

PMA Magazine

January 2007

CONNECTING THE IMAGING COMMUNITIES

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Time to try Wi-Fi?

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Photo courtesy of Eastman Kodak Co.

Need a day at the spa?

Check out The Picture Spa

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Sports + Portraits

Sportraits prints its portraits at the game

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Young blood

Attracting new markets involves understanding and creativity

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Dr. Martin Luther King arrest and booking, Montgomery, Ala., 1958.
© Charles Moore

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In addition to tiles, Lovett often uses natural rock to make a mosaic frame.

Creative twist

By Jennifer Barr Kruger

Artist and photographer
Tracy Lovett crafts
one-of-a-kind treasures
for portrait customers

While Tracy Lovett, owner of Images by Tracy Lovett, Sidney, Iowa (www.imagesbytracylovet.com), has both the natural talent and training to be a fine artist, she never thought she'd find herself behind the lens as a professional portrait photographer. The pictures she took of her clients served only as references to use as she painted or drew their portraits in charcoal

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and colored pencils. But frequently, when clients purchased the artwork, they also asked to buy the reference photos.

Lovett realized a whole new business opportunity was right there, just waiting for her to seize it. By combining her artistic talent with portrait photography, she began creating truly unique and beautiful photo products for her customers.

Lovett made her entrance into fine art portrait photography about 10 years ago, when she purchased some used medium-format equipment and began hand-tinting portraits and wedding photos she took for family and friends. But it was when Lovett started shooting digital 4 years ago that her creativity really emerged.

“When I went digital, I discovered there was a whole universe of products I could apply to my photos and end up with pieces that were completely original,” she says. “I was approached by LexJet and decided to buy some paper from them. A few months later, I bought a 24-inch LexJet 7600 printer, and I have never looked back.”

A real “picture” frame

One of Lovett’s most compelling products is a custom mosaic tile frame that incorporates her portraiture. The pictures are actually part of the frame, which then goes around another portrait.



Artist and photographer Tracy Lovett combined her skills to build a business making unique portrait art pieces.

To create a frame, she begins with a simple, sturdy, pine frame made by her husband, **Michael Lovett**.

“I output my images on **Epson** watercolor matte finish paper. I collage them down with heavy collage glue that dries very clear,



Lovett makes mosaic tile portrait frames with several pictures as part of the frame itself.



The images on Lovett's luminaries are attached with Velcro and can be easily replaced or changed seasonally. (Right) Lovett uses her background in clothing design to make hand-beaded picture pillows.



and that basically makes the picture a part of the wood," Lovett says.

After discussing color schemes and portrait choices with her customer, she cuts and lays out the clear tiles that go over the pictures on the frame, and fills in the surrounding areas with colored tiles and natural rock, securing them with mosaic glue and grouting them. Once it's dry, she cleans the frame, attaches hangers and mounts the picture.

"You have to have some basic tile and imaging knowledge, but this is not difficult to do," Lovett says. "You can apply mosaic tiles to anything. I'm thinking about doing some small tabletops with pictures inlaid."

The mosaic frames are very popular with high school seniors and new parents.

"We do a program called 'A Year of Baby.' For a flat fee, they can have their child photographed every month or every other month, depending on which package they choose," Lovett says. "They get a few pictures every time; and at the end of the year, they get either a coffee table book or a frame with the one-year-old picture in the middle and all the pictures from the year going all the way around. It's just a really nice way to display those images from the first year of life."

Lighting up the night

Drive by Lovett's home (the garage has been converted to her studio) any night and you will see the faces of many customers lighting up her garden. The images appear on luminaries she creates – again, with help from her husband. He builds the base with cedar, and she outputs the collaged images using a LexJet water-resistant polypropylene. The images are attached with

Velcro; and the luminaries are lit with Christmas lights, which perform well outside and are easy to replace.

"The cedar weathers, but I think that's part of the charm. When the images fade – which they do after about 6 months, but it usually takes a couple years before they fade enough to be replaced – we just output them again. We charge \$20 for a refill," Lovett says.

Additionally, the luminaries can be changed seasonally.

"I take lots of seasonal pictures for stock images, and some of my customers ask for those. With the Velcro, it's really easy to take the images on and off," she notes.

Home – and home page – marketing

Having luminaries on display in her garden is one way she markets the product.

"We have about 15 in our garden, and we keep them lit every night. People drive by and see images of their friends, or holiday pictures," she says. "It allows them to see what we do, and it's also a way to make my customers feel special. Whenever a senior comes by and sees their picture on display for everybody to look at, it makes them feel very important."

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Her work is on display throughout the interior of her home as well. “My products are all over my house; so whenever people come in, they can see what we do. That is what sells – people really have to see it. Products like these are hard to describe otherwise,” Lovett says.

Her website also helps customers see what she can do. It’s been up for 3 years and is starting to become an important sales tool, as orders now come in from different parts of the country.

“People can e-mail me their own snapshots, and we will make the products for them,” she says. In addition to the mosaic frames and luminaries, Lovett also makes photo jewelry and textile products like banners and pillows.

“I work a lot with cotton and silk,” Lovett says. “I went to college for clothing design, so I do a bit of sewing. The pillows are customized with images, and I hand bead on them. They’re really cool.”



Lovett’s mosaic tile portrait frames are popular with high school seniors.

Taking portraits full circle

Lovett believes the popularity of her products is testament to the fact people love to get a finished product from their portraits.

“People are really interested in being able to walk out with something complete. They don’t have to go to the frame shop. They don’t have to do anything else. My customers don’t walk out with an envelope of pictures. They have something in their hands that is done and truly unique.”

She also feels this type of work is the wave of the future.

“Everything can be customized. I think that’s where the industry is going,” she says. “Right now, anyone can spend \$400 and get a nice printer that will do 8-by-10s – so why would they need a

professional photographer? You have to be able to set yourself apart with your product, and provide something people couldn’t easily make at home.”

Having a stunning piece of art with a loved one’s portrait on it is also very appealing to people, Lovett says.

“I build on a lot of other people’s work and ideas. There are many artists who do really beautiful work. I try to apply their techniques to make a sellable product,” Lovett concludes. “Artists are making these gorgeous pieces that hang in museums. I want to bring that feel to my customers in a way that’s accessible to them.” ■