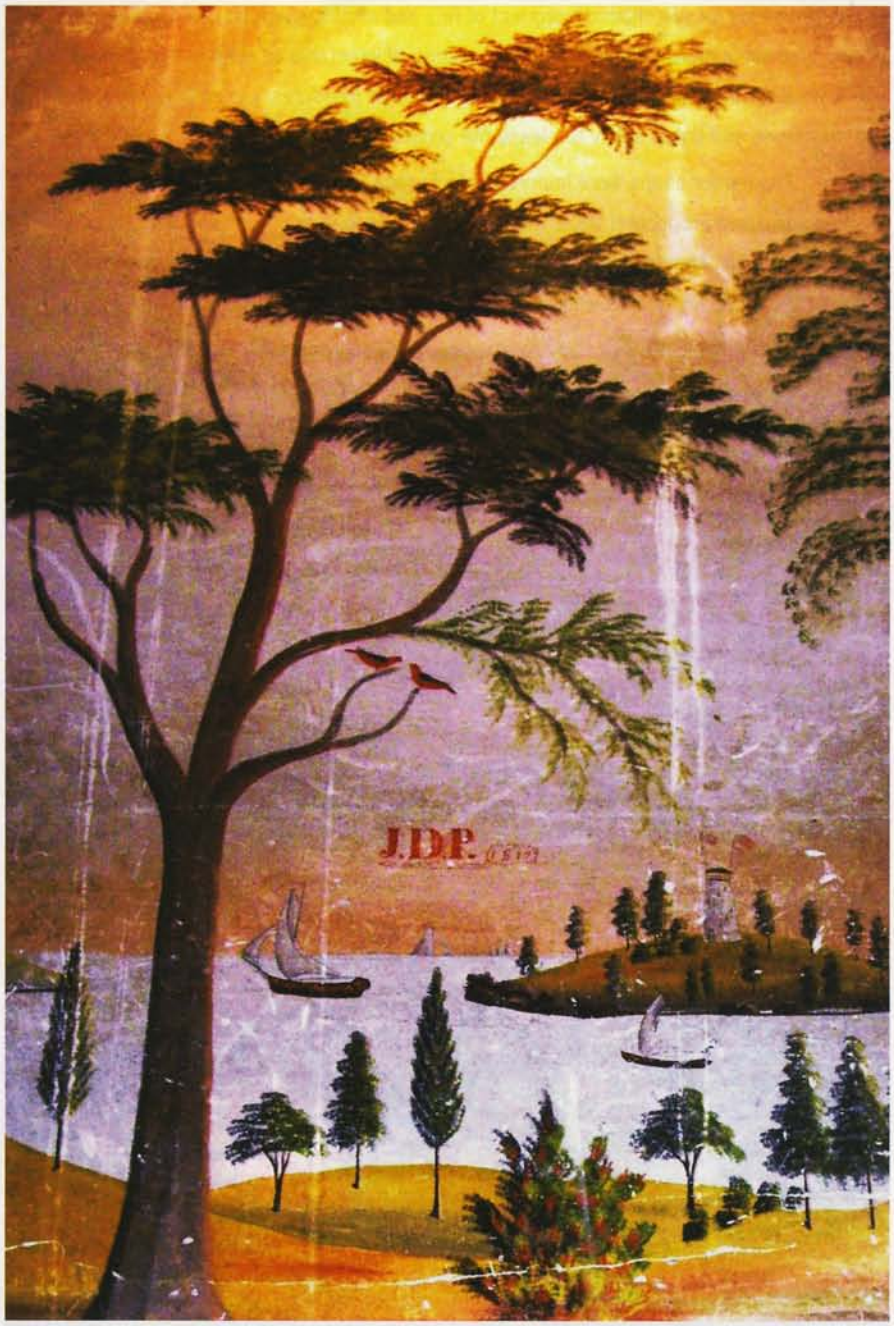
American Scenic Murals

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY, SCENIC WALL MURALS INVOLVED THE COOPERATIVE VISION OF TALENTED ARTISTS AND THE PEOPLE WHO HIRED THEM. FOR TODAY'S TRADITIONAL MURALISTS, THE PROCESS REMAINS THE SAME.



A red vermilion signature and date, "J.D.P. 1840," dominate the top of the stairway where two bed chambers meet in the James Norton House in East Baldwin, Maine. Muralist Jonathan Poor learned his trade at the hands of his famous uncle, Rufus Porter. Poor often signed and dated his work.

For the American homeowner in 1820, the idea of a scenic mural held both excitement and apprehension. It surely would be the envy of neighbors because these imaginative paintings were all the rage in wall decoration. Apprehension arose from the potential cost and the uncertainty about the ability of the itinerant artist to paint something pleasing.

Not much has changed in nearly two centuries. A mural still can be relatively expensive and so visually prominent that there's no tolerance for disappointment. Even the act of painting one has changed little. While today's plastic-based acrylic and latex paints have advantages over their 19th-Century counterparts, no modern tools have replaced the pencil, paintbrush, ladder, or skilled hand of the artist.

Any mural gracing the walls of a dining room or wrapping upward along a stairwell can be painted with technical skill, but for it to be successful, the homeowner—as with the 19th-Century client—must appreciate the artistic intangibles. The four muralists featured here say client satisfaction goes well beyond concerns of getting paid or obtaining a reference. Something peculiarly emotional about murals has been known to cause homeowners, upon seeing the newly finished mural for the first time, to weep with joy.

The same likely happened in 1820.

LANDSCAPES' ALLURE

Since the time humans lived in caves, we've valued artistic representations of the land just outside of our immediate habitats. Appreciative observers

The front parlor from a home in the Lakes region of New Hampshire reflects the work of the Avery School of painters from the mid-1850s. Murals are freehand painted both above and below the chair rail in strong colors, with black tendrils over the bushes and buildings.

painted finely wrought landscapes onto walls in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, and wove them into giant hanging tapestries in medieval castles. Landscapes also emerged as a popular European wallpaper motif in the 1760s.

With English and French wallpapers difficult to obtain in early America, talented artists arriving from Europe in the late 1700s helped quench the gentry's thirst for landscapes.

Artists such as Michele Felice Corné (c. 1752-1845)—a political refugee from Naples who traveled through parts of New England adorning overmantels in mansions—became a model for a new generation of itinerant painters who eventually brought the American scenic mural to a broader range of people and places.

"Surely during the early colonial period, artists arrived from Europe and Great Britain at all the large colonial port cities: Boston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Charles Town," commented Ann Eckert Brown, historian of American decorative arts and author of *American Wall Stenciling, 1790-1840*. "After arriving, they traveled extensively seeking commissions. Examples of early scenic overmantel murals have been recorded in the Mid-Atlantic area and a few in the South, primarily in homes of the aristocrats."

Wall murals and even stenciling rarely appeared in colonial homes because most structures, private or public, had walls hewn from wood. "The style of whole rooms decorated with murals and stenciling covering all four walls came into being only with the advent of fully plastered room interiors during the early Federal period," Brown said.

BEYOND RUFUS PORTER

Discussions of early American scenic murals tend to focus on Rufus Porter (1792-1884), often at the expense of the other muralists working during the same period. The remarkable Porter, an accomplished inventor as well as founder of *Scientific American* magazine, was arguably the most influential folk artist of his day.

Porter painted numerous scenic murals in Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont and wrote extensively about his technique. He advocated painting from the imagination rather than being limited to realistic representations. His method proved so inspiring, practical, and liberating that a num-

This parlor overmantel in Bernardstown, Massachusetts, probably dates to the turn of the 19th Century and has been attributed to the Jerrud Jessup school of painting. On the wall left of the fireplace (inset), is freehand decoration showing sprays of flowers and berries with a frieze of swags and tassels.

ber of artists took to the road in New England and beyond to paint their own scenic murals in homes, taverns and inns, and other public buildings.

No one knows how many scenic murals these itinerant artists painted during their heyday—from about 1815 into the 1840s—because the walls have been demolished or the murals remain hidden beneath layers of paint or wallpaper. Porter's influence is evident on many surviving murals, although today's researchers are discovering that some originally attributed to Porter were actually the work of other artists. Most murals either went unsigned or the signatures have been obliterated.

Still, a few names have come to light. Jonathan D. Poor (1807-45) of Sebago, Maine, was Porter's nephew, and his work strongly resembles that of his famous uncle. Orison Wood (1811-42) of Auburn, Maine, used Porter's style as a springboard to develop his own imaginative motifs. Little is known about William Price of New York who, in the 1820s, developed a style reminiscent of French wallpapers, or of John Avery, who painted scenic murals in New Hampshire beginning as early as 1818.

These traveling artists carried bottles of colored pigment powder they mixed on site with combinations of water, milk, or animal-hide glue to create surprisingly vibrant paints. Even classically trained immigrant European artists used water-based paints—and less often oil paints—when creating lavish murals in America's grandest homes of the period.

With the arrival of Victorian aesthetics in about 1850, homeowners came to regard the American scenic landscape as too "primitive" for home decoration and deemed it passé.

COSTLIER THAN WALLPAPER

American scenic murals have been called "poor man's wallpaper," implying that homeowners in the early 19th Century settled for hand-painted murals because they couldn't afford the expensive English and French wallpapers popular in Europe.

"Totally false," said Linda Carter Lefko, an authority on early American art forms. "It's something you hear repeated over and over again and it's absolutely not true."

Lefko recently published *Folk Art Murals of the Rufus Porter School: New England Landscapes 1825-1845* with co-author Jane E. Radcliffe, in which they noted that Porter himself, in an 1841 article, cited $10 as the price of painting a room of murals with watercolor, the typical medium. Using oil paint, Porter wrote, would raise the price to $25.

In comparison, the *American Builders General Price Book* for the same period put the cost of papering a room—including sizing the walls, hanging the paper, and the paper itself—at between $3.64 and $9.57 for

English wallpaper, and between $5.26 and $13.79 for French wallpaper. The substantial differences between high and low costs depended on the quality of the wallpaper and the workmen's wages, according to Lefko and Radcliffe.

In the new book they also cite an 1832 diary entry in which Sally Brown of Cavendish, Vermont, noted that she paid between $6 and $7 to two artists who took two days to paint murals in her home.

DEFINING CONTENT

Today, just as two centuries ago, much about a mural's style, content, and price is determined in up-front discussion between the homeowner and artist. As Susan Dwyer of East Greenwich, Rhode Island, put it, "When someone's in the market for a mural, it's a big step. It's much larger than buying a painting where, if you get sick of it, you can just take it down."

Hugh Alan Luck of Wenonah, New Jersey, provided insight into the process. "I'll sit down with the client and a lot of reference materials—some of it I bring, some of it she brings—and we'll sit in the kitchen and talk back and forth, me with my sketchpad. The main thing I do is ask questions of the client because you never know what could happen. She could love everything you paint. Or she might also say, 'You've painted a bird and I hate birds.' So, yes, I ask a lot of questions."

Lisa Nelthropp, an artist from Wolfeboro Falls, New Hampshire, emphasizes getting familiar with the area where the mural will be located. "I like to spend time with the homeowner and I like to spend time in the space, so I can really feel it," she said. "That way, I get an added sense of what the mural needs to be. It has to fit, to look like someone built his or her entire house around it."

These experienced muralists say they often can help clients expand the vision of what the mural could be. Kris Lemmon of Cincinnati noted, "It's important to go over lots of source material and to discuss the aesthetic of the period. I focus on what clients want and sometimes can actually broaden their choices by reviewing historically valid alternatives."

The degree of research and complexity in each project precludes an easy answer about pricing. Sometimes these artisans offer clients a project estimate and at other times they charge by the hour. Still, they say the homeowner needs at least a ballpark estimate early in the process for deciding whether to get competitive bids or even proceed at all.

SHARED EMOTIONS

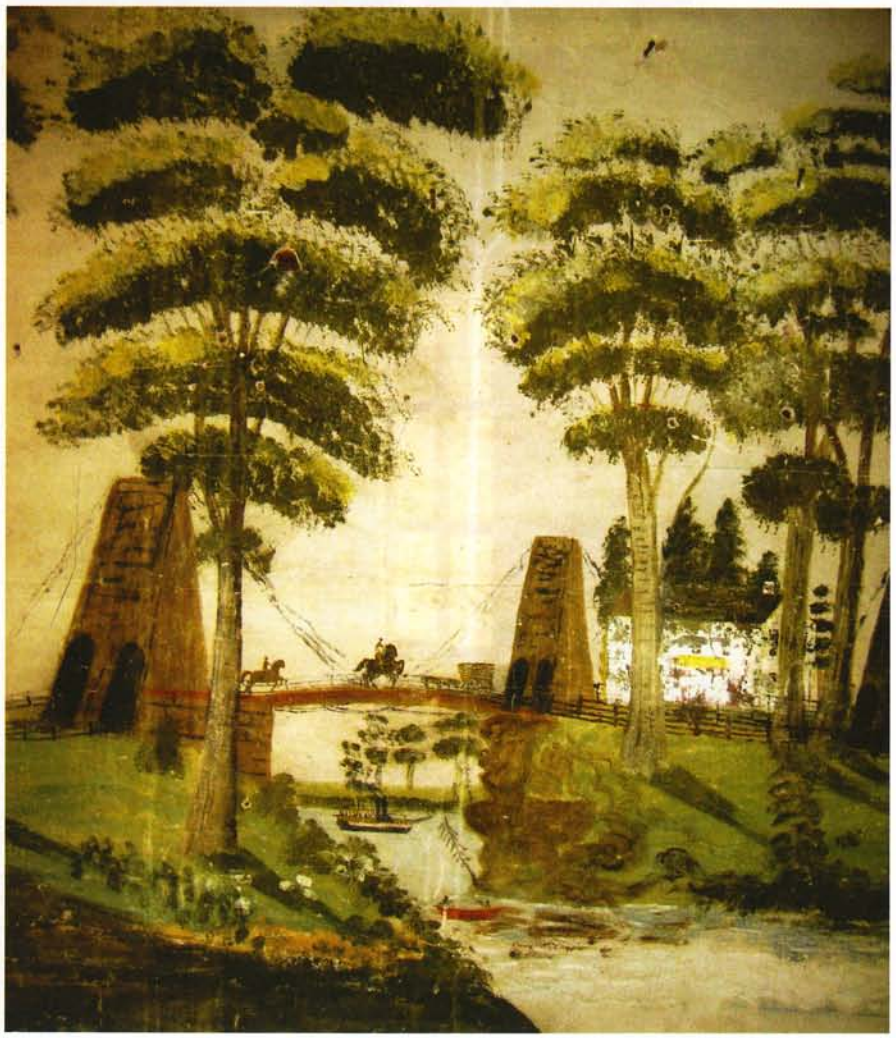
Despite all of the detailed discussions and concept reviews, the moment of truth comes when the muralist puts paint to the wall.

"Sometimes I can see them biting their nails," Dwyer said. "I can paint anything, but I can't read minds. So I always tell them, 'If there's something you don't like—maybe the color of the water, the shape of a house, or the style of a tree—just tell me. It's only paint and I can paint over it. After all, I'm going to leave here and you're going to live with this'."

Lemmon echoed the sentiment. "I tell them, 'I want you to live with this for awhile, give it a few days before I come back and do the final varnish. That way we can change something'."

Painting a mural goes beyond enlarging the content of a framed picture—the orientation and wall-size scale often are difficult—so completing a mural usually is an exhausting yet exuberant experience for the artist and can be equally

Painting on the walls of the 18th-Century Enoch Robie House in Deerfield, New Hampshire, probably dates to about 1810. The loose free-form style, done in glue-based paint on plaster, contrasts with the stenciling and formulaic painting of Rufus Porter and his followers. The design likely depicts scenes from local lore.



Susan Dwyer's mural of the Essex, Connecticut, waterfront rises up the stairwell in a historic home in Essex.

emotional for the homeowner.

"My goal when I accept a mural commission is, at the end, for the people to be thrilled," Dwyer said.

Nelthropp believes an artist's intuition can play a role. "When you really get into a mural, it can be very emotional," she explained. "I sense what the people I'm working for are all about, and I never finish a mural unless I get what I call the confirmation shivers. It just happens, and then I know I've nailed exactly what it is that my client has asked for. Somehow it's this emotional, spiritual thing—I hate to sound weird—but when I get the confirmation shivers I can say I'm done, that's it."

Susan Dwyer picked up the warm tones of the woodwork and flooring for the mural in the dining room of a home in Stonybrook, Long Island, New York.

Some clients, she said, respond accordingly. "I've had nine people, when they've first laid eyes on a mural I just finished for them, break into tears. It was because it really hit an emotional chord with them and they were so happy."

SUSAN DWYER

Susan Dwyer freely calls herself an artistic "sponge," having absorbed an extraordinarily wide range of influences and translated them into mural styles suitable for a number of settings. Displaying an artistic gift early in childhood, she was schooled at the Hartford Art School, Rhode Island School of Design, Paire College of Art, and Yale University.

"The two things I love most are art and early American history," she said. "I could paint George Washington all day, every day, and never get tired of it."

New England is at her core, having been raised in Connecticut and Rhode Island and spent time with grandparents in Vermont. Her love of New England and history and her talents drew her to the work of Rufus Porter.

"Murals are something I've always been able to paint, never a problem," said Dwyer, who's been painting them for twenty years. "Some artists can paint beautiful 8-by-10 paintings, but to blow up the scale to the size of a wall is very difficult for them. Not for me."

Many of Dwyer's murals show Porter's influence, but others are bright and playful and in a style uniquely her own. Her work can be found in homes throughout New England and several other states, in nearly all rooms of houses, and in several types of businesses. "I'm freakishly fast, which means people find my prices reasonable," she said. "Not one of my murals has taken longer than two days. I don't use stencils and I don't draw it out first. I just go to town."

Dwyer charges from $500 to $2,500 for her murals. Doing four walls of a dining room, for example, usually runs from $1,500 to $2,000.

KRIS LEMMON

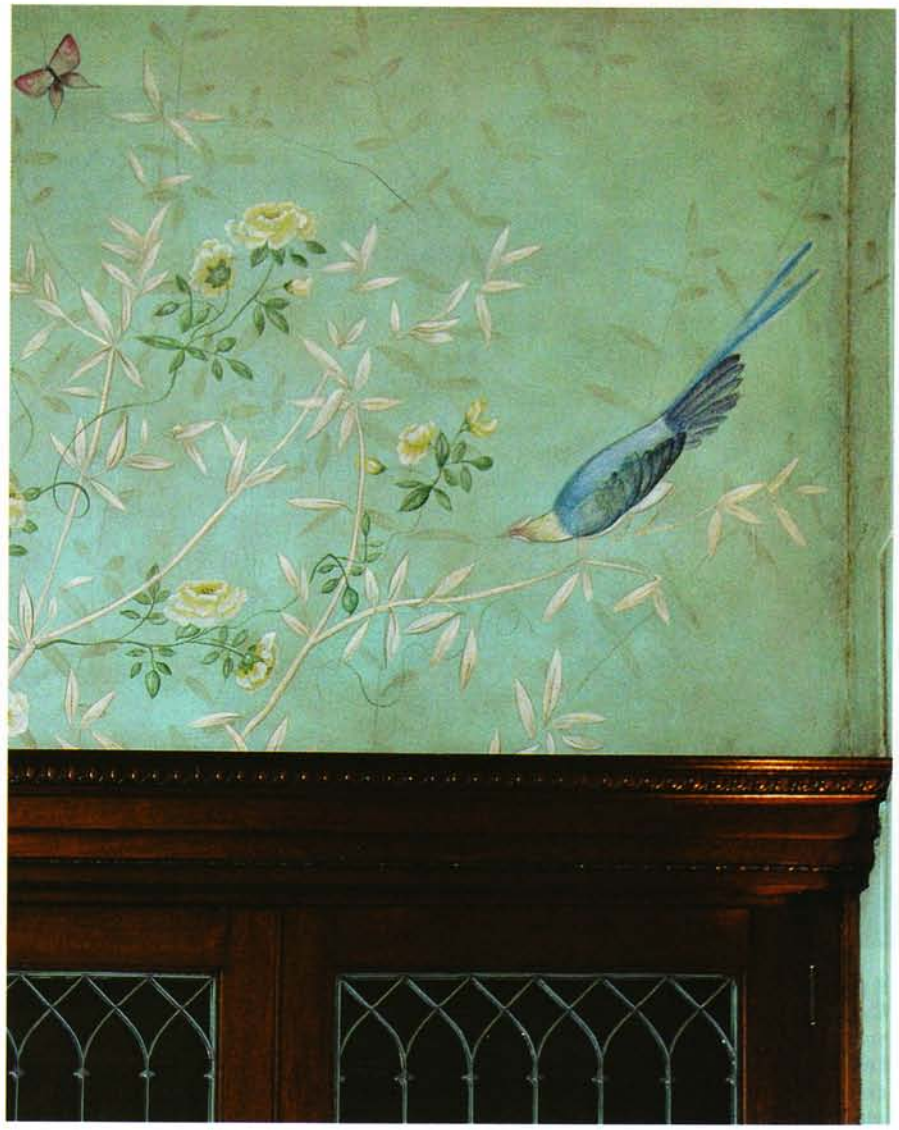
Kris Lemmon is at home painting murals in people's dining rooms or in enormous historic structures such as Cincinnati City Hall or Tennessee's state capital building in Nashville.

She's been restoring painted surfaces since the late 1980s, and in 2000 founded her own company, DecoWorks Studio in Cincinnati. Schooled in the fine arts, art history, and science, she specializes in conservation and restoration of artwork in historical buildings.

"Our restoration work usually involves uncovering the original decorations and documenting them, performing color analysis, and either restoring the existing artwork or going back and replicating it," she explained. For example, she recently restored hand-painted ceiling murals in the Cincinnati City Hall council chamber, long hidden beneath layers of paint and acoustic tile.

She counts a number of historic homeowners among her clients. "I put the house through a historic filter and aesthetic in order to create images that would be appropriate, would enhance the house, and would live beyond the current ownership of the house," she said. In other words, she won't create artwork based on a current owner's whim that would be inappropriate to the age or style of the home.

Artist and historical restorer Kris Lemmon reproduced 17th-Century Chinese decorative elements for this c. 1850 Italianate home in Covington, Kentucky. Such Chinese designs were popular with early America's gentry. Lemmon highlighted images of birds, branches, leaves, and butterflies with period *trompe l'oeil* elements.



A panoramic mural covers the parlor walls at the home of Wesley Newkirk in Cynthiana, Kentucky. Kris Lemmon painted it as part of an extensive project spanning several years, much of the work focused on restoring rare stenciling. Lemmon used the same microanalysis techniques to determine the original wall colors and worked with the late Elizabeth Newkirk in designing images for the mural, which she painted in a style reminiscent of early 1800s scenic landscapes.

Lemmon's clients—residential, commercial, or governmental—share a dedication to historical integrity. "It's relatively rare to find people who really love and respect their historic homes, regardless of the time period, and who are willing to do what's right by the home, to do what's needed," she said. "I'm emotionally connected to people who want to spend that sort of effort, and I get involved with my clients because of that."

Lemmon said her pricing depends on the specific project, but mural work in a private home generally runs about $500 a day.

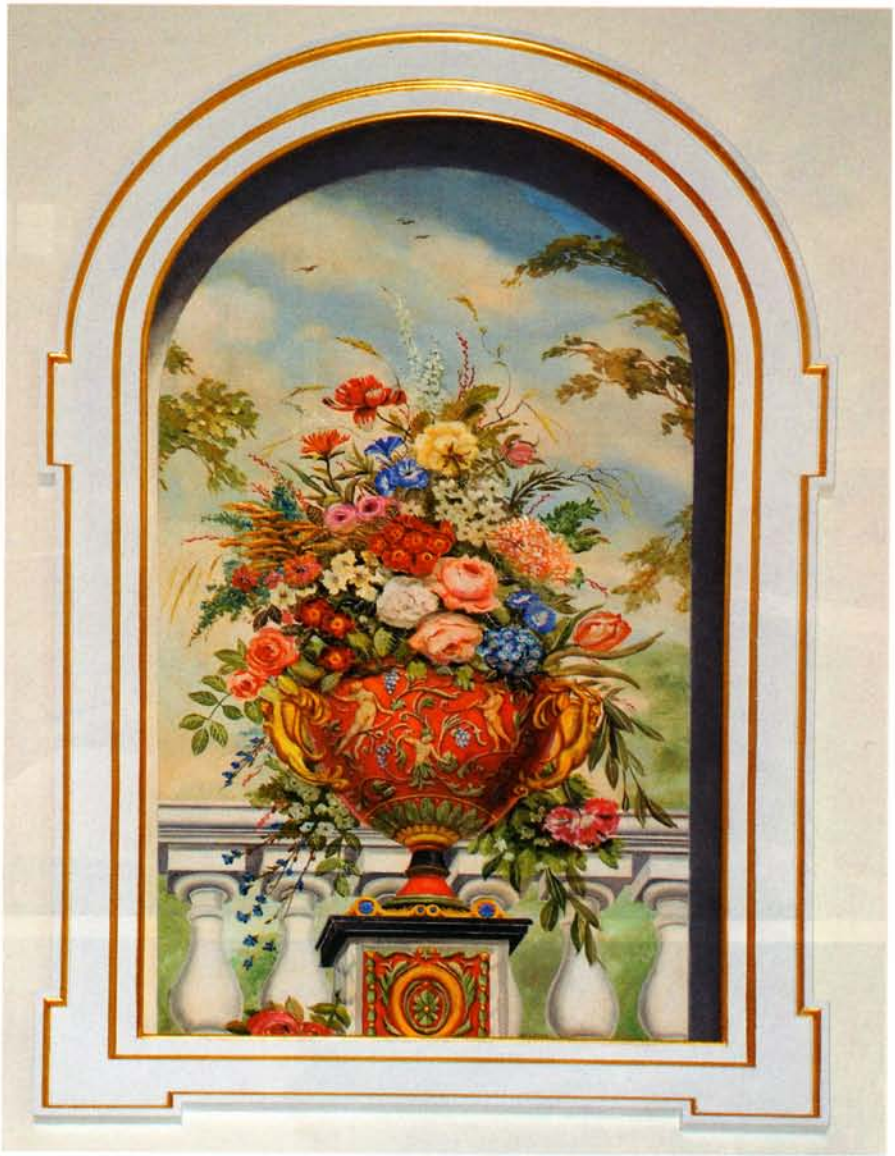
HUGH ALAN LUCK

Hugh Alan Luck can paint an impeccable scenic mural in the Rufus Porter style, but that's just the starting point for his capabilities, which extend to an entire range of neoclassical styles suitable for the finest historic homes. Plus, he's a credentialed master of faux finishes, decorative detailing styles, and *trompe l'oeil*. .

Luck, owner of Pine Street Studios, can mimic Porter and other 19th-Century American scenic muralists such as Jonathan Poor. His favorite influences include 18th- and 19th-Century Dutch and English artists—who painted the murals with which early America's gentry surrounded themselves.

He said much of his own style relies on antiqued finishes. "It adds depth and character and can make an acrylic mural look like it was painted in oil. But I find that a lot of the Rufus Porter murals I see in real life don't look as old as the ones I paint."

Luck has an extensive art school education plus training under master faux-finisher Ina Brousseau Marx. A substantial portion of his commissions, both residential and commercial, come through interior designers and architects working on historic structures. He has worked on some of the most notable mansions in the East, such as the Colonial Revival mansion of Dr. Horace Jayne in Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square neighborhood, designed in 1895 by the city's pre-eminent Victorian designer, Frank Furness.



Although technically not a mural, this vase overflowing with flowers is part of Hugh Alan Luck's extensive painted decoration in a Georgian-style New Jersey home. The artwork is reminiscent of English painter Robert Adams, a main influence on Luck's painting. Luck also applied *trompe l'oeil* techniques to give the scene depth.

Luck's price for a residential mural is $1,200 to $25,000, an extensive range because of widely varying project specifications, although his hourly rate is closer to $100. "People can look at the high end of that range and say, 'Wow!' but it's not that I make tons of money because those more expensive projects can take months to complete. I get involved in these jobs, get carried away. I've always gone beyond what people paid me for."

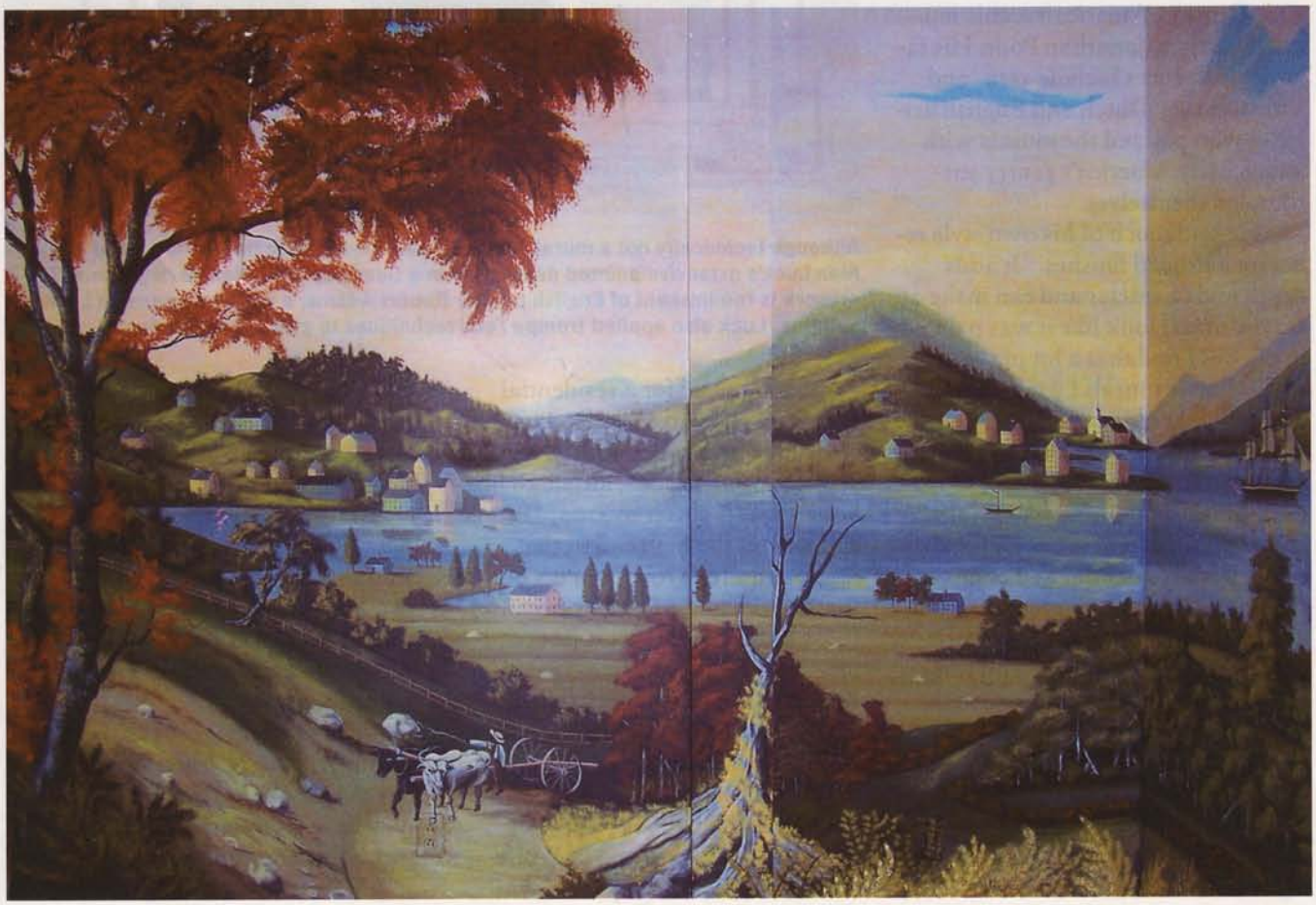
LISA NELTHROPP

In 2001, Lisa Nelthropp of Wolfeboro Falls, New Hampshire, was running a cake-decorating business. As she tells it:

"One day I was in my shop and I put my hands down on the stainless steel table and said, 'I'm going to paint in the style of Rufus Porter.' It was almost like somebody said it for me. I had no idea how I was going to do it, when I was going to do it, or why I was going to do it. I just knew I was going to do it."

The incident is especially interesting because Nelthropp knew next to nothing about Porter. "I think I may have seen something about him in a book somewhere," she guessed.

With no art training to draw



OPPOSITE Hugh Alan Luck painted this scenic mural in a newly constructed New Jersey home, basing it on the style popular in the early 19th Century. In a bit of whimsy, he added a graveyard with tiny tombstones for Rufus Porter, Elvis Presley, Silas Marner, and himself.

upon, she painted her first mural in her home. A friend showed it to another woman, and Nelthropp gained her first client. The more people saw her murals, the more clients she acquired, and soon her work was featured in *Yankee* magazine among other media. Since then she's been traveling up and down the East Coast painting murals in homes and businesses.

Along the way, Nelthropp, who has exhibited natural artistic talent since childhood, picked up the training she'd been missing. "To be a decorative painter in early America, you had to know a hundred different surfaces before you could even apprentice with someone," she said. Enrolling at the Massachusetts Institute of Surface Design for an array of classes, she has now gained certification in seventy-five different finishes.

Period artists who fascinated her also became focuses of her studies, particularly key examples of the Hudson River School of American painting, such as Thomas Chambers (1808-69) and Thomas Cole (1801-48). "They've actually formed the basis of my own style," she noted.

The cost of her murals can range from about $500 to $14,000, depending on the project's specifications.

Nelthropp is an intuitive artist. She often relies on an inner sense to guide many of her style and content decisions, and her clients have responded positively. "I'm gratified to have so many clients who have called me back again and again for more murals." ★

Gregory LeFever is a contributing editor to Early American Life.

Photographs of antique murals courtesy of Linda Carter Lefko, co-author of the recently published book about murals of the Rufus Porter landscape school, *Folk Art Murals of the Rufus Porter School: New England Landscapes 1825-1845* (Schiffer Ltd., 2011). For information, visit www.lclefko.com.

Although it reflects typical New England scenes, the mural opposite, in the lobby of the Zimmerman offices in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire, is based solely on Lisa Nelthropp's intuition. In the Johnson house in Northwood, New Hampshire, the mural below wraps around the walls of a boy's room and contains a number of different animals, some hidden and some in the open. Nelthropp took her inspiration from a storybook the boy liked.