

REVIEW

The Alchemist Who Turns Paint Into Stone

CREATING:
PIERRE FINKELSTEIN,
DECORATIVE PAINTER

BY PIA CATTON

THE DECORATIVE PAINTER Pierre Finkelstein embraces discipline, boundaries and efficiency. But artistic freedom? Not so much. "Working with a blank canvas is very difficult," he said. "I need to have some restraints."

Mr. Finkelstein, 49, is an expert painter of photorealistic faux finishes, such as marble, wood grain and patina. His work can be seen in the jets, yachts and homes of millionaires, in luxury hotels—the Ritz in Paris, the Carlyle Hotel in New York—and in museums such as the Frick Collection. His collaborators include top-flight interior designers, such as Diamond Baratta Design, and famed architects like Robert A.M. Stern and Thierry Despont.

Though he can beautify a room with a Versailles-style mural, Mr. Finkelstein takes a businesslike view of the craft. "We are not artists. We are artisans," he said. "We don't want to spend five days on a square foot. That's easel painting. We can't sell that."

His approach also reflects the time that he spent in the military. Growing up in France, he served active duty in a paratrooper unit and learned valuable lessons about leadership. "I had to take charge of kids my own age and motivate them. It taught me how to deal with people, to be a problem solver," he said, adding that he adopted the use of uniforms. His employees are required to wear company shirts and white painters' pants, not jeans, that identify them as craftsmen. "It unifies the team."

For Mr. Finkelstein, creativity starts with the style that an architect or designer is hoping to create. "They'll come to me with a set of blueprints and say, 'In this room, we want the feel of the 18th-century. Here are our fabrics and furniture plan.'"

The next step is to delineate the space for the painting. He is currently developing a design for a rectangular, vaulted ceiling. With that shape in mind, he sketched—on tracing paper using a pencil—a rough outline of rectangular panels and medallions that could be filled with motifs decided by the designer and the client.

Mr. Finkelstein then suggests ideas for those motifs by pulling from his extensive library of images. His studio on West 20th Street in Manhattan is lined, floor to ceiling, with historical books and "thousands and thousands" of pho-



PIERRE FINKELSTEIN at his New York studio, where his techniques are developed and styles are perfected before they are applied on site.

tographs that he has shot around the world. "It's really an investigation," he said. "New ideas are often recycled ideas."

In the case of the vaulted ceiling, he shared an illustration of panels outlined with molding and decorated with zodiac signs as motifs; the client went for the former but not the latter. "By a process of elimination and recommendation, we are able to narrow down a vision," he said.

Over the past 30 years, Mr. Finkelstein has collected folios, many from the 19th century, containing printed illustrations or paintings of marble, wood grain and interior decorations, like ornate flowers and leaves. The documents were made as reference material for decorative painters before photography was available. Painted surfaces have long been used to supplement real marble, which is expensive and can take months

to quarry, mill and install. "Even when Versailles was done, 60 to 70 percent of the marble was painted," he said.

Mr. Finkelstein is also a devoted picture-taker; he snaps his Canon 5D (as well as a simple point-and-shoot) at

His studio is lined, floor to ceiling, with historical books and 'thousands and thousands' of photographs.

baseboards, paneling and pedestals in museums. On a walk through the Louvre Museum, he noticed segments of real white marble painted to look like a red French variety called Rouge Royal. "Sometimes there are beautiful paintings around, and the guards are like

"Why are you taking a picture of this when there is a priceless painting above it?" he said.

When commissioned, Mr. Finkelstein typically executes a painting on site, so his studio functions more as a laboratory for developing techniques and perfecting styles. In his world, perfection means that there is no trace of the tool that was used to make the faux finish. "If you see a brush mark or a knife mark, a sponge or a rag, you are not succeeding," he said. All of his work is done freehand, in keeping with the tradition that he learned at the Institut supérieur de peinture Van Der Kelen-Logelain in Brussels.

To create a faux molding, a straight edge and pencil are used to draw a line, then shading is added with paint to give the look of a curve. Making a faux marble surface is a four-step process. A background color with some fine veins

is put down first; the larger veins are put down next; the third step is a glaze that adds tone, layering and depth; last comes the varnish. Wood grain follows a similar process.

Fees are charged by the square foot and are on a sliding scale that takes into account the finish and any practical challenges, such as scaffolding, travel or tight work spaces (as, say, on a yacht).

The brushes and tools that he uses have been around for centuries, but Mr. Finkelstein developed his own line with a French manufacturer. Though still classic in design (some have two and three heads to make veins and layers), the length and type of hair for the brushes have been changed to accommodate water-based paint, which the industry has embraced in place of oil-based paint.

Mr. Finkelstein landed in New York in the 1980s, just as a revival of decorative painting was hitting the U.S. He started his line of brushes and a school for decorative painting when he saw the lack of necessary equipment and training.

In addition to painted finishes, he also mixes plasters that are attractive to designers working on contemporary homes. A series of Japanese plasters, some with brown feathery bits of rice flour, turned out to be temperamental—requiring precise timing and dedicated mixing tools—but highly sought after for their organic, minimalist look.

Since founding Grand Illusion Decorative Painting in 1988, Mr. Finkelstein has been collaborating with designers, responding to trends and creating new concepts by drawing on his deep knowledge of classicism. "How you put it all together is your own technique," he said.

FAUX TO FINISH

DETAILS MATTER

A faux marble surface, right, takes four steps to complete. Each layer is essential to establish the effect of trompe l'oeil. Paying attention to detail at every step of the way is necessary for the success of the overall effect.



KNOW THE PAST

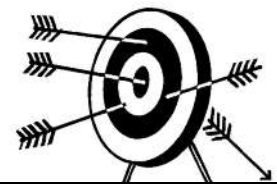
An early sketch for a ceiling design, at left in the photo, was inspired by Mr. Finkelstein's vast historical collection (a sample of which is at right). He said that he tries to solve modern problems with a twist on classic solutions.



MOVING TARGETS: JOE QUEENAN



Junior's Got Apple Stock, Dad the Worm



A CERTAIN POINT arrives in every father's life when he starts feeling jealous of his son. The physique. The hair. The fancy college degree. The bright, shining future. The spring break. But those are not the reasons I am jealous of my son.

I am jealous of him because of his precocious stock-picking ability.

When my son was in high school, I set up a brokerage account for him, so that he could learn about the stock market. Foolishly, he bought four high-tech stocks, even though I warned him to diversify, the way the experts say you should. The market promptly crashed, and his \$3,000 plummeted to a sickening \$1,200. He learned a valuable lesson about not just plunging into the market and buying four flashy, obvious stocks because you happen to play stupid videogames on a PC and have a vague, adolescent familiarity with the technology sector.

Little by little, though, the portfolio started to come back. Then it really came back. And then it exploded. But the rebound was not because of Microsoft (a dog), or Sony (another dog), or AOL Time Warner (a real mutt). No, it came back because my kid bought Apple at less than \$20.

If my son really loved me, he'd have told me years ago to liquidate my dud mutual funds and put my entire 401(k) into Apple.

Now 25 years old, he has never let me forget this.

I wrote about my son's investment style in Barron's a few years ago, about how he had violated all

the sacred principles of investing and still ended up tripling his original investment. I, on the other hand, followed all the sensible, time-honored strategies and got annihilated. Still, I was sure he would eventually get his comeuppance as Apple headed south. I was actually kind of looking forward to it.

I'm still waiting. Earlier this month, when Apple crossed the \$500-a-share threshold, I disconnected my phone and went to South Jersey for a few days and just basically hid. I was sure I was going to get a call from him reminding me that he bought Apple at 20 and asking how my short-term bond funds were doing. I didn't want to hear it. He has sold a few shares of the stock over the years and still has more than six times what he originally put into it. "Let me grab that check," he'll say at the diner. "I bought Apple at 20."

I'm really getting sick of this. It's not like the kid bought \$100,000 worth of Apple stock. It's not like he put all that original investment into Apple stock; most of the grubstake got wasted on those three other stocks, which have either cratered or stood still for the past decade or so. And more to the point, the money that he did put into Apple stock was my money.

As I look back on things, I think my kid's had it in for me from the start. If my son really loved me, he would have told me to liquidate my dud mutual funds and put my entire 401(k) into Apple back when he was a freshman in high school. If he had, I'd be worth eight hundred million dollars today and living in Tahiti. Instead, he kept all his cunning instincts to himself. He bought Apple for next to nothing without giving me a head's up that the stock was poised to explode. He hung me out

to dry. And he cleaned up.

My daughter, meanwhile, the one who's getting the Ph.D. in neuroscience, bought the same dithering, cataleptic mutual funds as me. She didn't buy Apple at 20. He did, proving that in the stock market, it's better to be lucky than smart. But when I say "lucky," I am not referring to being lucky enough to buy Apple at 20. Nor am I talking about being lucky enough to avoid cashing out of the stock when it started to go through the roof.

No, when I talk about luck, I mean being lucky enough to get born into a family with a dad who would front you the money to buy the stock in the first place. If my Dad had ponied up 50 bucks in 1963, and I'd taken a pre-emptive page out of my son's book and bought a few shares of IBM, I'd be on Easy Street today. Thanks a lot, Dad. Thanks for nothing.