

American Traditions

Celebrate homegrown talent with products made in the United States.

by Ashley Trent

When one looks back upon the history of the United States, it is astonishing how much has happened in a relatively brief period of time. Part of our young country's success in industry, politics, education and other realms is thanks to our nation's founders — a group of assiduous go-getters who desired, among many things, to establish independence and solidify inalienable freedoms that would allow them to pursue their dreams.

Today's American inventors, designers and manufacturers share that same drive. Fueled with creativity and perseverance, these entrepreneurs and industry leaders are carrying on our nation's tradition of innovation and development. You can support the tradition of American craftsmanship by selling gifts and accessories that are made in the U.S. In this feature, we focus on products that reflect American traditions and the stories of the people who are behind these products.

Family Values

Togetherness and solidarity are mainstays when it comes to quintessential American culture; the family members who own and work at Vaillancourt Folk Art have placed these values at the forefront of their business. The company, which specializes in Christmas collectibles, began in 1984 when Gary Vaillancourt gave his wife,

Judi, an inspiring Christmas present: three antique chocolate moulds.

The thoughtful gift led the couple to explore the possibility of starting their own family business in which they could produce hand-painted chalkware figures using the vintage moulds. Judi would then paint the figures by hand with bright colors that would enhance the artistry of the mould-makers' original work; she was amazed at how richly intricate the figures were and appreciated the way the painted versions could show more detail and emotion than chocolate versions would. The figures were a hit with Christmas collectors, and Vaillancourt Folk Art was born.

Since receiving her first three moulds, Judi's collection has grown to nearly 10,000 antique moulds, which are used to create the Sutton, Massachusetts-based company's figurines. The extensive collection has allowed Vaillancourt Folk Art to solidify its reputation as a source for American-made holiday keepsakes.

"The defining characteristics of our products are several," notes Gary. "First of all, all of our products are cast in antique confectionery moulds circa 1850-1950. This creates a product that is truly historic, because we are painting figures that were created in moulds that truly reflect the history of their country."

Gary says that the figures are popular among collectors who appreciate antiques as well as Christmas enthusiasts who are drawn to the history and traditions of the holiday. "Our products are historically accurate and truly translate the folklore and history of Santa that has been long lost," he explains. "Many collectors marvel not only at the painting detail but at the story these figures tell." The historical factor is all the more powerful, adds Gary, because of Judi's dedication to maintaining authentic Christmas themes; he says she has taken much pride in researching the holiday to perfect her

artwork. "Her Christmas library is outstanding, and her understanding of worldwide Christmas traditions brings life to her figures."

Supporting Artists

As the company has grown through the years, Gary and Judi have selected talented artists to take part in painting the figures by hand; each piece, explains Gary, takes roughly 16 people three weeks to produce. All the figures are signed, dated and numbered in the Vaillancourt Folk Art studio, which is located in a large 1820s textile mill. The studio is even open to the public for

tours. "The painters are in the middle of our retail gallery and near the Christmas museum," says Gary. The tours, he adds, benefit both the consumers' understanding of how the product is made as well as the artists' inspiration and drive to create quality pieces. "There are not many American companies producing Christmas [collectibles], and visitors are amazed to see product being created before their eyes. Our painters love to interact with the customers, and the customer gets a true appreciation of what hand-painted means. It also builds an understanding of the price differences between American-made and foreign-made. Our painters also are truly appreciative of the collectors who buy their work, and that translates very well."

Many of the artists at Vaillancourt Folk Art have a degree in fine art; the average tenure with the company is an impressive 16 years. "We have two of our painters who have been with us for



The Vertical Tote from **Cinda B** (877/692-4632 or www.cindab.com), which manufactures its products in Indiana, is great for multitasking girls on the go. It comes in 13 patterns. Suggested retail: \$98.



Lakeshore Candle Company's (888/752-2635 or www.lakeshore-candlecompany.com) new Cranberry Clementine scent is a blend of tart cranberries and fresh citrus. The company's premium soy candles are hand-poured in Michigan. Suggested retail: \$2.99 votive, \$14.95 10-oz. glass tumbler, \$17.50 18-oz. tin.

25 years," says Gary. "Our staff's ability to reproduce Judi's designs in such high quality has set us apart in the industry. The dedication and care of our staff has been a blessing."

Because the company is so respected within the art community, a position as an artist with Vaillancourt Folk Art is akin to a dream job for many painters. "The last time we hired a new painter was five years ago, and we had more than 75 artists with formal degrees and master's apply for the job," notes Gary. "This level of talent has made us unique."

What's more, Gary and Judi are strong believers that a key to their success is having a variety of ages among their employees to create the best chemistry; there is always someone over

Kay Berry's (800/426-1932 or www.kayberry.com) stone products are handcrafted in Pennsylvania. Suggested retail: \$53.



California-based **B. Dazzle Inc.'s** (310/374-3000 or www.b-dazzle.com) Horse Racing Scramble Squares is the latest addition to the company's award-winning line of nine-piece brainteaser puzzles. Suggested retail: \$9.95.



The American Santa figure from **Vaillancourt Folk Art** (877/665-2244 or www.valfa.com) is handmade chalkware that is cast and painted in the company's Massachusetts studio. Suggested retail: \$180.

