

Hand-painted Furniture
Nouveau
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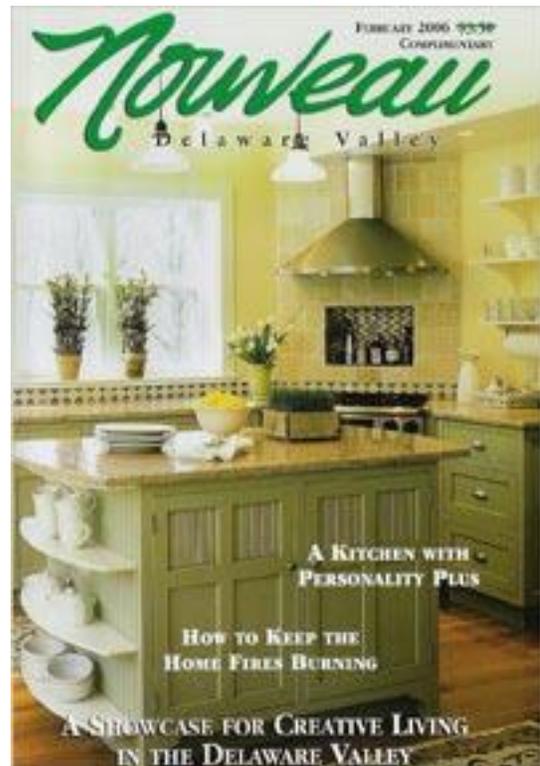
In the earliest days cave dwellers decorated their walls with crude paintings of the world around them. Ancient cultures, from Greeks and Romans to Medieval Europeans, embellished their living spaces with painted pottery, decorated furnishings and tapestries.

Throughout time, men and women have sought to beautify their homes, drawing from the wider world around them for inspiration. It is no different today. Our technological society, about to enter a new millennium, has found a renewed interest in hand-painted furniture and decorative artistry. Perhaps in response to the fast-paced nature of our lives, surrounding ourselves with beautiful tradition helps to calm and soothe the soul.

Hand-painted furniture in America had its origins in folk art from each of the countries whose people eventually populated the New World. Because those practicing the art form were self-taught, the paintings were quite primitive or what is also often called naïve. Today we find this style charming and provincial. Because of the lack of formal art training, stencils became a popular way for these painters to get the design symmetrical. Flowing swirls and less intricate designs were usually done freehand.

With the Colonies' freedom from England through the signing of the Declaration of Independence, paintings often displayed patriotic themes and became a singular expression of America's freedom. Through the industrial revolution in the mid 1800s and the advent of mass-produced items, this art form lost some of its luster, but found a renewal in the Arts and Craft movement of the 20th century when decorative painting on furniture and accessories again flourished.

While the beauty of such decorative furniture cannot be denied, neither can its functionality. First and foremost, our forebears were pragmatic men and women. Before closets were commonly built into homes, chests, armoires, and cabinets were used for storage of all types; and were hand-painted. Tables, chairs and beds were



decorated as well. A practical reason for all this decoration was to disguise the poor quality of the wood often used by country cabinetmakers and to help preserve it, and to brighten the drabness of homes illuminated by candlelight.

Popular among the Pennsylvania Germans were festively painted dower chests, with the girl's name and date painted across the top. A young girl would store household items in this chest that she would take to a home of her own when she married. The lettering became an integral part of the design, which often consisted of doves, symbols of marital bliss; hearts, for love and joy; and tulips, which for a time, appeared nearly everywhere.

Fireboards, heavy pieces of wood built to stand in front of fireplaces during the summer months, were popular throughout early America and were often hand-painted with country landscape scenes or representations of the nearby village or farm.

These furniture artists experimented with a variety of items to create different effects. Sponges, feathers, crumpled cloth or paper, combs, leaves and even fingers were all used to manipulate the paint. Corncobs, putty and dry brushes were also used.

A base coat of paint or wood-grained color was applied and allowed to dry. Sometimes, a second coat of a contrasting color would be applied, and lightly sanded to let the first layer show through. Occasionally, this topcoat of paint was mixed with oil or vinegar to create interesting random patterns in the final design. Then, the animal life, landscape, or floral scenes would be painted on. Finally, several layers of clear, protective shellac would be painted on.

Today, artists practice a wide variety of folk art painting across the country. The Delaware Valley region has historically been a haven for artists of all types, and is no less so for those who keep alive the tradition of hand painting furniture and other household items for beautiful and practical reasons.

Nouveau has taken a closer look at several local artists who hand-paint furniture and other items for the home. The quality of individualism found in the earliest hand-painters is carried on in these contemporary artists.

Keeping a vanishing tradition alive

One of perhaps a handful of artists who still practices the centuries-old technique of casein, or milk painting, lives and works right around the corner in Glenside.

Marie-Colette Dupont-Nivet, born in New York to an American father and French mother, was raised in Paris from the age of two. Returning to America about 13 years ago, she lived in various parts of the Delaware Valley, including Doylestown, before settling in what she calls "the perfect place for me to work."

“There is a large garden with a stream here and many flowers in the summer,” she says with a strong French accent. “There are cabinetmakers and furniture makers nearby, and it is like a little village here.”

She is well established in this “little village” after eight years of working in her large, bright and airy studio. Here is where customers regularly bring chests, tables and small antique items for her to transform with her unique method of painting.

After attending the Ecole des Arts Decoratifs in Paris, Marie-Colette lived for a time in Strasbourg, a town in the Alsace region of France, near the German border, where she discovered traditional painted furniture in a small museum there which “enchanted her.”

“I wondered, ‘how did they manage to have such color,’” she remembers. “This was not the results you get with oil or acrylic.”

Through this fortuitous visit, she met her mentor, Msr. Nussbaum, with whom she worked for several years, learning the technique and perfecting her process. While working as a restorer for the Musee Alsacien de Strasbourg, she was also creating her own pieces for private clients. While in Europe, she followed more closely the patterns of the traditional and historic pieces at the museum. Once in America, she spread her creative wings, and developed her own style, reacting to the freer atmosphere she felt here.

While in Strasbourg, she discovered that country cabinetmakers of the 18th century often worked with inexpensive pine. To add interest to the flatness of the wood, they used to paint on faux wood, called graining, and they used combs and feathers to add interest to it.

To hold the pieces together, they used a “very hard and very good glue” made with a milk base, ammonia and water. Then they would mix this glue with pigments and decorate the furniture with colors that were rich and deep. The furniture was of a simple design and inferior wood, which the beauty of the paintings helped to disguise.

“This was called ‘art populaire’ or folk art,” she explains. “After a while, they went further by adding scenes from the world around them – flowers, birds, buildings – but everything with a primitive look. These weren’t trained painters, but their work was charming and full of heart, which is what took me when I first saw it in the museum,” she adds.

She still obtains the pigments for her work from a studio in Alsace that manufactures them. “I think he’s the last one in Europe who supplies this. The German artists go there to pick up pigments. I can buy them in New York City or Paris, but there they are very expensive.”

Marie-Colette chooses her furniture pieces from two suppliers, one an emigrant from Prague who creates pieces of a “more German shape with cut corners and large top

and bottom moldings.” The other cabinetmaker provides her with more contemporary pieces, including entertainment centers. Sometimes she finds unique pieces in antique markets.

Marie-Colette laments the disappearance of the tradition that she practices, but is determined to keep it alive in her “village.” She sells her work through two shops in Chestnut Hill: Secret Garden and Garden Gate Shop. She also encourages people to visit the Barnes Foundation on the Main Line where they can see fine examples of casein painting.

Marie-Colette is adamant that the old ways are the best. “When you use acrylic on wood, you are working with plastic on top of the wood. After years, the plastic coating can distort the color and the beauty is not the same. What I do, the color becomes more beautiful with time.”

Beginning with a piece of stripped furniture, she brushes on an ocher base and shellacs and sands the piece lightly. The piece is then painted with a dark glaze to imitate wood. This “false wood” is then brushed lightly with a feather or comb to give it a wood-grained appearance. Then, Marie-Colette paints on her characteristically primitive landscapes, animals and floral pieces. Finally, several coats of shellac are applied to the sides of the piece. A cellulose varnish is used on areas that will receive heavy use, like a tabletop for example. As the very last step in the process, Marie-Colette waxes the piece with beeswax.

The married mother of three college-age children loves variety in her work and enjoys the interaction with her customers.

“Even the same piece of furniture for two different clients would be totally different. People talk about their memories or show me pictures that I work from. They give me ideas. The customer doesn’t only buy the piece; they help me create it. It’s good for me and it’s good for the people. It makes them dream and be creative.”

Fine art applied to furniture

Red Stone Farm is the name of both the home and business of Dot and Tom Bunn. Their 200-year-old farmhouse sits - surrounded by high, tangled brush, trees and vines, covered now with a light coating of snow - as an oasis in the middle of suburban development in Plumstead Township.

The property boasts an abundant supply of red stones and flowers, insects, butterflies, birds and small animals of all types in the warmer weather. All signs of nature with which the down-to-earth Bunns surround themselves and from which Dot draws her inspiration.

The two produce one-of-a-kind hand-painted furniture and home accessories she categorizes as European country. No swirls or provincial designs here.

Dot, who calls herself an artistic designer, has been an artist all her life. She is an oil painter who studied textiles and had her own dressmaking business for ten years. Tom is a printer who sold his business about three years ago to join Dot in creating unique wooden hand-painted furniture.

“We spent 20 years working on our house, which taught us a lot, and we decided this was something we could both do and enjoy together,” says Tom. Each enjoys a distinct function in the business relationship.

“Tom fixes up and repairs the customers’ furniture and builds table tops, mirror frames and more,” begins Dot.

“And I get to put on the base coat, too,” he laughs.

Dot will paint just about anything a customer wants painted, from murals on walls to floors and anything in between. Clock faces and custom mirror frames are two of her favorite types of pieces to work on.

Some of Dot’s work includes trompe l’oeil; literally, “to fool the eye.” “This style was originally meant to describe inanimate objects,” Dot explains, “like a painted wall niche with flowers, but now can be used to mean almost anything” that is not what it seems to be.

To illustrate, Tom carries a small corner cabinet into the warm and comfortable sitting room. Painted onto the front door panel are shelves holding dishes, a wine carafe and a bowl of peaches. They look so real, that from a distance of a couple of feet, it’s difficult to tell that they are not.

This cabinet demonstrates Dot’s predominant method of working with wood. A base coat of paint is applied, in this case, a soft gold (although she generally uses very bright undercoats). Then a second layer of a creamy white was painted on and partially rubbed away. Next Dot paints on blushing pink roses, shiny white morning glories or some other beautiful flower. A striped monarch butterfly may flit among the blossoms, or perhaps a ladybug clings to a stem. A tiny bunny may be seen peeking from under a leaf.

She then antiques the piece with an oil-based antiquing medium. Finally, Dot paints or rubs on a protective finish. She uses either an oil rub-on finish or one that’s water based polyurethane. This seals in the decorative finish, ensuring that nothing can be wiped away later.

“I prefer to work with acrylics, but for antiquing, oil gives a transparency that, with several layers, creates a depth.”

Dot and Tom discovered early on that people love small animals and scenes of nature. Which is convenient, since that’s what she is drawn to paint. “I don’t do geometric

patterns or modern designs. And people haven't really come to me for that anyway," she says thoughtfully.

"Painting is a statement," says Dot emphatically. "We keep what we do in wood very simple. There is no high-end furniture work for us. I like to do things that are fun. Tom builds a 3-D canvas for me to paint on ..." Dot says.

"And Dot creates a piece of fine art," Tom finishes. "Our clients really are investing in a piece of art," says Tom. "It's art work on furniture."

The Bunns are clear about their work parameters. Within their guidelines Dot includes anything with a decorative charm; a certain look that she then customizes with the client. No contemporary abstract shapes, high-contrast colors or non-representational figures find their way into her work. She also feels strongly about protecting the integrity of the furnishings she works with.

If that means having to tell a client, "No, I can't paint over that beautiful wooden piece of furniture. That would be a mistake," then that's what she does. Conviction is strong in her voice when she speaks of remaining true to her work.

"We work with people and problem-solve for them," she says, but she won't do work with which she would be uncomfortable. "When you tell people that a certain piece of furniture has value the way it is, most will respect that. That's the responsibility of the artist."

At this point, the couple is in the process of deciding on a focus for Red Stone Farm. Without restricting themselves, they nonetheless don't want to feel overextended, which is why, in part, they decided against opening a shop.

"I would get bored with mass producing work," says Dot. "I encourage people to find things that mean something to them; to their life. We should all live with things that mean something, that remind us of someone we have loved. It's a way to remember people."

The Bunns sell through Lions and Lilies in Peddlers Village and Interior Classics in Doylestown, and through word-of-mouth.

Creating an illusion

Behind the nondescript brick façade of the suburban home waits a whimsical world created by an artist with a fancy for illusion.

The home's owner, Carol Nagel, specializes in hand-painting and faux finishing furniture, walls and accessories, and lives closely with her work.

Over the past nine years, she and her husband, Ed have turned their home in Doylestown Borough into a veritable showplace of their work. Ed paints portraits and

landscapes, while Carol creates custom-painted furniture and fairy-tale like scenes on walls, floors and furnishings.

“The fun about faux – even for me – is enjoying the illusion. Is it or isn’t it?” she asks.

A fine example of Carol’s faux finishing sits in a room just off her first-floor studio. A small fireplace with marbleized side panels and painted front tiles stands flush against the far wall. Even close up, the tiles look like the original blue delft tiles, and the marble appears to be smooth and cool to the touch.

Dozens of books sit on shelves in the adjacent workroom, ready to provide her with just the right inspiration for her next piece of furniture. She refers to the pictures of Swedish folk art for inspiration and to the lighter colors and more playful feel of country French designs as well.

“In a lifetime, I couldn’t put a dent in all the wonderful designs I have in my books. I use these pictures for inspiration and then put myself into it too.”

One of Carol’s specialties is taking a piece of furniture – usually an entertainment unit or chest – and painting it with various motifs from Germany, Sweden, France and other countries.

Vinegar painting, a Pennsylvania German technique, is a favorite of Carol’s. Adding white vinegar to the paint helps it hold its position when she presses putty into it, creating decorative patterns in the paint.

The Pennsylvania Germans adapted their familiar designs, seen so often on hex signs in the Lancaster County region, from the Southern Germans who covered nearly all their furniture with ornate, swirling colorful designs.

“The story goes that this was called ‘farmer furniture,’” Carol explains, “because the farmers would spend their winters indoors, and this gave them something to do. Really, they were done by traveling artists” but the art form came to America with German immigrants. Although they didn’t have the time or talent, they wanted to get the same effect, and created simplified versions of what they had left behind.

The Pennsylvania German designs are highly stylized with lots of tulips, flowers and hearts that Carol paints partly with stencils (when symmetry is important) and partly freehand. The latex and acrylic paint is applied over a base color, antiqued to give it a weathered appearance, and then coated with clear polyurethane for a strong, durable finish.

“I try to simulate wear and tear and some dirt,” says Carol. “Old paint mellows and its look softens. I try to show what time does to things.”

While Carol occasionally works with unfinished furniture, she often works with older pieces, customizing a new look to a worn piece. A wooden chest in her living room is a

favorite. With its wood shined to a soft gloss, three geometric panels of pink, blue and green form the motif of an Amish quilt. The surrounding wood is left in its natural state.

“It would almost be a crime to paint over good wood,” Carol says passionately. “Look at this walnut and dovetailing ... it’s almost too nice to paint.”

Carol’s living room is a feast for the senses. Two small parakeets chirp from the dining room, a dog and cat lounge on cushions, fantasy trees and vines wind up the walls and around windows, while several small angels perch on the wall. Wait. Are they real objects or painted imposters? This time, they are three-dimensional objects, but the impression of illusion persists.

Near the center of the room, an admired chest, showing extreme signs of distressing turn out to have received “real-life” antiquing from Carol’s two now-grown children and variety of pets.

The Tyler School of Art graduate appreciates the importance of understanding the background of an image before trying to manipulate or copy it. Art history and knowledge of colors and how they are interrelated are of utmost importance to her.

“All cultures – back to the Greeks and Romans – in one way or another, decorated their every-day items. It’s what people do. The desire to ornament is a very human thing.”

Although Carol is a master of illusion in her work, she is solidly based in reality and tradition in her motivations and techniques.

“I don’t use a lot of tricks in my work,” she says with a chuckle “No corn cobs or goose feathers for me. I use brushes and paint”.

“I don’t really respond to modern free-form work that zigzags and is more unstructured. I like to work with the client, see what their taste is and draw from the hundreds of wonderful ideas that are out there.”

“Form and color give me great joy in life. I love to play with different realities and enjoy the whimsy of it all,” Carol gestures around at her work. Her large silver hoop earrings sway in time to her emotion. “I feel so lucky that I have a career in something that makes me feel so happy.”

Everything old is new again

Climb the narrow stairway into the apartment/studio of John and Lisa Hickey in the old general store in Carversville, and find yourself in a virtual gallery of their work. You’ve entered the world of H Design.

Here there is a fine mix of old and new furnishings. Much of the furniture has been restored and/or hand-painted by the couple, like the green and blue dining table chairs

or the finely buffed dark wood buffets. The seeming paradox of modern iron lighting fixtures and accessories reflects their creative and business philosophy.

“We do work from funky to traditional to classic, and don’t want to niche ourselves, says John. “France and Italy are our main interests and we love the old -world effects, but we also like the industrial look. In fact, we would love to live in a renovated factory,” he adds laughing, but serious.

The duo has been married only a year, but in business together for four. They find great satisfaction in their work together, whether it is painting a futuristic design on the side of an upright piano, marbleizing a wooden column or finishing an old wooden table top to give it a fine faux leather look.

It’s quite apparent that John is passionate about their work. He sports an artist’s goatee and wears paint-splattered sweatshirt and jeans. Eyes shine from behind round wire-framed glasses as he discusses the life he shares with his wife.

“We work so well together and we have always liked working on projects together,” he begins. “I tend to see things in more geometric shapes, measure everything and use a ruler and stencils, but Lisa’s work is much more free-hand. She can just see the picture and paint it on the piece,” he says gesturing toward an old bureau. Through application of some simple stain and new drawer pulls, and especially by Lisa’s softly painted view of a bucolic countryside, the piece has been reborn as an attractive piece of furniture.

Most of the looks are achieved in a two-step process. First the couple applies a base coat of specially ordered paint from a firm in Florida. Secondly, a glaze coat is applied and “worked.” John says they may use a twisted paint brush to create a wooden burl effect; or a plastic bag for a marbleized look; or even rags, cotton swabs or gloved fingers for some other type of swirling.

Sponge painting surfaces may be familiar to many, but the Hickeys take that process several steps further. Other effects given to wooden, metal and iron surfaces are old-world fresco, linen, different varieties of wood, washed painted look; leather and even brick and stone. They work on “anything paint-able,” including walls and floors.

For stone and other porous-looking surfaces, John will actually mix the pigment into the plaster. “So the final coat is actually painting with plaster.”

Often they will take an old piece of wooden furniture, say a corner cabinet, strip off the old layers of paint, re-paint it with two coats of two different colors and lightly sand away portions of the second coat, allowing the bottom layer to peek through.

“This gives it an aged look,” explains John. “Makes it look a little dirty and older.”

John explains that he and Lisa read books on finishing and took several seminars to learn the basics of technique, then developed their own processes over the years. John

declines to give out all of his exact methods, as he says, "...can't give away all my trade secrets."

John has made H Design his full-time career, after years in other creative pursuits, including landscaping and sweater design and manufacture. Lisa continues to work full-time as a framer at the Frame Game in Newtown and Yardley where she also has sold some of their work. Being in the right place at the right time certainly has helped in their pursuits. Several months ago John happened to meet Adam Dolle and Joe Brown, the owners of Adam Brown, a fine home furnishing store recently opened in Doylestown, and now H Design is one of the shop's prime furniture finishers.

"We do custom pieces for Adam Brown and will be doing work through them for the Bucks County Designer House this spring."

H Designs will also work on the Princeton Designer House in April through Black-eyed Susan, a furnishing store in Yardley.

"It took a long time, but we really love what we're doing now," says John. "Our work complements each other. It's a nice mix. There are some limitations, but freedom of expression is so important."

One of the couples' greatest joys in their work is the one-on-one contact with customers.

Says Lisa: "We really enjoy meeting and creating closely with our clients. It adds a lot of their personality to the pieces we create with them. Everyone has something unique to offer."

As long as there is old furniture waiting for a new life, the Hickeys will have raw material to exercise that freedom. Under plastic tenting in the attic workshop of H Design wait a round wrought-iron table frame; wooden glass front hutch, white paint peeling away from the oak base; and a forlorn-looking horse-hair filled wing chair among assorted other flea-market and auction treasures. They wait to be touched by the imagination and hands of John and Lisa, and to be reborn as a brightly-colored art deco chest or classic bureau – maybe with a detailed French countryside painted on its face.