

HISTORY ON A WALL



Photos by Darin Oswald / The Idaho Statesman included in the artwork are a series of tiles of the Idanha Hotel itself.

Timeless art piece offers look at Idanha's history, artist's past

By Dana Oland
The Idaho Statesman

To understand ceramic artist Kerry Moosman you first need to understand his sense of time. It's not that clocks run differently in his sphere, although that's not an impossible notion.

When you're around him, life seems less hurried and never frantic. Moosman doesn't get caught up in seconds ticking away on a watch. He processes time in the cycles of the sun and the passage of years, decades and centuries.

They're all one, he says.

"History is a living thing. It's not the past. Everything we are and do is a product of everything that has come before."

That sentiment fuels Moosman's art, his passion as a preservationist and his philosophy of life.

Now he has put his stamp on Boise's historic Idanha at 10th and Main streets.

Moosman's ceramic mural, "Healing Waters," glimmers in the late afternoon sun on the alley side of the Idanha. Flashes of gold catch the light. The tiles appear to grow out of the wall as though they have always been there.

Bicyclists stop to ponder it. Pedestrians pause as it catches their attention.

"It just fits," said Eric McDonald, 24, as he looked on from the seat of his mountain bike. "I've been watching it go up for a few weeks. Job well done for sure."

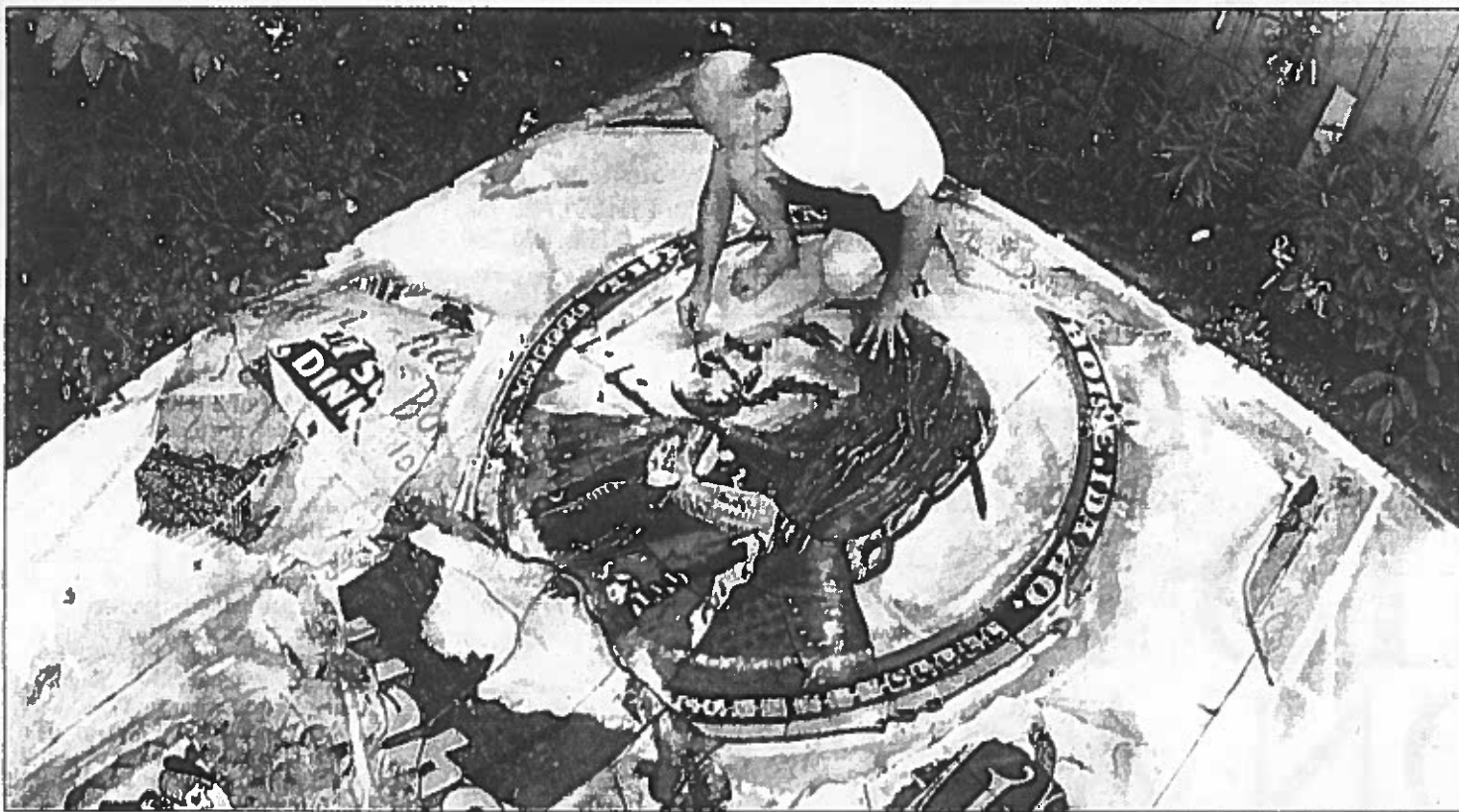
This is Moosman's second ceramic mural as Boise public art. He made "Al-

See Moosman on page 3



"Spirit of Healing Waters," Kerry Moosman's finished artwork on the side of the Idanha Hotel in downtown Boise.

Darin Oswald / The Idaho Statesman



Photos by Darin Oswald / The Idaho Statesman

Kerry Moosman creates an outline of his latest ceramic tile mural destined for the alley side of the Idanha Hotel in downtown Boise. Moosman also created the ceramic mural "Alley History" on 9th Street. He's calling this piece "Spirit of the Healing Waters," which is the closest translation for Idanha he has found when it was the name used on bottled spring water.

Moosman

From page 1

ley History" in 1992, off 9th and Bannock streets, a piece that remains a favorite among downtown denizens.

"Healing Waters" combines Moosman's love of history, his preservationist passion, his spirituality and artistic sensibility.

He used bits of ephemera associated with the hotel to create the imagery — a menu, a match book cover, an advertisement, stationary letterhead, an old print of the building, an early stock certificate and an old tourism brochure announcing Idaho's beauty to the outside world the qualities of the Idanha.

There's even a bit about The Weeds, a 1960s bar inside the Idanha that featured go-go girls in cages.

"The Idanha has had it all," Moosman said. "It (the mural) is a history lesson, I think. Instead of representing one historical period, it's all of the periods combined."

The dominant image is the portrait of a Cheyenne Indian named Chief Wolf Robe. It was the hotel's first logo that once towered over Main Street on a sign taller than the building's turrets.

Scottish sheep ranchers John and Thomas McMillan, who built the hotel, chose this Native American image from a photography book.

"I think they (the McMillans) were just a little nostalgic, looking ahead at the 20th century and realizing that 1900 marked the lowest point of American Indian population in the state. I think they were being a little compassionate."

Get in the spirit

The mural looks like something that was once complete, then had bits chipped away.

The negative space invites the viewer to fill in the gaps with his or her own imagination, Moosman said.

Moosman ripped up pieces of paper — the menu, the stock certificate, et al. — then he arranged them like puzzle pieces until he found the right shape. When he got to the clay, he made his ceramic tiles in the shape of those torn

pieces.

The mural is in the rough shape of a cross. There are several trinities inside the design — three Indian heads, three images of the building, three bits of the herald, etc.

Though Moosman is not a religious man, he collects Mexican retablos, small religious paintings used for candle-lit offerings. In Mexico, they are used as spiritual medicine.

That part may have been subconscious, he said. The artistic process isn't necessarily logical. But the spiritual context fits well with the idea of the "spirit of healing waters" and the fact that the hotel was built on the former church site.

It also works as spiritual medicine, he said, and in a small way as an offering to Idaho's past.

The man from Atlanta

Moosman's love of history and sense of time comes from his years spent in Atlanta, a small mining town near the Sawtooth mountains, he said.

After spending much of his childhood there, his family moved to Boise when Moosman entered the third grade. Because both sets of grandparents stayed behind, his Atlanta connection stayed strong.

Today Moosman, 50, owns a good portion of Atlanta — five houses, a nightclub and lunch counter and a barbershop. Those don't include the small complex of buildings he lost to the Trail Creek Fire in 2000.

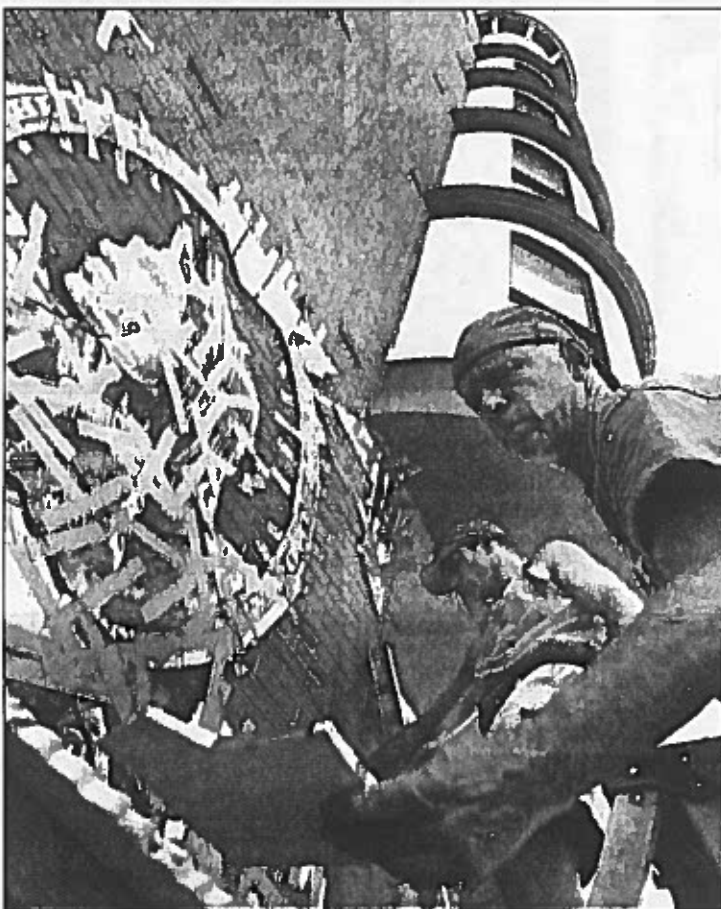
While there — about six months of the year — he lives on Atlanta time. He works when it's light, rests when it's not.

"When you live in the mountains you have a different sense of time. The stress of day-to-day life and keeping schedules falls away. You have the time to appreciate nature and see the changes. That becomes a clock itself. It's a more organic situation. I like it. The passage of time becomes a whole different philosophy."

Burning of Atlanta

His commitment to the town is a commitment to himself. He found that out when the fire hit back in 2000.

When officials evacuated the



Artist Kerry Moosman, with help from Justin Ahlin, places his latest ceramic tile creation on the alley side of the Idanha Hotel in downtown Boise.

town, Moosman stayed to battle the blaze alongside the army of firefighters and smokejumpers.

He hosed down his building inside and out and held his breath on many nights over the three weeks the fire threatened.

"I woke up one time and saw nothing but red — like looking through a piece of red glass. It was this huge red force field — just the heat and energy from the fire. Everything was turned inside out. Matter was changing before my eyes. In a way it was very beautiful."

The fire threatened, then moved back. The experience left its mark on Moosman.

"It makes you more uneasy. I'm always looking over my shoulder. When you have a close call with disaster, it makes you more aware of your own mortality," he said.

"You're not going to be here forever. What you're creating won't be around forever, either."

Preserving the past

The idea of preserving his hometown became more precious after watching Boise's downtown landscape change forever during the 1970s and '80s.

"Urban renewal ... it was really a terrible time. They'd put chain-link fence around these cool old buildings and start demolishing them. There was nothing at all going on downtown. It looked like a big old bombed-out, dusty, dirty place. All the buildings were empty. And it was really discouraging," Moosman remembered.

Moosman is excited that the Idanha was saved. Seeing it again become part of Boise's vibrant downtown life is gratifying, he said.

When he heard of this public art project, he started doing his research right away. He was selected from three finalists for the \$18,000 piece.

The piece was built with matching funds from Capital City Development Corporation and Parklane Co. Inc., which owns the historic building.

Parklane owner Ken Howell bought the building in 1999. He restored it and turned it into apartments and commercial

spaces.

Putting something new on a historic building is delicate business, said Karen Bubb, Boise City Arts Commission's public arts coordinator.

"Kerry has the sensibility to do something that already looks old.

He combines elements in a way that are almost abstract but he retains their historic connections," she said.

To offer story ideas or comments, contact reporter Dana Oland at doland@idahostatesman.com or 377-6442.

The Idanha Hotel ushered in a new era

Intense research into the Idanha's history was part of Moosman's process to develop the mural. Bits of that history work as subtext for the mural's content and aesthetics.

John McMillan, for whom McMillan Road is named, and his partners built the Idanha Hotel. To do it they tore down an old Episcopal church at 10th and Main streets.

Construction began in 1900. The hotel was intended to herald in the new era, a new period in time. It had Idaho's first elevator. Guests could read by electric light and use a telephone to call loved ones. It was the ultimate in modern convenience and progress.

As impressive as it was when it opened a year later, it's important to note that this was not Idaho's first Idanha Hotel. There was one built in the 1860s near Soda Springs.

It stood by mineral springs that were believed to have healing powers. The hotel became a sort of latter-day rehab center for alcoholics.

"If they put booze in the water it turned black. I'm not sure why but they thought the waters had curative abilities but they did," Moosman said.

So the hotel and the bottled water were both given the name Idan-Ha, which is believed to have meant "spirit of the healing waters." Hence, it's the title of Moosman's piece.

Because history is not always exact, no one knows for sure, just as no one is completely sure of the origin of the word "Idaho," Moosman said.

Also, what is now the corner of 10th and Main streets was once a stop on the Oregon Trail. Settlers converged on the Boise camp site after crossing the harsh desert from what is now Mountain Home.

"From the beginning this was a restful area," Moosman said. "They could refresh themselves. They could find the hot springs, do laundry and relax. It must have been magical."

So, Moosman gave the mural a watery feeling, with opalescent glazes, burnished metallic paints, and reflective gold that appears to ripple in sunlight.

'Healing Waters' is a departure for Moosman

The ceramic murals "Alley History" and "Healing Waters" are a departure for artist Kerry Moosman. They use modern glazes and firing techniques. When he works on his large-scale ceramic vessels, things are a little different.

The vessels range in size from 3- to 4-feet tall and sell for up to \$5,000.

Moosman uses an ancient technique that dates back 4,000 years. He's not in a hurry when he's using this time-intensive method. It takes about two months to make one.

"Nothing has more historic significance than pottery," Moosman said. "That's what I like about clay. It lasts. For lots of cultures, that's all that's left."

He makes about five vessels a year at Fort Boise Community Center ceramics studio, where Moosman teaches in the winter.

He rolls clay into long snakes, then coils them to form the object. After he smooths the outside surface, he burnishes it with a polished stone. If he wants a high-gloss finish, he rubs lard into its surface.

Then he dung-fires them at a low 1,200 degrees. The way he arranges the dried horse dung determines how the piece will look. Results vary from black to red, and the smoke from the burning dung subtly influences the look of each piece.

"They are reminiscent of landscapes," said Stephanie Wilde, owner of Stewart Gallery, who represents the artist in Boise. "They make me think of the red clay terrain where I grew up."

You can see Moosman's vessels at Stewart Gallery in November. The Boise Art Museum owns two of Moosman's vessels.

"Kerry's work is an asset to our collection of American ceramics. He is a master of his technique that we hold it up to artists of a national and international level," said Heather Ferrell, associate curator at the Boise Art Museum.

Every year, Moosman donates a small vessel to the Flying M Coffeehouse's "Valentine for AIDS" silent auction. His piece generally brings in the highest price, usually \$400 to \$500.