



Charlotte Van Zant-King holds two large-scale block prints she carved and printed.

From Public to Private Art

After making her mark in public art, Charlotte Van Zant-King has changed her focus

By Jeanie Senior

Before artist Charlotte Van Zant-King moved to Goldendale in 2007, she lived in Alaska and California. She left a legacy of public art in both states.

Some were giant tapestries. Others were tile murals, and some were large mosaics. On an expansive tile mural at the entrance of Willow Crest Elementary School in Anchorage—one of several murals Charlotte did for the school—caribou dance across the tundra. A 14-by-24-foot tapestry of ravens in flight, mountains and sky hangs in a Fairbanks courthouse. Another large tapestry, “Salmon Returning,” is in the Alaska Institute of Technology in Seward.

“I have pieces here and there, all over Alaska,” Charlotte says.

When she got her first commission for the state’s percent for art initiative, “it just sort of launched me, because I worked really hard at it,” she says.

Charlotte, her husband, Rod, and their daughter moved from Alaska to Northern California in 2000, where she did more public art. She made pieces for a park in Santa Fe Springs and, with parent volunteers and about 500 schoolchildren, she created colorful mosaic walls at the new Playground Fantastico next to a middle school in a public park in Napa. She also did “The Neighbors,” a large tile mural populated with local wildlife—deer, coyote, raccoon, birds—for the city of Lafayette.

These days, Charlotte works in tile and mosaics, scaled down to table tops and pieces that can hang

on a wall. She is working with oils, doing plein air painting, monotypes and woodblock prints of the birds in the Gorge and the birds in her backyard.

She recently went to Bend and took a class in typesetting.

“I’m one of those people who just can’t stand it if I can’t try something else,” she says.

What remains a constant in art is Charlotte’s love of the birds, animals and fish that share her world.

“So many different things I do are tied to natural history,” she says. “When I do a fish, it really is a fish, because that’s part of my background.”

Charlotte is both an artist and a biologist. She has a biology degree from University of North Carolina at Greensboro and a degree in art from Western Washington University in Bellingham.

The daughter of a career Army man, Charlotte was born in Kentucky, grew up in Oklahoma and North Carolina and graduated from a high school on an Army base in Italy. In college, “it took me awhile to find myself,” she says. “My dad was convinced I should be a doctor, a lawyer, a judge.”

Instead, she chose biology. She met and married her first husband, and the couple moved to Bellingham. In 1978, they moved to Point Barrow, Alaska.

After the couple divorced, Charlotte stayed in Alaska. She met Rod, a migratory bird biologist, who studied birds along the West Coast up to Canada and Alaska.

Charlotte worked in wildlife rescue and rehabilitation, and started doing art seriously. She had owned a weaving shop in Bellingham, and learned tapestry technique in Vancouver, B.C., from a well-known Canadian tapestry artist, Joanna Staniszki.

“You build a loom to fit the tapestry, and (weave the tapestry) by hand,” Charlotte says. “It’s the most primitive form of weaving, but it’s also in a way some of the most refined technique, because you have absolute control.”

Her favorite tapestry, “The Girl Who Became a Swan,” is 4-feet high and 24-feet long. She made it for the visitors’ room at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Correctional Center in Bethel, Alaska.

Charlotte and Rod ended up in Goldendale because he had landed in Dallesport, looked around and said it reminded him a bit of where he had grown up in Idaho. She OK’d the move, she says, because there was a gallery in Goldendale, and Maryhill Museum of Art was nearby.



They now live in Goldendale while Rod builds a house a few miles north of town.

“There’s a very large community of women artists here, and artisans and craftspeople,” Charlotte says. “It’s a really nice community.”

After working in public art for 25 years, Charlotte has stepped back from public art projects to focus on smaller projects.

“Now, people know me for my black-and-white bird prints,” she says. “It’s nice to know that people buy my work because they really like it. When it’s a public commission, they’re kind of forced to accept it, just because they’re the public.” ■

Visit Charlotte’s website at www.charlottevanzantking.com. Click on the public art tab to see photos of her work.

Lizard and fish mosaics—and the materials needed to create them—cover Charlotte’s worktable.