

Fabulous Faux

Go faux – decorative painting finishes can bring an artistic touch to a home's décor
Fabulous Faux

Written by Jennifer Walker-Journey

If there was one thing Dr. Jan Greenwood wanted for the home she was building in Miramar Beach, it was for it to be like no other house on the Emerald Coast. Greenwood, a psychiatrist, didn't want a designer; she knew exactly what she liked, and she worked tirelessly in her limited spare time hand-picking exotic artwork, beautiful sink basins and elaborate cabinetry to reflect a rather daring Asian-Tuscan hybrid theme.

"It's a distinctive house," Greenwood, said. "I put a lot of time into it, and I wanted the whole house to be distinctive in its own right."

With the furnishings meticulously chosen, Greenwood then turned to the walls, which in some rooms soared as high as 23 feet and encased floor-to-ceiling windows with stunning views of the sound and golf course.

"The paint was critical" to soften the walls and tie the eclectic look together, she said. But not just any paint. Greenwood wanted an artist's touch.

Enter Krista Vind, a decorative painter based in Niceville. Vind was one of a handful of experienced painters Greenwood had interviewed to capture the designs she had in mind. Viewing samples of faux finishes from each one, Greenwood said the decision to hire Vind was simple.

"There is a world of difference between a painter and an artist," she said. "It was clear she was an artist. Her work was outstanding."

It wasn't an easy task. As Vind toured the home she noted the challenge: Three different themes needed to blend together – Asian, Tuscan and a little shabby chic. Meanwhile, Vind said, "I had to work with her to find something so specific and unique to her style."

As Vind laid out various faux-finish samples for Greenwood, her job got easier.

"She knew exactly what she liked, and that made it easy," Lind said.

Over the next several weeks, Vind began to work, adding a brilliant, highly polished, red Venetian plaster to the towering wall of windows; a stunning gold leafing to the foyer dome; and a handmade, hand-painted paper overlapping on the wall of one bathroom. The faux finishes pulled the rooms – and Greenwood's diverse styles – together comfortably.

Faux finishes are a popular decorative technique meant to create the illusion of marble, wood and even plaster. While nonprofessionals can try their hand at faux finishing, Vind doesn't recommend attempting it without some type of training – either in a classroom or through books. Professional-grade materials can give a much more realistic result than most store-bought products; however, most are sold exclusively to professional artists.

In total, more than 3,200 square feet of Greenwood's home was covered in some type of faux finish. The decorative work wasn't reserved for just the walls. Vind painted the kitchen molding to look like the Tuscan-style, custom-made wooden kitchen cabinets; made a faux door and decorated the interior of bathroom cabinets; and hand-painted tulips on the master bathroom cabinets to match the hand-painted, porcelain crackled sinks, also decorated with tulips.

"Really, anything can be done," said Vind, who charges anywhere from \$3.50 to \$65 per square foot. Just about any look can be created, from rust and water stains to stonework, tile, marble and wood. Using the right

techniques, rooms can give off the breezy cool of the beach or the cozy warmth of a Tuscan bar.

“People usually think of faux finishes as giving an Old World appearance — like French, Italian, Venetian,” said interior designer Pat Kennedy of Studio III Art Group in Destin.

Decorative painting is just one of the elements her design group uses to create atmosphere in a home. Kennedy works with co-owners Mark Bonner and Larry Griffin to layer in other effects, such as furniture pieces and lighting.

“But what people don’t realize is that faux finishes can also be contemporary,” Kennedy said, citing a recent project in which the three designers worked together to pull the reflections of the sea into a waterfront home. The walls were finished in a gray, almost metallic sheen, and the room was appointed with modern-looking chrome accessories and white furniture.

“It’s beautiful how the sparkles from the water’s reflection come into the room and bounce off the walls,” Kennedy said. “It’s almost like the water flows through the house.”

The Studio III designers set their pricing after an in-person consultation. Prices are based on several factors, including the size of the room, the number of windows and doors, the effects to be used and the layers required. All jobs are equally important, Kennedy said, whether the design group is finishing a single chair or an entire home.

When all aspects of room design, including furniture, fabric, color and light, are considered, “the walls are really the last thing you notice,” Kennedy said. “But they are an important player when it comes to setting the mood.” The walls even can transport you to another place.

On the edge of a healthy sand dune, just steps from the gently swaying blue-green waters of the Gulf, sits a white-framed gazebo. Inside of that rests Fred and Linda Buehler’s bathtub. The Buehlers’ Seagrove house is two blocks from the beach, but the three-wall mural that encases the couple’s master suite bathtub gives the inviting illusion that the beach is just within reach.

Last spring, the Buehlers came across Cecilia Haught’s artwork at San Destin’s ArtQuest and hired her to paint their walls. To make the Buehlers’ mural even more realistic, Haught copied the window style on the exterior of the home.

Haught, of Destin, specializes in trompe l’oeil, an art technique in which realistic images are crafted to create the optical illusion that the painting is actually real. The name trompe l’oeil is derived from French and means to “trick the eye.”

“It’s like walking into a room and feeling like you’ve gone into someplace else,” Haught said. As with faux finishes, tromp l’oeil murals are designed to send the senses reeling.

Haught’s work ranges from about \$600 for smaller murals to hundreds of thousands of dollars for larger works. While murals are ideal for small spaces, helping to open and extend rooms, they also are used to add dimension and eliminate monotony on large spaces. One of Haught’s largest designs can be seen on the massive poolside exterior wall of the Sterling Reef condominium in Panama City. There, Haught painted a palm tree-lined pathway that seems to disappear in the distance. It’s so realistic that shortly after finishing the piece a bird flew from the sky into the faux opening of the mural. (The bird was a bit shaken but survived the mishap.)

Even people can be fooled by decorative painting — and in essence, that is the idea. For Vind, the ultimate payoff after completing a project was fooling other professionals.

Recently, Vind did extensive decorative painting at the 17-year-old home of Ruth and Billy Lark at The Cove in Panama City. The house was newly renovated and the Larks added some Old World touches, such as newel posts made from salvaged iron and wood, and antique light fixtures. But the freshly hung Sheetrock and molding didn’t mesh with

the aged appointments in the home, so Vind used various faux-finish techniques to capture the desired result.

“The finished walls looked like they had some slight water damage and some mold,” Vind said. “I know that sounds terrible, but that was what it was supposed to look like. It really was beautiful.”

The effect was so lifelike, she said, that even some of the construction crew had to stop, scratch their heads and wonder what happened to the walls they had just built.