Ancient Louisiana landscape focus of woman’s creativity

By Candace Pollock
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Murline Murray has a knack for taking one of Louisiana’s oldest works of Mother Nature and molding it into her own work of art.

What some people may see as just cypress tree stumps, or “knees”, protruding from the waters of natural canals and bayous, Murray brings to life with a little paint and creativity.

“I know exactly how I want to design the “knee” before I even begin painting it. I’ve never had to sit down and think about the design. It’s already in my mind before I begin my work,” said the native and lifelong resident of this small community.

Her forte is Santas – tall ones, short ones, skinny ones, fat ones – painted to reflect the shape of each cypress “knee”.

“They’re unique. No one cypress knee is the same,” Murray said. “And I think that’s why people like them so much. They’re fascinated with the shapes.”

What started out as a hobby about five years ago has brought Murray national, as well as international attention, much to her amazement.

“I collect Santa Clauses and one day I was out on our farm and I noticed how the “knees” reminded me of Santas. So I asked my husband to cut one down and I painted it,” she said. “I never knew that my hobby would take off like it did. I’m so surprised.”

She said her “Cypress Santas” are popular throughout south Louisiana, where dealers who purchase Murray’s work sell them at arts and crafts shows.

““No matter what time of the year it is, I always sell out of Santas at the craft shows,” she said. “People display them anywhere, even outside. The cypress tree has been nicknamed ‘wood everlasting’ because of its durability.”

But the popularity of the “Cypress Santas” doesn’t stop there, as people throughout the country have purchased the “knees”. Murray’s work has even found homes overseas, in such countries as Japan, Africa and England.

“Louisiana is becoming so popular elsewhere. People want something that’s native of this state,” said Murray, adding she wants each “knee” to be as authentic and true to the area as possible.

That’s why her work doesn’t start at the painting stage.

Murray said she sets aside an entire week just to collect the “knees”, spending an entire day wading through local canals and bayous, carefully choosing which stumps she’d like to paint.

Then she cuts each one down with a chainsaw, boils it for an hour to remove the bark leaving a smooth surface, and lets it air dry before painting it.

Murray said she can collect 200-250 “knees” within a week’s time, but it may take months just to finish one stump because of the long drying then painting process.

Once the work is completed, Murray numbers, signs and dates each “knee”, then provides a little history on the cypress tree for each purchaser.

Murray said she accepts orders upon request. For more information call the Atchafalaya Christmas Shoppe in Melville at 623-3672.