

Wall to Wall Dreams

Beautiful murals need no frames

By Laura Casey San Jose Mercury News

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WALNUT CREEK, Calif. — That big, gleaming white wall is crying out for something, anything but the giant blankness it is now. A large, framed painting. A bold accent of color. A coating of wallpaper.

While most people will consider those options, others are turning to an ancient answer — one that can be surprisingly affordable. A hand-painted mural.

The benefit of murals, say those who have them, is that they can be personalized to create a view, theme or mood that the other options lack. Although murals are more expensive than wallpaper or paint, they can turn a blank space into a child's play area or a vacation fantasy. Murals also become the focal point of a room and of conversation, a way to share and reflect the individual tastes of the people who commission them.

Prices range from \$500 for a small piece up to \$3,500 for a larger work. There are no limits to how high the price can go, depending on what a person wants, artists say. But even a small addition can make a big impact.

Three Bay Area muralists and their clients shared their creations:

The murals: An African savanna scene and a storybook princess

Artist: Scott Willis, www.scottwillismurals.com

Location: Garage and bedroom, San Francisco.



Sonja and Kevin O'Brien were running out of space in their north San Francisco home so they decided to turn half of their two-car garage into a play space for their 3-year-old daughter, Morgan, and her friends. Sonja O'Brien looked online for an artist to do an African savanna mural on the garage wall and found Willis.

Although she talked to and interviewed several muralists, she warmed up to Willis, a former newspaper political cartoonist from San Jose, immediately. "He stuck to his quote, and I felt very comfortable having him in the house," O'Brien says. "He blended in with the family and came when he said he was going to come."

Willis has been painting murals for homes for about five years. It's a job he loves, and much different from penning cartoons for newspapers.

"I was always working within a limited space and in black and white," says Willis, who worked for the San Jose Mercury News, among other papers.

Willis starts the process by talking with his clients and sketching out their ideas. His fee is based on the size and detail of the work, but he will modify it to make the project more detailed or less expensive.

"It's exacting to what the client wants," he says.

The result of that first contact is a lovely African scene with blue skies and friendly lions, monkeys and giraffes. The work is done in acrylics, and little Morgan spent hours talking with Willis as he painted. His first wall took a little more than a week.

Sonja O'Brien was so happy with the mural, she commissioned another for a different wall in the garage. She asked for characters from Morgan's favorite books.

Then she asked Willis to paint a mural for Morgan's room. It's a personalized fairy scene with a royal couple headed down a winding road from their castle, which is topped with flags from the family's heritage. Floating fairies watch the loving scene while butterflies flutter about.

"It's playful and interactive," Sonja O'Brien says. "This is very individual and personal and nobody else has these walls."

The mural: An under-the-sea experience

Artist: Dan Fontes, www.danfontes.com

Location: Guest bathroom, Alameda, Calif.

Deborah Finney is a dedicated art collector and although her main passion is collecting glass, she wanted to commission a work of painted art in her home.

The concept? Guests would feel like they were divers in the middle of the ocean. They are surrounded by humpback whales during migration, West Coast sea nettle jellyfish and an intricately detailed sea turtle. On the ceiling are images of “fellow divers,” and near the floor are white and orange coral and green sea plants.

“It looks like you’re in the middle of a train of humpback whales,” Finney says, adding that Fontes’ work is “a lot like glass in that it changes colors depending on how the light hits it.”

Finding the right artist for the work was the most difficult part of the process, Finney says. She says that many artists she interviewed were intimidated by her home, which is stately and luxurious. San Rafael-based Fontes was not intimidated and, in fact, fit right in, she says.

“I had total faith in him,” she says.

Fontes, who is known in Oakland for public murals and his work with Alameda’s Pacific Pinball Museum, made many changes to his original design. Finney first wanted the bottom of a boat on the ceiling, as if the viewer had just jumped off into the water. When that didn’t look just right, Fontes painted over the boat and painted in the divers. The sea turtle, one of the most detailed images in the room, was also a special request that took Fontes three days to paint.

“It’s a conversation that evolves,” he says.

The whole room took about six weeks to complete.

Finney is so pleased with Fontes’ work, she says she doesn’t have the heart to affix toilet paper holders and towel racks to the walls. She uses a movable toilet paper holder for now.

“I think the mural goes along well with our love for art,” she says.

The mural: A walk through a seaside Italian villa.

Artist: Kerry Broughton, www.storiedwalls.com

Location: Front room, Brentwood, Calif.

The entry room to Diana and Manny Vierra’s Brentwood home is marked by an imposing, 14-foot-by-14-foot wall. Manny Vierra hung a painting of “The Last Supper” on it, but Diana wanted something more modern, more fun. The couple shopped for a water feature, but when they found out it would take more maintenance than they were willing to commit to, they decided to hire a muralist.

Kerry Broughton is familiar to the Vierras because she painted a mural on a friend’s wall in Discovery Bay. Impressed, Diana Vierra contacted Broughton to see if she would paint a dreamy, relaxed Italian villa in the empty space. The result is a soft, airy image that looks as if you can just walk right into it.

“We’ve always loved the Italy look with the plants on the windowsills and the steps leading to the ocean,” Diana Vierra says while sitting near the mural, the soft tones of the painting reflected in the black grand piano.

Like the other artists, the Oakley-based Broughton consulted with the Vierras and made some drawings before starting on the wall. Once she started painting, she worked fast, completing the wall in a week.

The initial drawing was not set in stone. Once Broughton started painting, the Vierras asked if she could add various elements. They wanted wrought iron chairs and tables, railings and some plants to help obscure a heating vent.

“I watched the mural unfold, and it was amazing,” Diana Vierra says.

Broughton has been painting murals full-time for 13 years and it’s a “God-given” skill, she says, that she learned on her own.

“Ever since I was 4 years old, I’ve been painting, and I always enjoyed painting large,” she says.

She decides on shades and colors based on the home’s decor but relies mostly on what the client wants.

Pricing, she says, is based on other muralists’ estimates.

“I have a range in my head,” she says.

And in the five years the Vierras have had the mural on their wall, Diana Vierra says her dream Italian spot hasn’t gotten old.

“I just love it,” she says.