Sailing in style
Maritime artist likes to see her work sail away — on sides of vessels

By AARON KURILOFF
(The New Orleans) Times-Picayune

NEW ORLEANS — Cynthia Assevado provides a service important to commercial fishermen throughout St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes, some of the nation's most-productive fisheries. But it's not her skill with a net they demand, nor her steady hand on the helm.

It's her brushwork.

Assevado is a maritime artist, she specializes in painting names on fishing boats. Almost every "Princess Amanda" or "Captain Lafitte" that tows a net between Lake Borgne and the mouth of the Mississippi River bears her trademark cursive flourish.

Changing times have left Assevado's work occupying the same dwindling niche as figurehead carvers, scrimshaw artists or sailmakers. But many fishermen in St. Bernard or Plaquemines wouldn't consider putting to sea without one of her designs adorning the hull for good luck. As winter's cold fronts blow boats into ports across the Louisiana coast, Assevado's high season has just begun.

"I don't know anybody else that does this," she said. "I kind of wish I did, though, because I'm getting too old and fat to be climbing on these scaffolds."

It's a tradition that chose her as much as she chose it. Years ago, when Assevado was starting her seafood business, a man named Walter Younger painted most of the local fishing boats.

"He was a legend in this area," Assevado said.

When he retired, Violet painter and woodcarver Ike Hingle stepped into the void. But Hingle retired, and Assevado, who had always painted oars as a hobby, found her skills increasingly in demand.

"I literally had to teach myself," she said. "I went to a sign-painting class, and they'll teach you certain letters or styles, but nobody tells you what to do if there's a flare in the boat's hull that you can't really measure and just have to eye up."

Now, when the season closes for the winter, neighbors commonly see her atop a scaffold, carefully filling in letters with a squirrel-hair brush.

Masculine names get a hard, block font. Boats named for princesses and queens get Old English letters.

"It has to go with the theme of the boat, like if it says 'Captain Joe,' I wouldn't use a real frilly type for that," Assevado said.

"The best ones that I've had? I painted a 'Good If She Goes.' There was one that said 'Cold-Hearted Woman' and on the back it said 'Hard-Headed Man.'"

Her winter efforts start slowly as operators work through their routine maintenance, but business picks up significantly in early spring, as captains get their vessels ready for the annual May Blessing of the Fleet, a 50-year-old tradition started by Canary Islander DemigrDes that fishermen say ensures a safe and prosperous fishing season.

Lately, however, the shrimp industry, from which most of Assevado's work comes, has fallen on hard times. Last year, shrimpers around the Gulf of Mexico suffered one of their worst harvests, which they blamed on high fuel and insurance costs, overfishing and competition from cheap imported shrimp that this year dropped dockside prices to their lowest level in decades. Few new boats need naming.