

Karen Oakley

Faux Real decorative painting.

"taking beautiful things and making them look nice..."

By: Lisa Mikulski

In the world of Karen Oakley, house painting isn't a job, it is a work of art. As a master faux finisher and decorative painter, Karen Oakley has been invited into some of Connecticut's most impressive homes and historical buildings to provide an age-old craft. With a variety of tools and specialized paints and glazes, she gives texture and ambiance to interior walls, mantles, floors and staircases. The techniques she uses are more complex than you would think. Oakley's work goes beyond simply applying texture to a room's wall using sponges and rag rolling. A professional faux finisher can create a replication of marble or wood so exact that it is nearly impossible to tell that it is not the real thing.

Oakley, who has been in the business

for 15 years, has consulted and worked on historical buildings, existing residences, commercial venues and even yachts. She also works on brand new homes. "I love coming into new construction because everything there is building white and very sterile. With faux finishing, I can make the house look like it already has a lot of atmosphere and character. There is a sense of craftsmanship. And there are a lot of interesting textures that can be obtained," she says. "I can make a new house look as if it's already got a life. I'm happy to provide a kind of soul to a new home."

The history of faux finishing and decorative painting dates back to the famous cave paintings in Lascaux, France. Examples of it can be found in ancient







Egypt, Pompeii, and throughout the Renaissance. The Greeks utilized decorative painting and faux finishing in their temples to create frescos or to replicate architectural elements, marbling and garden scenes. In Pompeii, where even the

wealthiest of families had small homes, Trompe L'oeil (meaning to "trick the eye") was used to create the illusion of additional living space. Faux finishing was also used extensively in Venice to complement the walls of public places, palaces and churches whose structures were already heavily burdened with the weight of marble.

In classical times, an apprentice would study with a master for years before finally being able to work on his own. Like

the apprentices of the past, today's faux finishers must continually educate themselves and stay up-to-date with cutting-edge products and techniques. As a certified professional, Oakley attends lectures and workshops in New York City at least twice a year to stay on top of her craft.

The decorative painting aspect of the profession is concerned with murals or stenciling but the terms "faux finishing" and "decorative painting" can be used interchangeably. Decorative painters can create an effect that, in the past, would be obtained by wallpaper. Wallpaper,





however, doesn't provide the flexibility or quality found in decorative painting. The effects obtained are various and nearly limitless and there are no seams or repeating patterns. The result can be permanent, or if a change is desired, a new motif can easily be achieved without the hassle of taking down



or putting up wallpaper. While Oakley says she doesn't specialize in murals, she does enjoy creating botanical motifs. "I love doing the bird and branch Chinese wallpaper type work. I'm good at nature scenes but there are many different types of schools of decorative painting which can be incorporated in one's home."

Interest in this craft has exploded in recent years as interior designers and homeowners look for ways to make rooms truly unique, to go well beyond basic flat paint. Some of the







decorative finishes available include glazes, patinas, parchment, modellos, marbleizing, and faux bois (wood finishing). Oakley's work can also greatly enhance the artwork that is placed upon it, making it ideal for art galleries and homes of art collectors.

A good faux finisher is also a problem solver. When consulting a new job, Oakley must consider light, space, age and placement. It's much more than applying some swirls on a wall. Oakley also works closely with interior designers and consults on a variety of projects. Sample boards are created for each client and she admits that a good deal of her job is advising people on application, technique and the variety of effects that can be obtained. "I have probably 40 different types of looks that can be achieved and each can have 10 variations. When dealing

with modellos the options are almost limitless. The fact that the job changes every week is something I really love. Each home, each client is special and unique. Each requires a different type of solution."

Oakley cannot only replicate marble, limestone, rattan, travertine and English Oak to perfection, but she can also create something completely new. Rather than ripping out entire architectural elements, she can make an old laminate countertop look like mahogany. Oakley's results are astounding and her clients clearly love what she can do for them. While her work doesn't come cheaply, she can provide a range of solutions and alternative and perhaps even save a client a good deal of money.

Although she uses products like glazing and metallics,

