



TROMPE L'OEIL: It's Just an Illusion

BY MELISSA RUSSELL

Have you ever been tempted to pull a richly covered book off of a shelf, only to have your fingertips meet a flat wall? Or tried to smooth a rumpled rug that turned out to be painted on the floor? If so, you have encountered art's most special effect, trompe l'oeil painting.

Trompe l'oeil, a French expression that translates as "to fool the eye," is a traditional style of painting dating back to the ancient Greeks and Romans that creates a three-dimensional effect on a flat surface. At its best, trompe l'oeil, creates realistic optical illusions that are particularly useful in solving architectural problems. Think of the richly "carved" moldings of Renaissance cathedrals, or the decorative ceilings depicting open sky with swirling clouds that bedeck Newport's opulent summer cottages. These are just a few prime examples of the trompe l'oeil technique.

Arlington artist John Coles has made a career out of making something literally out of nothing.



Working in a skylighted studio at the top of a San Francisco grade street, Coles found his first trompe l'oeil project almost 30 years ago, when a client approached him about creating a fireplace for an apartment.

"They wanted a fireplace with a window above the mantel," he said. "That isn't really practical in real life, but it works in a painting."

The finished project featured not only outdoor views atop a blazing fireplace, but family photos and the client's cats dozing on the mantel as well.

"I knew I did a good job when I tried to pick up the spilled matches I had painted on the floor," Coles said.

Word of mouth spread, and Coles became known for his ability to solve tricky architectural problems such as a "bad" corner, a narrow hallway, or a dark stairwell, with paint and brush.

Dim bathrooms and dark offices were brightened with murals of outdoor scenes, or windows facing out onto attractive views, he said. Ceilings were painted with ivy covered lattice. Living rooms were dressed up with faux molding and painted artwork, complete with frames.

One client requested that Coles depict the idealized contents of her refrigerator on its doors. Another wanted a mirror and its reflected view painted on a living room wall.

Coles painted china plates and platters to appear as though they were mounted on a kitchen wall. For another client, he created a window, opened to reveal a favorite vacation harbor and bobbing sailboat, with a book and pair of binoculars resting atop the painted windowsill.

"You can put windows where you want them and paint the views you want to see," he said.

Locally, Coles has painted murals on the exterior of commercial buildings in Reading and Woburn, and in hotels and office buildings in Boston and New York. A mural painted 15 years ago in New York City's Carlyle Hotel is still on view, Coles said.

Decorative painting does not have to be limited to walls and floors, Coles said. Small, whimsical touches to pieces of furniture can be particularly delightful, such as intricate shells or a randomly scattered deck of cards, just begging to be picked up by passers-by.

While trompe l'oeil has always been popular, it is not a style that works for everyone, Coles said. And, it is important for it to be executed by a master of the technique.

"If it is not done right, it doesn't work," he said. "If it is done well, it will definitely fool the eye." ■

OPPOSITE PAGE: A mural John Coles created this summer, off Haven Street in Reading. Image courtesy of Nina Coles.

ABOVE: 1: John Coles works on a chair in his Arlington home studio. Staff photo by Matthew Madoano. 2: Painted chair by Coles. Staff photo by Matthew Madoano. 3: Detail of the top of a table painted by Coles. Staff photo by Matthew Madoano. 4-5: A mural John Coles created this summer, off Haven Street in Reading. Image courtesy of Nina Coles.

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