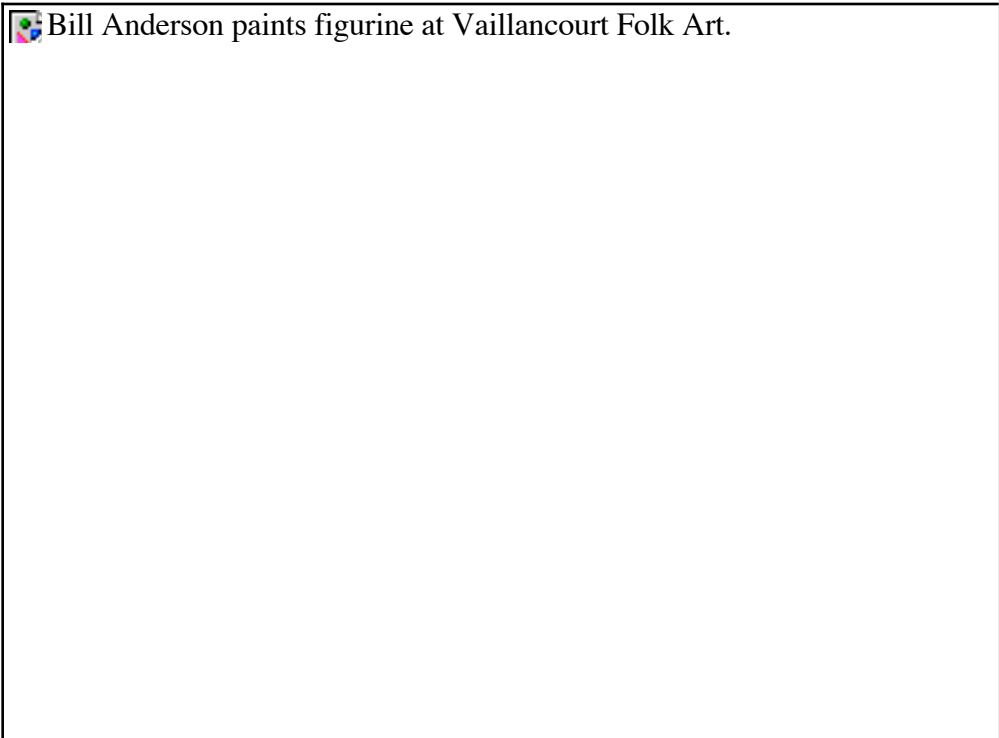




Business Focus



Bill J. Anderson of Northbridge uses oil-based paint to decorate a red, white and blue Santa figurine at Vaillancourt Folk Art in Sutton.

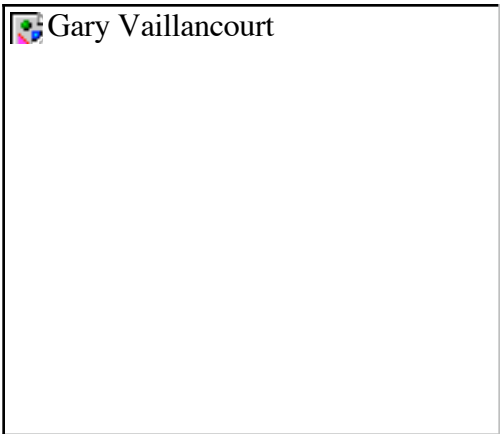
Santa's present

Patriotic figurines bring welcome boost to sales at Vaillancourt

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By Lisa Eckelbecker
Telegram & Gazette Staff

SUTTON -- America's patriotic fervor is heating up activities in an unexpected place -- the workshop of Vaillancourt Folk Art.



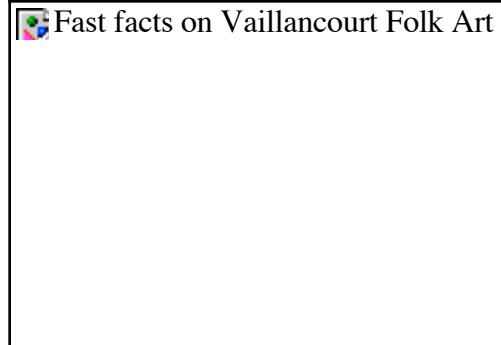
"Normally, I'll sell 20 (Santas) a

With just days to go before Christmas, artists at the handcrafted ornament business are toiling to turn out enough red, white and blue Santa figurines and fierce bald eagle ornaments to satisfy buyers across the country who are clamoring for made-in-the-USA collectibles.

"What we're seeing is people saying, 'We want to buy American,' " said Gary F. Vaillancourt, co-owner of the business.

year, maybe 25. This year I've sold 700 in the last six weeks."

GARY F. VAILLANCOURT
VAILLANCOURT FOLK ART
CO-OWNER



The hunger for patriotic objects is nothing new in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon. Flag sales skyrocketed immediately after the attacks.

Yet at Vaillancourt Folk Art, known for its hand-painted chalkware, consumer patriotism has breathed new life into two lines of ornaments that have been generating modest sales since they were launched years ago.

One ornament line is a stars-and-stripes Santa that is based on an 1863 illustration by artist Thomas Nast. A second line is a bald eagle taken from a design dating to about 1920.

Both are examples of the meticulously crafted, high-end chalkware produced by Vaillancourt Folk Art.

The business uses antique chocolate and ice cream molds to turn out plaster-like figurines that a team of artists hand paint, following the designs of Mr. Vaillancourt's wife, Judi C. Vaillancourt. All pieces are produced in limited numbers, and each piece takes about three weeks to complete.

At the Vaillancourt Folk Art Web site, www.valfa.com, the patriotic Santa is selling for \$110 and the eagle is selling for \$150.

Part of the allure of Vaillancourt Folk Art objects is their made-in-the-USA status, something rare in a gift industry dominated by foreign producers, some retailers said.

"Right now, it's not just the patriotic, red-white-and-blue stars and stripes that is popular," said Julie E. Delgrosso, owner of the Christmas House in Elmira, N.Y., and a longtime retailer of Vaillancourt Folk Art ornaments. "It's the idea that it's made here and we're helping our country by purchasing a Vaillancourt Folk Art

piece."

Demand has been unexpectedly high for the patriotic Santa and the eagle, according to Mr. Vaillancourt. The business launched the eagle ornament in 1984, selling about 250 up until this season. Since Sept. 11, the business has sold 220 eagles, many to corporations that are giving away the ornaments.

The Santa, originally launched in 1985, is even hotter.

"Normally, I'll sell 20 a year, maybe 25," Mr. Vaillancourt said. "This year I've sold 700 in the last six weeks."

Some of the business's longtime retailers have been unable to keep up with demand.

"It's incredible. I had 75 of the (Santa) ornaments, and I have none left," said Vivienne B. Magee, owner of Vivienne's Antiques in Portersville, Pa., and a longtime seller of Vaillancourt Folk Art objects. "I would've gotten more, but they didn't have more to give me."

Sales of patriotic items are so strong at Vaillancourt Folk Art that the artists will likely be producing Christmas pieces into January to fill back orders.

For Vaillancourt Folk Art, the patriotic buying is a welcome end to a year in which many recession-wary clients reduced ornament orders. Still, Mr. Vaillancourt said he is mindful that the fervor behind the recent buying stems from tragedy. The business is donating 10 percent of its proceeds from the sale of patriotic items to the American Red Cross, and it has already sent about \$5,000 to the charity, he said.

Vaillancourt Folk Art also will not try to capitalize on the market with patriotic ornaments for Easter or other upcoming holidays.

The one concession the company made was to redesign the decorations on a glass snowman ornament to include a flag. The ornaments are made in Germany but painted in Sutton.

Mr. Vaillancourt said he does not expect demand for patriotic ornaments to last long. But he said he hopes consumers retain their affection for domestically produced collectibles.

"Who knows how deep the resurgence of American pride will go," he said.