

Art

Tree 'n Sea Living

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Up Front Art That Fits Everyone to a T

One of today's most popular garments is really rather humble. It's not especially glamorous. One would most likely not wear it to one's wedding. In fact, the lowly T-shirt started out as something men wore underneath other shirts.

Despite its nondescript beginnings, the T-shirt fad seems to have engulfed the torsos of most Americans in recent years. Original and custom-made T-shirts are currently among Santa Cruzans' favorite articles of clothing.

But according to Dennis Reinero of the Shirt Factory near the Boardwalk, "T-shirts have always been around in one form or another." He's probably right -- Reinero has been doing his airbrushed T-shirts for 18 years.

Reinero's airbrushing, which started as a hobby in high school, has grown into a business, soon to expand into a second shop located in Capitola. Reinero also airbrushed the outside of his shop and his truck, and his specialty is custom-made T-shirt designs of people's favorite cars.

Reinero is known by some as "the granddaddy of

Santa Cruz T-shirts" and his shop is almost a landmark to local residents and regular tourists.

"People come in here and they always say, 'You're still doing T-shirts?' " chuckles Reinero.

Airbrushing is a technique that uses a "gun" with compressed air shooting a special paint onto the T-shirt. "The brush never touches the shirt," says Reinero as he demonstrates. "There is no friction between them. It gives you a lot of freedom."

There are many of his older T-shirts around, some from as far back as 1960, says Reinero. Whenever he finds someone that has one of these, he has them bring it to his shop so that he can photograph it.

Compared to Reinero, Fabrigraphics and Sopwith Designs, two original T-shirt companies also in the area, are relative newcomers to the business. Sopwith has been in operation three years and Fabrigraphics for five.

Lauryn LeClere, owner, artist, and main printer of Fabrigraphics, got started in the T-shirt business through his sailboat.

"I was playing with the idea of doing silk screening

for a living," he explained, "and then the yacht broker at the harbor bought a bunch of my T-shirts, and I started doing T-shirts for a lot of other businesses around the harbor."

LeClere specializes in silk screening T-shirts for businesses in the Santa Cruz area, such as Shadowbrook restaurant, KFAT radio station, Z's Liquors, Togo's, and the annual Pleasure Point bike race. Some of the designs are suggested to him and others he designs especially for his clients.

"I've been trying to make up a collection of my own designs, but I just haven't had time," sighs LeClere.

Sopwith Designs in Capitola is a far cry from being a one-man business, however. Sopwith also specializes in making silk screened T-shirts for businesses, and a good portion of their work is done for Odyssey Records. They also have made T-shirts for Bargetto Winery, the Good Fruit Company, Polar Bear Ice Cream and a host of others. All in all, they have printed T-shirts for about 300 businesses.

Says Sopwith's sales Manager, Mark Saunders,

"The output varies from day to day and week to week, but we produce about 120,000 T-shirts a year." The company employs three printers, five salespeople, and one artist to handle the company's orders.

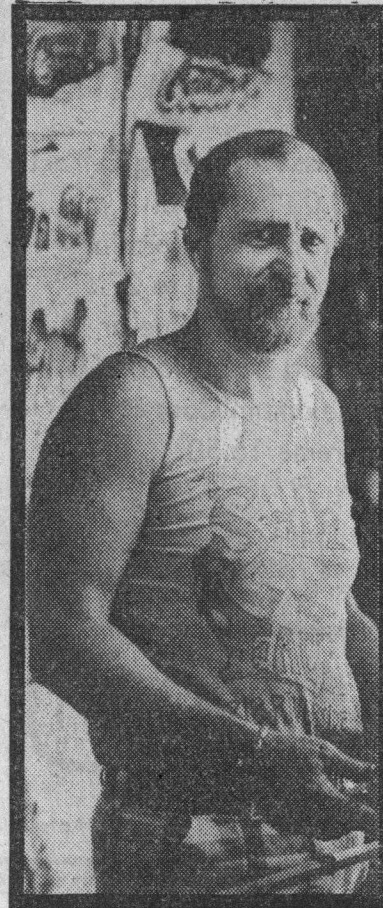
Silk screening is done with wooden frames over which silk, nylon, or cotton material has been tightly stretched. A special photographic process imprints a negative image of the design to be used on the screen. When ink is squeezed through the screen, it will only come through the screen through that image. A different screen must be used for each different color added to the shirt. Screens are mounted on a many-armed "carousel" which the printer turns as he adds each color to the shirt. The finished shirt is then sent through a drier.

T-shirts, whether they be originals or those that are mass-produced, seem to be here for a while. They're casual, comfortable, expressive, and fun. Some of the area's original T-shirts are already collector's items. In future years, who knows -- T-shirt museums?

—Kathy McKenzie

Photos By Bill Lovejoy

Top photos from left: Dale Matlock and Pete Castello of Sopwith; young Jesse Lovejoy; large photo is Lauryn LeClere of Fabrigraphics; bottom left, Cindy Thomas; right, LeClere and carousel



Above, "The Great Reinero" demonstrates his airbrush technique and is caught in a relaxing moment at The Shirt Factory; at right, Rick Peterson models a custom-made T-shirt Reinero did in the 50s