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ARTISTIC UNION

A COUPLE REINVENTS WALL ART

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Jorge and Cindy Simes' decorative painting business had an auspicious start in a most cosmopolitan city—Buenos Aires. The couple met there in 1985 at a salon dinner hosted by a mutual friend, an American art collector, and soon discovered they shared an interest in the arts. An Argentine, Jorge showcased his work at local galleries; Cindy taught, studied and painted. "We started out as friends, helping each other with projects," Cindy recalls. The two gradually started dating. As they became more serious, Cindy, a Pittsburgh native, persuaded Jorge to move to the United States.

They decided to settle in Chicago, where they were hired immediately to adorn walls inside local residences. "We liked doing it and seeing happy faces at the end, so it was very encouraging," says Jorge. "We liked everything about it." In the early years, Simes Studios did some commercial work, decorating restaurants. One of their most memorable projects was for Cafe Biaggio in downtown Chicago. They copied Italian artist Andrea Mantegna, painting murals resembling old frescoes and tapestry. But not everyone wants reproductions. Most seek something new, the couple says. The studio, which now has nine full-time artists, was commissioned to hand-paint green garlands inside a Lake Forest guesthouse. They also painted mythological figures on a domed staircase in a Hinsdale home. The Simeses do their homework before they pick up their brushes. They pour over art history books and visit museums. For an Egyptian-themed commission, they visited the Field Museum and Oriental Institute. For another, they studied the brushwork and colors in a Flemish painting at the Art Institute of Chicago. "We work on the surface of things," says Jorge, "so the psychological and historical aspects only make sense if they are accurate."

Currently, they're launching a line of back-painted glass—eglomise. In the future, they hope to add more staff. The couple, who just celebrated their 20th anniversary, must be doing something right. What makes the partnership work? "We have a good separation of powers and respect for what each one does best," says Cindy.

