

BY *Sandra Stillman Gartner*
PHOTOS BY *Tim Sink*

The road to Stephanie Stouffer's studio and home in Belmont is a winding one. Large farmhouses are set back on rolling hills, reminiscent of a painting by Andrew Wyeth. A short distance up Maple Hill Road, a gracious woman with silver hair, slender figure and an infectious smile, emerges from her Studio and Gallery. Stephanie Stouffer has reason to be happy. The artist has fulfilled one of her lifelong dreams of combining her living and studio spaces with a public gallery.

In the fall of 2008, Stouffer's vision became a reality when she opened a gallery attached to her studio. Stouffer's sister is a professional architect and designed the addition for her. Both the gallery and studio are attached to the artist's two-story, brightly lit living quarters, which she shares with several pets.

In the living room of Stouffer's home are two large pieces of sculpture left over from her days as a student at Rhode Island School of Design. "I only keep a few of my own pieces displayed in the house. It's much more interesting for me to surround myself with other people's art work or mementos from places where I've traveled," she said.

Trained as a sculptor at RISD and married to an artist, Stouffer and her husband moved to St. Louis, Missouri. She was hired by Hallmark and joined the world of designing greeting cards for the well-known company. "My supervisor at Hallmark gave me a beginner's kit filled with gouache paints and set me on my own path. I basically trained myself to draw," Stouffer said. The motif back in the late 1970's was adorable children with large eyes and cute animals. She added, "I actually surprised myself when I discovered I could paint them."

The artist made her way up the

corporate ladder and became a supervisor to young artists who joined Hallmark. It was on a trip to Vermont with some colleagues to explore folk themes for new products that Stouffer re-discovered the Green Mountain State. "I had attended Bennington College for one year before I went to RISD and hadn't been back since." During their travels for Hallmark, the group visited the well-known and respected monks of the Weston Priory. The monks welcomed the designers into the monastery. They turned out to be accomplished artists in their own right.

In 1983, divorced and in her late thirties, Stouffer was ready to make a career change. She decided to leave Hallmark and the corporate world and become a freelance artist. She said, "When I first moved back to Vermont, I rented a home on Terrible Mountain. I spent some time with the monks at Weston Priory as a participant in the retreats at the monastery, which is open to everyone. That experience set me on my life course for the next 25 years."

With a large and varied portfolio of designs and completed art, Stouffer began working for the upscale Caspari card line in a partnership that lasted 18 years. "I am a self-taught painter and have developed



STEPHANIE STOUFFER



a layering style using gouache (a water-based paint) and creating a three-dimensional look. In all my art, I strive to seek new design challenges, to know myself better and to bring delight to others," she said.

Stouffer's whimsical designs are licensed to a variety of manufacturers and can be found on products for both everyday and seasonal use. Her creations appear on such items as stoneware, pillows, welcome mats, flags, tapestries, napkins, ornaments, gift-wrap, nightlights, cards and prints. It's not unusual for a customer to come into her Vermont gallery and recognize something that they saw in a department store or catalog. Stouffer's work is sold both nationally and internationally.

Product manufacturers employ Stouffer's designs throughout the year, but she is also well known for her holiday graphics. An agent in California represents the artist and takes samples of her work to tradeshows several times a year. The shows are usually held in New York City, Las Vegas and Atlanta. "Sometimes I'm the last one to find out that one of my designs has

been sold and hear about it later or see it somewhere," Stouffer said.

One of her more popular designs is a traditional Santa Claus that has been transformed into a magical character. Stouffer said, "I incorporate traditional symbols in a design and make them appear fresh and new through innovative layouts, decorative borders, patterned backgrounds and other styling techniques." Manufacturers use the designs that she creates independently but also request de-



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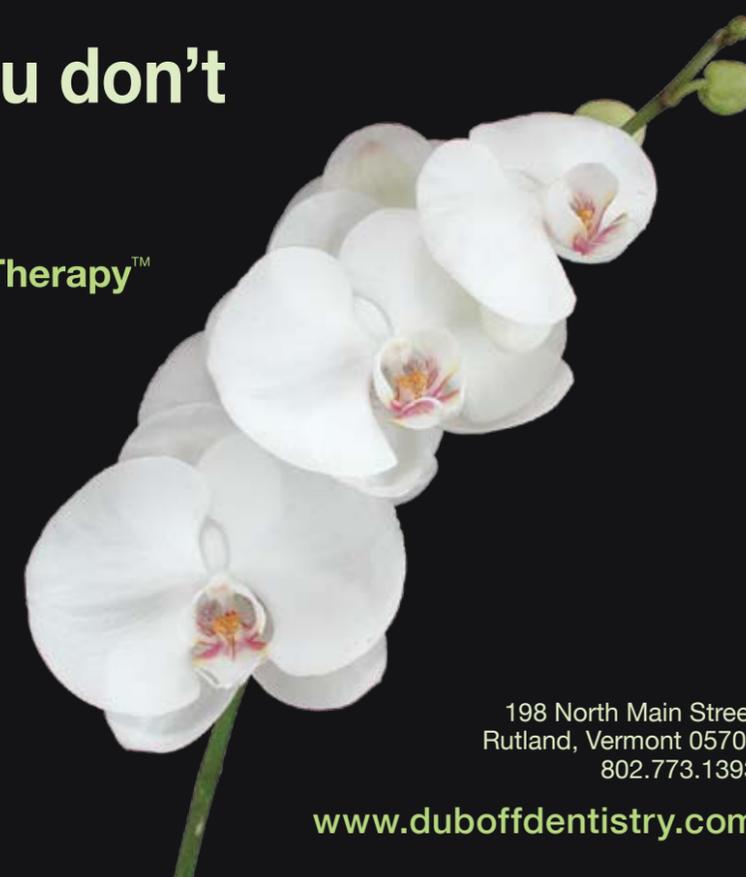
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signs utilizing a special subject or motif.

The Vermont artist calls the product market a fickle place because “what’s hot” changes from season to season. In order to produce items for the 2010 Holiday Season, Stouffer’s new designs had to be completed about a year before. She paints everything in her Vermont studio, scans the completed work into her computer and then sends them to her representative in California. The samples are then re-produced and marketed from the West Coast.

For years, many local residents never knew what Stouffer did in her house at 250 Maple Hill Road. Now with a public gallery, the neighbors and visitors to Vermont have the opportunity to see her work up close. All the items in the gallery have been produced from original artwork and many are no longer available on the open market. In essence, they are literally collector’s items of Stouffer’s designs.

A disciplined artist, Stouffer rises early and takes a swim in her lap pool. By 9 a.m. she is in her studio painting and listening to Vermont Public Radio. She particularly likes classical music and world news. “I am a very focused person and become totally involved in my subject and imagination when I’m working on a project,” she said. Once she starts painting, Stouffer allows her intuition to take over and often doesn’t know the outcome of the design until the piece is completed.

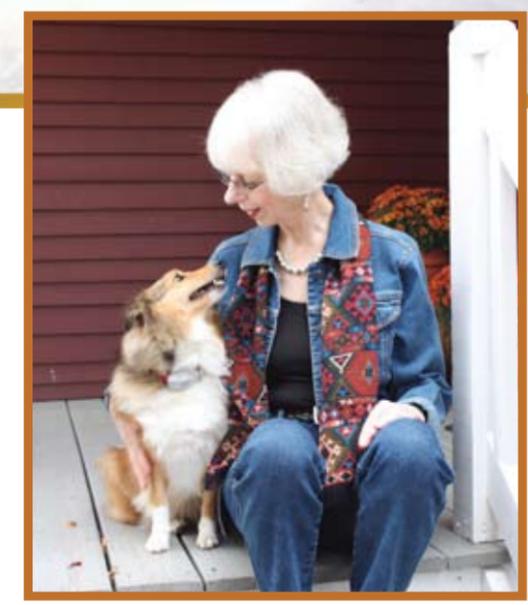
In the late afternoon, Stouffer takes a long walk to unwind from her day in the studio. Since she spends her time working as a solo artist, she enjoys the company of good friends and joining them for evening get-togethers at different homes. She said, “I really like a good bottle of wine and a great meal. There is a wonderful community of creative people in the Belmont and Mount Holly area near where I live and work. I am very fortunate to be in Vermont.”

The Gallery is open most weekends from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. If the flag is out, visitors are welcome to drop in or can request a specific time by calling (802) 259-



2686. During the holiday season, there will be extended hours and select gift items available for \$30 and less. You can also visit her website at: www.stephanie-stouffer.com

A former editorial assistant at Glamour Magazine, Sandra Stillman Gartner's articles have been published in such periodicals as Lady's Circle and Yankee. She is a published poet and screenplay writer, and is one of three producing directors of Vermont Actors' Repertory Theatre and performs on stage, television and in film.



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