

DESIGNING HISTORIANS



By Mary Miley Theobald '74

Look for the Sign of the Seven Stars when you're next in Yorktown. It stands in front of the Mungo Somerwell House (c. 1710) on Main Street, marking a highly unusual store selling highly unusual reproductions. The shop's three owners share a passion for colonial objects and 18th-century style as well as an uncommon academic approach to the antique reproductions process — and, coincidentally, all are graduates of William and Mary.

In Robert R. Hunter, Jr. M.A. '87, Virginia Lascara '81 and Michelle Erickson '82, scholarship and craftsmanship converge. Like the shops of the old port of Yorktown that once bulged with merchandise, Period Designs, as they call their shop, is full to the bursting point of ceramics, glass, framed prints, furniture, floorcloths, leather, tin, brass and iron wares, all accurate enough to fool a reincarnated 18th-century customer.

"Lots of folks do reproductions — making something with modern tools and materials and distressing it or faking it in some manner so it looks old," says Hunter. "We carry work by a dozen or so craftsmen who truly care about what they're doing and *how* they do it. Fanatics, really, people who are as devoted to the accurate process as they are to the appearance of the finished product."



Hunter is an archaeologist with a master's degree in anthropology from William and Mary. In 1988 he became the founding director of the William and Mary Center for Archaeological Research, an institution that he guided for several years before moving down DOG Street to become a ceramics curator for Colonial Williamsburg. Today he works as the product originator for Period Designs, initiating products he thinks will be appropriate for certain museums. As the non-craftsman in the trio, he deals with antiques and artifacts and works with dedicated craftspeople on rediscovering the long-forgotten processes and techniques that make the accurate reproductions possible.

With his partner, Samuel G. Margolin '92, a nautical archaeologist with a Ph.D. in history who has served on occasion as adjunct faculty at both William and Mary and Christopher Newport University, Hunter also runs an antiques



business that specializes in British and American ceramics, glass, coins and prints. One room in the Mungo Somerwell House is devoted to these antiques; there it is common to find very uncommon 17th- and 18th-century objects.

When Ginny Lascara began working at Colonial Williamsburg as the associate curator for prints and maps, she was astonished to learn that no one was making historically accurate reproductions of period picture frames. With her brother Joseph Lascara M.A. '82, a former marine biologist, she started a framing business called the Black Dog Gallery that very quickly grew to include seven employees and locations in Yorktown and Virginia Beach.

The Lascaras also reproduce certain black and white prints and maps that they paint with watercolors in the 18th-century manner, as well as a line of painted floorcloths. When they need exceptional artistry, they draft their mother, Betty Lyons Lascara '43, the wife of the late Vice-Admiral Vincent Lascara '42,

to help with the finer details on picture frames and floorcloths.

Michelle Erickson graduated from William and Mary in 1982 and went on to get reproductions experience at the Jamestown pottery. With the help of four employees at her Hampton studio, she produces a diverse assortment of English delft, redwares and slipware, all based on 17th- and 18th-century antiques she has studied in various museum collections, especially those in the museums of the "historic triangle" of Jamestown, Yorktown and Williamsburg. Her work is sold through Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area shops and the Craft Houses as well as the Period Designs shop in Yorktown, but most of her one-of-a-kind efforts go to museums and collectors who can't find or can't afford the skyrocketing prices of the originals.

The Yorktown store is managed by Ann Berry '79, M.A. '84, yet another W&M alumna. Berry's undergraduate degree in colonial American studies and

her M.A. in museum education give her a unique perspective on the reproductions business. Berry came to Period Designs from the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities at Jamestown, where she served as site coordinator, developing both the volunteer program and the Jamestown Rediscovery lecture series.

The store and its unique merchandise has garnered more than its share of national attention considering the short time — just over four years — it has been in business. *Colonial Homes*, *Town and Country*, *Country Living*, *Early American Life*, and the *Colonial Williamsburg Journal* have carried features about Period Designs and the related businesses of each of its principals. It is a remarkable array of William and Mary's creativity and expertise — and Yorktown's newest historic attraction. ■

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Virginia Lascara '81 (left), Rob Hunter M.A. '87 and Michelle Erickson '82 show off some of the reproductions that have made their shop famous from Colonial Williamsburg to Hollywood. Photos courtesy of *Colonial Homes* Magazine.

