

Furieri & Co. brings modern approach to an art form that began in 4000 B.C.



THIRD GENERATION: Jean-Francois Furieri of Iconoplast Designs Inc. continues the business that his grandfather started in Italy in the early 1900s.

The public is rarely aware of the obstacles constantly faced by independent business people — and not just those in the high-technology field, where simply being “new” is enough to stop many in their tracks.

Many Torontonians have seen *The Phantom of the Opera* and admired the decorative detail and ornamentation of the city's newly restored Pantages Theatre. Some would even recognize the name of Jean-Francois Furieri as the lead craftsman, president and owner of Iconoplast Designs Inc., who is responsible for much of the meticulous decorative restoration.

Very few people know that Iconoplast was the only company that had the nerve to bid on the project. And even fewer know that when Furieri approached his insurance company for a performance bond, which was required by the general contractor to secure the contract for the job, he was refused on the grounds that he did not have any audited statements for his company.

Family business

What do you do? If you are Jean-Francois Furieri, you simply sign over title of your home to the contractor and go to work! Like his father and grandfather, Furieri is devoted to the art of decorative plastering.

Dominique Furieri originated the family business in Italy in the early 1900s and then moved it to Algiers. The exquisite molds and models found in the company's studios today were crafted by him. One of his major projects was all of the decorative plastering at the Hotel Carlton in Cannes, a grand structure of 200 rooms, built in 1912. For the past 10 years, it has been undergoing a major restoration and thanks to Dominique Furieri's meticulous file keeping, the company was able to study old photographs, drawings and drafts to duplicate the original intent.



Dominique's son, Jean-Dominique, expanded the business when it moved to France. Word of the brilliant craftsman quickly spread through the international community. Among those who commissioned his work was Sheik Ahmed Zaki Yamani, former chairman of OPEC.

Growing up, Jean-Francois was put to work cleaning the family shop and casting small rosettes and cornices. Soaking up knowledge and skill from his dad and fellow artists, he spent the years from 1968 to 1980 becoming an architectural, sculptural craftsman.

Furieri has two versions of why he moved to Canada in 1980. Professionally, he will tell you, “differences and opportunities in Canada beckoned.” As soon as he arrived he was hired by Balmar Architectural Design. Privately, he will tell you, “my wife, Sylvie, whom I met in Cannes, is Canadian.”

For seven years he honed his craft and established a name in the Canadian trade. When it came time for his father to retire in 1987, he was ready to take over the family business and move it to Toronto.

Today the Iconoplast Design touch can be seen and appreciated in several public places, including Montreal's Cineplex Egyptian theatre.

All of Furieri's competitors in the trade declined to bid on the 8.4 foot Capitals that sit atop the heavy columns in the theatre. They said it was “impossible to make them that size,” Furieri explains. “They didn't have the know-how.”

Recently, Iconoplast invested in a state-of-the-art Computer

Assisted Design (CAD) system and computer graphics programs that enable Furieri to create original designs, scan in on existing graphic images or blueprints and alter them or other existing designs of any specification with impressive speed and accuracy.

With access to this new technology, Furieri's company is bringing a modern approach to a traditional art. Few artistic endeavors that will thrive in the next decade and into the 21st century can trace their origins as far back as 4000 B.C. One of the earliest attempts was done with mud. But decorative plastering as we know it today was not extensively employed until the rise of Grecian art around 500 B.C.

Small sphinx

Furieri explains that his company's name comes from the word “iconoclast,” a person who attacks established or traditional concepts, principles, laws, etc. One time he was asked to reproduce a small sphinx for a client and delivered it sporting both an earring and a pony tail.

The next time you're in the Pantages Theatre, admiring the magnificent decorative plaster artwork and thinking what a world-class city you live in, remember it wasn't Garth Drabinsky's big bucks nor the general contractor's organizational skills that are solely responsible.

A third-generation, independent business person believed so much in his employees and himself that he put his family's home on the block to prove it.

On behalf of many in Toronto, Jean-Francois: You shouldn't have had to do it — but we're glad you did. Thank you.

□ Herve De Jordy welcomes questions, comments or inquiries on starting your own business. Write to: *On Your Own*, The Toronto Star, 1 Yonge St., Toronto, M5E 1E6. Not every letter can be answered but all will be considered.