

# Walls of art blend mason's many talents

By  
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Jay Tschetter considers his brick art a marriage — one between his trade and his art background.

Those who have seen the train steam toward them from his 40-by-14-foot brick mural outside the old Burlington Northern depot can attest to just how successful this union has been.

This combination of brick and art began with several years' train-

ing as a mason before obtaining a formal art education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

A self-professed fair-weather mason, Tschetter used the winter months to practice his art training after leaving school.

"I kept my art alive by just trying to scratch through the winter without laying brick and doing scrimshaw projects while living in Bellingham (Wash.)," he said.

Tschetter returned to Lincoln and tried to make a go at scrimshaw, the art of carving ivory.

"But nobody knew what it was; nobody knew the value of it," he said.

For a while, Tschetter dropped scrimshaw and art from his life. But while flipping through a brochure at a bricklayer's convention, he discovered a picture of a brick sculpture.

"I immediately had an 'eureka' experience — oh my god, you can do this?" Tschetter said. "It was perfect for me."

He contacted the company in the brochure and trained with them for a while. But, when it came to setting up his own shop, he said Yankee Hill Brick & Tile, 3705 S. Coddington Ave, offered the best deal.

Sitting in Tschetter's cozy workshop in a corner of the Yankee Hill factory, one can sense some of the advantages at being located within the factory walls.

"Yankee Hill bricks offer an extraordinary variety of colors in brick, probably more so than any other brickyard in the country," Tschetter explained.

Because Yankee Hill is a small company and has to keep up with automated plants that can produce four times the volume a year, they specialize in matching colors and custom orders, he said.

Tschetter added that besides donating work space and providing quality bricks, Yankee Hill also helps in marketing his final product.

"They issued a nationwide press release after I got this done," he said, pointing to the empty 40-foot easel of slanted plywood used to complete his train mural.

Tschetter said he began to visualize the big project after feeling some discontent with the "mean-

ingless sense of being (just) a brick-layer."

"I wanted something more," he said. "It became an exercise in the power of positive thinking."

Tschetter said he began looking in the newspapers for architectural announcements — what kind of buildings were being built in the area.

Seeing the plans for the depot alterations, Tschetter called the planning committee and suggested they think of a little train mural coming out from the wall in the adjacent park.

"They took it to the city, and the city got excited about it and decided for a bigger project than just a wall in the park. But the city had to put it up for open bidding," he said.

Tschetter talked extensively to old railroaders while researching the final drawing.

"I just kind of knew this was my baby, and I couldn't let anyone take it away," Tschetter said.

Once the bid was awarded, pallets of still damp or green bricks began to arrive in Tschetter's workshop, and the 40-foot-high easel was constructed.

The bricks were made in three phases, beginning with the dark-colored bricks of black and brown, he said.

After stacking the first-phase bricks against the easel, Tschetter spent a month sculpting the train and track into the surface of the bricks.

Tschetter uses clay-working tools of his own design. The free-hand carving is worked into the surface of the wet brick by scraping portions away or scratching designs into the brick to enhance the three-dimensional effect of the wall.

Tones from brown to red took the mural up to the horizon line, while phase three finished the top of the mural with colors ranging from salmon to pure buff.

Tschetter later reconstructed the wall himself using mortar as paint and matching the mortar color to the brick of that particular area.

"It's billed as the first grand-scale-color-blended brick mural of its kind," Tschetter boasted.

Most of the murals are monotone, but some colors come from glazes, slips or coatings just on the

surface of the brick, he said. The colors in the downtown mural go through the entire brick.

He commended Yankee Hill for creating the graduated extruding process that gradually changed the color of the brick as it was squeezed from the molder.

Tschetter's only color problems stemmed from the fact that the true color doesn't appear until the bricks are fired. He solved this by firing samples from each pallet of wet brick and matching them against his color schematic drawing.

Although the train mural is the biggest that Tschetter has attempted, he did another 10-by-10-foot mural for an insurance company in Omaha.

"I like the small stuff, though; there's less stress," he admitted.

Currently, Tschetter is creating single and multi-brick samples for Yankee Hill's retail collection to be shown to builders and interior designers in the spring.

He also continues to experiment with achieving brick color variations by using different firing, glazing and chemical techniques.

"Brick companies are interested in what I'm doing — offering alternatives to putting design back into buildings," he said.

Architecture went through a phase in the '40s and '50s when everything went blank, Tschetter explained. Now, he feels more interest in putting back the ornamentation.

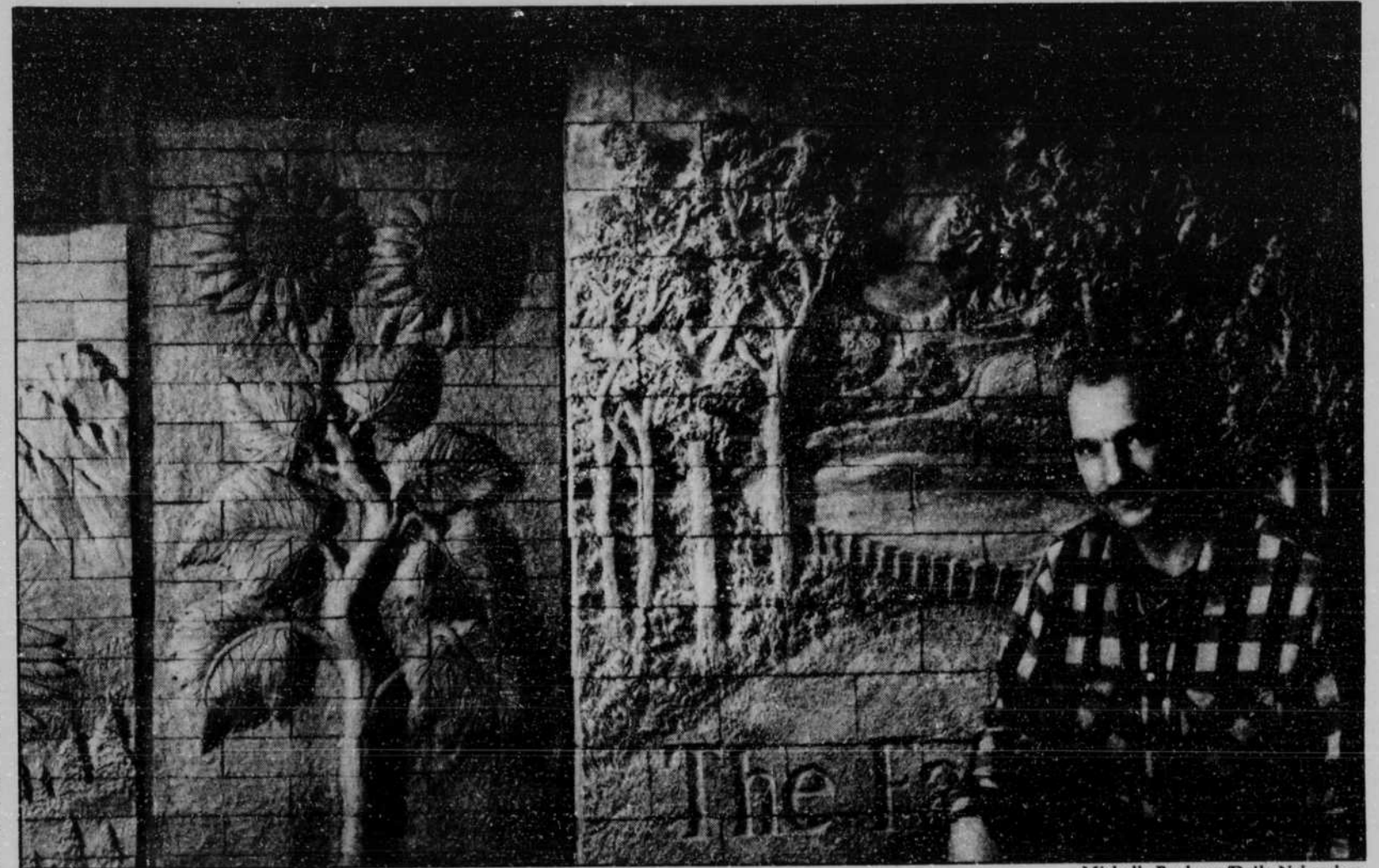
"From murals to singular brick, my role is to afford people an opportunity to embellish buildings or fireplaces with affordable design," Tschetter said.

Once he gets established, Tschetter said he looks forward to sharing his art experiences with schoolchildren.

"Creativity in this society is put off as some extraneous activity that doesn't have a lot of meaning," he said.

Tschetter is concerned that the system used to indoctrinate young students into school reduces their power of creativity.

"If creativity is buried, then we're not a whole people," he said. "Above all, teach your kids to be creative, because they're definitely going to need that to get by in the coming times."



Michelle Paulman/Daily Nebraskan

Jay Tschetter displays some of his brick art in his workshop at Yankee Hill Brick & Tile, 3705 S. Coddington Ave.



Michelle Paulman/Daily Nebraskan

Jay Tschetter adds some final touches on a fireplace border at his workshop.

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