

WEST COAST DECORATIVE PAINTERS

Traditional Disciplines Applied with Contemporary Spirit

By Hunter Drohojowska

IN THE RAREFIED WORLD of contemporary art, the notion of the “decorative” often meets with disdain. Yet before the modern era, decoration was considered one of the primary functions of painting. Embracing rather than rejecting the styles and skills of the past, a handful of artists in California have returned to decorative painting. They have mastered Renaissance realism, trompe-l’oeil illusion and Japanese naturalism while forging their own individual styles.

Japanese and Chinese arts have historically celebrated decoration, and the influence of the Far East is evident in the work of three of these painters. Wayne Smyth says his attraction to Japanese art stems from that culture’s appreciation for harmony with nature. “The Japanese



house in Malibu. They proved a success, and he started working in a Japanese style on screens built by his partner, George Lazoraitis. Smyth points out that in Japan the maker of screens, the *hyogushi*, is as respected as the painter.

Lazoraitis builds each screen’s framework from tempered alder wood, covers it with seven layers of mulberry paper, finishes the front with gold or silver leaf or silk, and after the image is completed, adds a border of antique Japanese brocade and a black-lacquered frame. The two artists, who live in Los Angeles, oper-

LEFT: Carlo Marchiori’s mural of a country festival, painted in a manner inspired by Tiepolo, is an inventive interpretation of 18th-century Venetian painting that reveals the artist’s appreciation for his Italian heritage.

BELOW: Tropical foliage and fantasy architecture in Renaissance and Baroque styles are integrated into a ceiling mural by Mark Evans and Charley Brown—one of a series of seven commissioned for a Honolulu residence.



ABOVE: Harrison Howard, who draws ideas from frequent visits to the zoo, believes that the universal appeal of animals makes them an ideal subject for murals. His work also reflects his enthusiasm for a wide range of influences from the decorative and fine arts.

have the ability to improve on nature,” he notes. “‘More beautiful than true,’ as they would say.”

Smyth worked as an art director before turning to painting. Then in 1979 he was asked to do a pair of screens depicting a Japanese emperor and empress for Linda Ronstadt’s

ate under the name Byobu West—from the Japanese word for screen.

Smyth is inspired by Edo-period art, and his screens feature scenes such as cranes in flight or evening rains. The effect is Japanese but scaled to meet the requirements of a Western interior. “We give the client a tra-

continued on page 96D

Traditional Disciplines Applied with Contemporary
continued from page 96



ditional subject but in untraditional sizes," explains Smyth.

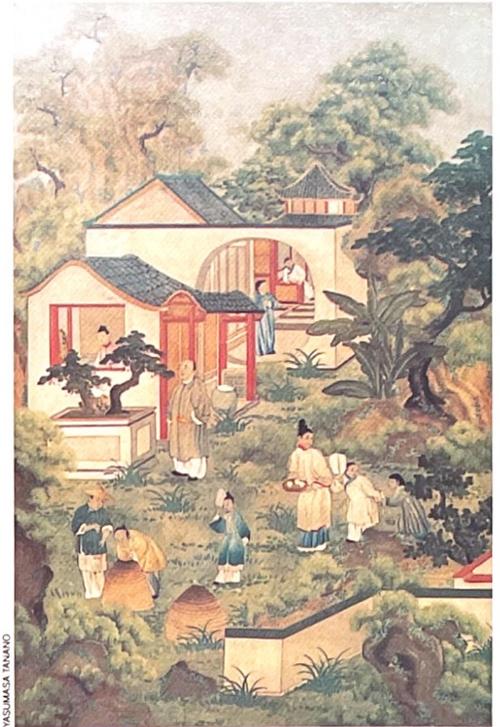
Robert Crowder, also in Los Angeles, has been painting in the style of the Far East since the mid-1940s. Before the Second World War, Crowder was teaching English and music in Tokyo. While there, he studied painting with the Japanese master Mochizuki Shunko. Since his return to this country after the war, he has dedicated himself to painting, and his command of the Japanese style is convincing: He was commissioned by

Mitsui to decorate the Japanese Pavilion at EPCOT Center in Florida.

The Japanese aesthetic is understated and humorous in the work of Karen Kariya. A third-generation Japanese American, she counts nineteenth-century American trompe-l'oeil artists William Michael Harnett and John Frederick Peto as important influences. She is best known for her trompe-l'oeil *tansu*—chests with touch-latch doors and clever illusions of shelves and iron hardware. For commissioned works, Kariya will

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BELOW: Robert Crowder of Los Angeles lived in Japan for many years and studied with the painting master Mochizuki Shunko. He has worked in the Oriental style for almost 50 years.



YASUMASA TANAKA

LEFT: Pamela Silin-Palmer's fanciful autumn pageant of rabbits in Renaissance attire, suggested by a Botticelli painting, exemplifies what she describes as their "iconlike quality."



PALMA PERRETTY

personalize her pieces by using the owner's name in the titles of books she has depicted on the shelves. This sort of coded symbolism is in keeping with the tradition of trompe l'oeil.

Kariya's application of Western technique to Eastern form is partly the result of her education. She studied in Japan and Italy before getting her bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, and her master's degree from the San Francisco Art Institute. She points out that decorative art is a field where women have excelled. "It seemed a natural thing to do."

continued on page 96H

Traditional Disciplines Applied with Contemporary Spirit
continued from page 96D

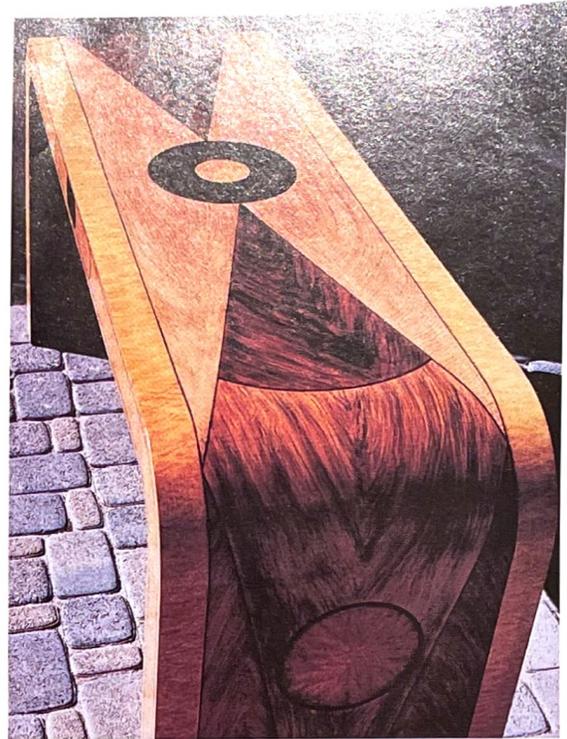
Kariya, who lives in Berkeley, began painting furniture in 1976 and shared a studio with Pamela Silin-Palmer, an artist who had begun decorative painting the year before. Silin-Palmer decided to call their joint studio Faunus. "I named it after the Roman word for Pan because a lot of the characters I was portraying were mythological," explains Silin-Palmer.

Silin-Palmer, who has since moved to Mendocino, has been influenced by the decorative arts of Europe. Fantasy and wit characterize her painted furniture and murals. She studied art history at Yale, with a specialization in the medieval and early Renaissance periods, but insists that most of her training came from living in Florence and southern France, studying the painting and the decorative arts of these regions, and teaching herself the necessary skills. "In Europe," she says, "there isn't as great a division between fine art and decoration."

She cites Botticelli and Uccello as having affected her dramatic compositions and lighting. For example, an autumn festival scene by Botticelli has inspired murals and screens that depict Renaissance celebrations with rabbits in fancy dress impersonating maidens, musicians and courtiers. "I use rabbits because they have this

RIGHT: Maria Levin's *faux-bois* table finish, commissioned for a residence, simulates the graining of five exotic woods, among them amboyna and kingwood.

BELOW: Garth Benton—for some 30 years a student of the artistic traditions and techniques of past cultures—portrays the ephemera of daily life through the age-old art form of *trompe l'oeil*.



iconlike quality and you can project onto their faces," says Silin-Palmer with a laugh. "And they have these incredible ears, which serve the horizontal or diagonal in composition." She has painted a variety of furniture with such animals as geese, sheep and pigs in Renaissance costume, and notes that animals in human attire have been a consistent motif in the history of decorative arts.

Mark Evans and Charley Brown began their San Francisco-based collaboration six years ago. Although at first excited by the murals at the Villa Maser and the Palazzo Labia in Venice, they now create wall, ceiling and floor paintings ranging in style from the Italian Baroque to 1930s Americana to contemporary imagery.

Evans has a fine-arts degree from Indiana University and Brown has a master of fine arts from Humboldt State University. Evans worked in ad-



LEFT: Best known for her playful adaptations of the traditional Japanese *tansu*, Karen Kariya uses her accomplished *trompe l'oeil* technique to create the illusion of iron hardware and shelves, to which she often adds a variety of the client's personal possessions.

continued on page 100

vertising for a time, while Brown exhibited at galleries, but both were unsatisfied until their foray into decorative painting, a career that got its start when they decorated their own house in a manner they describe as "bombed-out palazzo." "It was fun, and we saw potential for a historic art form in a contemporary setting," says Evans. Soon, designers were offering them commissions. Brown, along with assistants, recently completed seven ceilings for a residence in Hawaii. In the master bedroom, he painted a view of the sky above an arched trellis supported by columns and stone putti.

"Our works are not copies of existing murals," explains Brown. "We do a lot of research on a period and then paint in that style—which is more interesting." Evans notes, "There is often an element of surrealism. We try to put a twist on everything we do."

Garth Benton, a cousin of the painter Thomas Hart Benton, has been interested in art since the time his father gave him a book on his cousin's paintings. He went on to study art at Art Center College of Design and at UCLA. In 1971 he received his most important assignment—murals for the J. Paul Getty Museum. He won the commission with extensive renderings in the first-century-Roman style based on his research at the Metropolitan's *cubiculum*—a rebuilt Pompeian room with original frescoes. He makes similar investigations for many of his murals, drawing upon stylistic influences that include ancient Chinese, seventeenth-century French, Indian and Art Déco. "By reading, studying and researching, I immerse myself in the culture and art history of a particular civilization," Benton has said. "I rarely just copy existing art. Rather, I interpret. What emerges is new art, painted by me."

Carlo Marchiori, who lives in San Francisco and Calistoga, says, "I paint because I am Venetian, educated and influenced by Palladio, the Bassanos, Veronese and the Tiepolos. They

lived in my neighborhood. I love to speak through my work about this culture, in their very dialect and with their airs and visions."

Marchiori's murals are reminiscent of frescoes found in Italian villas. He went to art school in Padua and to the Instituto d'Arte in Venice, graduating with a master's degree. His education stressed the established techniques of decorative art—fresco, *trompe l'oeil*, perspective and drawing in a disciplined studio environment. At first he worked in commercial art, including animation. But after moving to California ten years ago, he returned to his heritage. "I like large projects where I can interpret the Palladian style. I make it whimsical and my own, otherwise it has no life." His mural of a country festival in Italy is in the style of Tiepolo, but he relies on his memory as much as on art history. "I went all over the world and realized my roots were quite interesting," says Marchiori. "If I had stayed at home, in Italy, I probably would never have recognized this."

While Harrison Howard mentions

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a variety of decorative painters as influences, his aesthetic seems to have much in common with the Peaceable Kingdom, where many species of animals, and an occasional human being, live in serenity and dignity. Howard, who lives in La Jolla, visits the zoo as a source for ideas. But his work is not strictly illustrative. A mural of birds standing in a stark architectural format of ornamental iron, drapery and potted plants includes a spoonbill and a heron as well as fowl that were invented by the artist. "The design is more important than realistic rendering," he explains. "I think

animals are a good subject for decoration because they have a universal appeal," he continues. "I haven't tried to create profound messages in my paintings. In decorative art, it is a matter of producing what is suitable for a given space or person."

Since Howard's father was also an artist—he executed murals for the La Jolla hotel La Valencia—the younger Howard was exposed to the techniques and history of art from an early age. Traveling in Europe, he absorbed the lessons of frescoes by Tiepolo and Piero della Francesca. He received a degree in industrial design from Art Center College of Design in 1984. "My reason for painting is a simple one," he says. "There is nothing I would rather do."

Maria and Daniel Levin, who call themselves Chimera, specialize in a range of *faux* finishes for furniture and interiors. Maria Levin trained as a painter at the British Columbia Art College and worked in a realist style as a muralist. Six years ago she took courses at the Pardon School of Specialist Decoration in New York, and now she concentrates on *faux* finishes of lapis, malachite, stonework and rare woods. She recently designed the marquetry for a table that incorporates *faux* finishes of kingwood, rosewood, bird's-eye maple, burl walnut and amboyna. "You can't even get some of these woods today," she says. When she tires of the exacting work of finishes, she returns to murals. Her husband, Daniel, has a background in furniture restoration and now specializes in gilding.

Chimera is based in Forest Knolls, near San Francisco, and over the past three years, Levin has discovered one important difference between her fine art and her decorative art. "I'm making a living now, and I couldn't do that working as a fine artist," she explains. "Yet I'm working in a field I love, with antiques and the whole history of art. People have used these techniques through the ages, which makes me feel that I'm in tune with what has gone before." □