per day, they learned there was a hunger for information about faux painting and an online market for selling faux-painting materials.

Visitors to the site wanted to know how they could create faux finishes and where they could buy materials, so the Londons started posting instructions and selling other people's products online.

"We ... saw what sold and what didn't and got feedback on problems people were having," Mark explains. "With that information, we created our own product line."

They started selling their products online about two years ago and now have a national customer base. They say revenue is expected to reach about \$180,000 by the end of this year. And they expect to boost sales to more than \$500,000 by the end of 2003 by entering the retail-store market.

To do this, they are targeting the higher-end designer stores, rather than home-improvement warehouses like Home Depot or Lowe's. "Their price points are just too low for us," Mark says.

Some of the selling points for their line, they say, is that it has the same high-quality ingredients as professional-grade products but is water-based, easier to use and more flexible.

They claim that their decorative plasters are the only ones on the market that can be rolled on and that their glazes have longer "open times," meaning they take longer to dry, giving the painter more time to refine or fix brush strokes.

"We offer products that give you a sophisticated look with the ease of application. You don't have to work your butt off to get these gorgeous designer looks," says Mark.

"It's really the only pro-grade line out there that's also marketed toward the do-it-yourselfer."

The increased open time is one reason Pam Peterson, who owns a faux-finishing business in the Chicago area, uses their glaze exclusively.

"I like the open time, and the price is also good (compared with other professional-grade products)," says Peterson.

A gallon of glaze sells on their web site (<http://www.fauxlikeapro.com>) for \$49.50, but Peterson notes that she often gets a discount for being a return customer. In contrast, a gallon of consumer-grade glaze made by Behr is selling for about \$20 at Home Depot. But Peterson says it's worth it for her to spend the extra money. She says she tried several consumer-grade products and wasn't happy with the results.

"Ralph Lauren opened the market, and we're refining it," Sandra says.

So far, after drilling away at the retail market for about five months, their products are selling locally at Johnson Paint Co. stores; at Backstage Hardware, in the Design Center in Boston; and at a designer store in California. They are also hoping to get into Home Depot's Expo Design stores and possibly even Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware.

Mark admits that getting into stores is not easy. "I've found that you can huff and puff as much as you want, but these guys work at their own pace," he says.

He adds that now that they are in a few stores, it's getting a little easier to get into more. He expects to be in about 10 stores by the end of the year and in 20 to 25 stores by the end of 2003.