

Hiring a Decorative Artisan

By Amy Ketteran © 2005



Ketteran Studios

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You have decided you want to commission an artist to do some custom work in your home. You sort of know what you want, but you are not exactly sure how this whole process works. Here are a few of the things you should know and questions you should ask before and during the process of hiring a decorative artisan.

There seem to be a lot of different types of painters out there. What is the difference?

Mural (Muralist)

- A medium to large scale painting usually of a scene, collage or tromp l'oeil (fool the eye). They can be painted directly on the wall or painted on fabric and applied to the wall.
- If they are painted on fabric you can usually take them with you if you move and the artist usually does the work in her own studio.
- Muralists usually prefer to do entire scenes so if you are looking to have a single animal or object painted you may need to hire a decorative painter (see below). This, however, is not always the case so go ahead and ask.

Faux Finish (Faux Finisher)

- A decorative paint finish applied to the wall. This can range from textures, to glazes, to frottage, or metallic finishes. Companies and artists are always coming up with new techniques but any good faux finisher will know what is available and can guide you through the choices.
- An actual re-creation of another surface such as marble, wood, or stone. Some faux finishers specialize in only these techniques as some of them can be quite complicated and take years to perfect.
- Restoration work done in historic homes. These are almost always specialists who have studied the old techniques so they can match and restore faux finishes in older homes.

Stencil (Stencilist)

- An ancient process created by brushing or sponging paint through a cutout shape. Stenciling has come a long way since the days of ducks and ivy. Stencils can now be quite complicated designs from forms of tromp l'oeil, to sophisticated borders to all over wall patterns.

Decorative Painting (Decorative Painter)

- While technically this is tole painting (a specific style of painting with stroke work) it has evolved over the years to include almost any type of hand painting on objects, furniture or even walls.

Before you make the first phone call there are a few questions you should think over.

- What do you want done? You do not have to know exactly but at least have an idea what rooms you want worked on, a general idea of what you want the finished product to look like (pictures are great for this), or an idea of the feeling you want the room to evoke.
- If you have more than one project in mind decide which projects are a priority.
- What is your budget? This is also not an exact number but you should at least have decided if you are going to spend around \$700, \$7,000 or \$70, 000.
- Remember that you are hiring a trained artisan that has to pay for training, tools, supplies, insurance and maybe even studio space. If you have no idea how much what you want done costs, ask, but do not be surprised if you have to pay more than a few hundred dollars to have your bathroom faux finished. If someone quotes you a very low price, do some more research before hiring them. Remember, you get what you pay for.

The First Phone Call

Once you have general answers to all of the above questions, you can start calling artists. The best way to find someone is to ask friends, neighbors, interior designers or paint stores. You can also look artists up on the internet or phone book. Any way you do it, there are a few questions you should ask .

What you should ask:

- What type of work do you do?
- Do you have a specialty?
- How long have you been doing this?
- What kind of training do you have and what specifically did you study? (They could have an art degree, have gone to decorative art schools or be self taught. These answers could all mean the person is extremely talented or only marginally good, but they should be able to easily answer the question.)
- If the artist hem and haws they probably have very little training and you should do quite a bit more reseach before hiring them.
- An artist will not be able to give you a price over the phone. But, since you have already decided the range of your budget, they will be able to tell you if what you are asking for fits into your budget and suggest some alternatives if it does not.
- If you like what you have heard so far, arrange to see their portfolio/sample boards. They may ask to come to you or have you come to them. Either way works, depending on what stage of planning you got to on the phone.
- Don't be surprised if the artisan charges a consultation fee to come out to your house. Sometimes this fee will go toward the final price of the work, sometimes it will not.

The First Meeting

This is when you get to meet the artist and see their work and maybe even get started on the planning of your project. Every artist is different but this is generally what will happen.

- You will sit down and look through the artists portfolio or sample boards. (Sample boards are small boards with an actual faux finish on them. Faux finishes rarely photograph well so boards will give you a much better feel for a finish.)

- You will walk around the house and look at the rooms you want done. The artist will probably ask a lot of questions. Just relax and answer them and if you don't have an answer, say so. A good decorative artisan will help guide you through the decision making process and may have some great ideas to take a room to the next level or enhance your ideas.

- If you are comfortable with the artist the next step will be renderings (for a mural or decorative painting) or sample boards (for a faux finish, stenciling).

- If you are not comfortable, ask to see their work in a home. If they have no home to show you, that could be a red flag that they have little experience.

- You will usually pay several hundred dollars to have a full color rendering done for a mural. Some muralists put this money toward the price of the finished mural, some do not. Make sure you ask.

- You will usually pay between \$20-\$100 per sample board from faux finisher, decorative artist or stencilist. These prices vary depending on the complexity of the sample and may or may not go toward the final price. Make sure you ask their policy.

Putting it all together.

Now that you have a general idea of how the process works, here are a few more things to help you on your artistic journey.

- The right person for the job may be two or more people. Don't be afraid to hire one person to do your faux finishing and another to paint a mural. Many decorative artisans work this way and can even recommend someone to do the work they will not be doing.

- Make sure you are comfortable with the artist as a person as well as with their work. If their work is good but you can not communicate with them, the finished product will suffer.

- You don't have to know exactly what you want done before you make the first phone call. Collaborate with the artist. You might be surprised with what you can come up with together.

- Have fun! Yes, parts of this process can be a bit stressful, but enjoy the fact that you have a real artisan creating a custom look or piece for your home. Something that you can enjoy every day.