



Flora Roberts paints from life to achieve her three-dimensional depictions of flowers — Tom Teasdale

A fresco to go

Interiors | A new generation of muralists is ready to transform your walls with a floral fancy, a mythical scene or an abstract design. *By Serena Fokschaner*

When she enters her basement studio Tiffany Duggan plunges into a world of wit and whimsy. Leaves drift along the stairway, flowers bloom from skirting boards; a serpent wiggles around the bookcase. Duggan, an interior designer, commissioned the mural artist Julianna Byrne to bring a “breath of nature” to the windowless London space. “Sitting at my desk, I’m transported somewhere more enchanting,” she says.

The artwork captures a shift in taste. After decades of taupe-toned minimalism, we are looking for more expressive ways to decorate. Byrne trained as an illustrator and her playful motifs, which can be scaled up or down, draw on Greek mythology. Others are bringing the garden inside; or using classical devices, such as trompe l’oeil, to define architecture.

“There are no rules now,” says Byrne, who is represented by Partnership Editions, an online platform for emerging artists. “Everyone has access to interiors through social media; it’s making us more creative with our choices.” Murals, last fashionable in the 1980s, are bringing soul to boot rooms, bedrooms and bars.

Mathilde Favier, Dior’s head of PR, commissioned a blossom-laden bough from Rosie Mennem; Lucinda Oakes’s neoclassical schemes adorn the Ballyfin Demesne hotel in Ireland. For London members club 5 Hertford Street, Lizzi Porter looked to the Ballets Russes.

“Knowing that an artist has worked on your home adds depth,” says Georgia Spray, Partnership Editions’ founder, “and the process of creation is just as fascinating as the finished piece.” She draws a parallel with the surge of interest in craft, as the Crafts Council recently reported: “Nowadays, we want to surround ourselves with things that feel characterful — and human.”

Months of staying indoors have been grist to the mill. During lockdown interior designer Beata Heuman turned her terrace into a Tuscan retreat. Walls painted fresco-pink are embellished with pillars and borders. “The design is simple but it has made the space feel larger and created a connection between outside and in,” says Heuman, who trained with Nicky Haslam.

Inspiration came from the Boboli Gardens in Florence. “You have to live with a mural, so I always refer to places and images I love,” says Heuman, who sneaks surreal flourishes — winking eyelashes, cigar-smoking hares — into designs. “They add mystery and escapism. Interiors should open our minds to possibilities,” she says.

For Tess Newall, an artist and set designer, murals bridge the gap between “imagination and domesticity”. Newall painted the backdrops for the film *Vita & Virginia* (2018) and her Bloomsbury-esque style suits walls and furniture. “I have folders of reference material which I draw on,” she says. Her latest scheme

was inspired by the home of 18th-century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus. She paints plants on parchment pasted on to the wall. “I’ll add texture using powdered pigments, applied with brushes and sponges. People like seeing brushstrokes, feeling textures; knowing that pieces have been produced with care.”

Interior designer Scott Maddux has developed his own pictorial “language” to animate surfaces. “I’ve always admired [British abstract artist] Ben Nicholson’s collages and the way he implies depth through tone and shading,” says Maddux, who works with artist Isabelle Day on high-end projects. The grid-like compositions evolve on site. “I’ll have a rough idea, and Isabelle will draw it out. We use different finishes to define areas; some matt, others have a sheen.” Applied to walls and ceilings, it creates the effect of walking into an abstract artwork.

Other artists prefer to bring the outside in. Like the Dutch Old Master painters she admires, Flora Roberts paints from life to achieve her three-



Murals by Lizzi Porter (left) and Lucinda Oakes — Ricardo Labogue

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(Clockwise from left) Tess Newall works on her mural inspired by the home of Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus; a serpent winds its way around a bookcase in a mural by Julianna Byrne; designer Beata Heuman's painted terrace inspired by the Boboli Gardens — Simon Brown



Mexico shows the way in the art of 'painted walls'

Thanks to such exponents of the form as Diego Rivera, Mexico became one of the world's most famous centres for mural painting in the 1920s. That said, the art of "painted walls" translates from the Mayan *Bonampak* and dates back to well before Europeans set eyes on the Americas.



Why a country as prone to earthquakes as Mexico should want to paint some of its best art on walls might defy logic. But therein lies the secret of some of the best murals. The surreal and illogical enjoy great play in these artworks, along with other features such as intense colour, humour and — in no small measure — blood and guts.

To take some of Rivera's most famous work as examples: severed arms or martyrs undergoing execution may be perfectly acceptable when depicted on the walls of the national palace in Mexico City, where Rivera interprets such moments of national history as the Spanish conquest and the 1910-20 revolution.

They might not be what you want, though, for your living-room wall or that stairway you feel needs brightening up a bit. A better source of inspiration would be one of the artist's other works a short walk away in the Mexican capital. "Dream of a Sunday

Afternoon in Alameda Central Park" (pictured above) was located in one of the main hotels, until the building was destroyed by the earthquake of September 1985. Salvaged, amazingly, the mural was transported across the road to the Alameda park, by the side of which it now stands in its own museum.

Fans of the surreal will appreciate the skeleton in feather boa next to a man in a bowler hat. Rivera pokes fun at himself as a boy in striped socks loomed over by the eyebrows of Frida Kahlo. Colourful balloons rise above the crowd in the park.

As viewed today, the packed gathering of characters can leave you wondering when it was that we last experienced such a thing — and when we might again. As such, the mural achieves the end of carrying the mind away to another place and time.

Peter Chapman

dimensional depictions of flowers: "I work quickly using layers of acrylics to add depth without using traditional methods of perspective," says the artist, fresh from a visit to a sustainable flower farm. Rosie Mennem, whose clients include shoe designer Jimmy Choo, is currently perched on a ladder painting the "joyful, colourful" abundance of an English garden inside a country house. "Hand-painted walls add surprise," she says. "However beautiful a printed wallpaper may be, it feels static compared with a mural."

At decorating company Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler, archival designs include Fowler's trompe l'oeil "Gothic Bedroom" painted for Nancy Lancaster's home in the 1950s. "A mural doesn't have to cover an entire wall," says director Emma Burns. "A pair of grisaille pillars can boost a room's presence, adding



Rosie Mennem's mural for Mathilde Favier

an otherworldly air. It's a 17th-century device that still feels modern." Burns remembers the 1980s, when the mania for DIY murals, inspired by books such as *Paint Magic* by Jocasta Innes, had mixed results. "So much depends on technique. Murals work best when they're folkish or highly accomplished."

Decorative artist Mathew Bray agrees. "You have to understand how different materials work. We'll use distemper to achieve a fresco-like effect or gouache for *Chinoiserie*." Everyday elements like soil or ash are used to "antique" or age strident tones. "Without these interventions, murals can look fake," says Bray, whose business has expanded during lockdown. "Perhaps it's Instagram or being forced to stay at home and contemplate your walls. Either way, our commissions are getting bolder and more beautiful."

Prices depend on size, intricacy and practicalities such as scaffolding. At Partnership Editions, Spray works with client and artist to put together a package. Once they agree a price the artist works on idea development. At mural specialists Studio Spelling, prices range from £500 to £5,000. Murals can also be painted on removable panels.

This reminds Burns of the murals by Martin Battersby for Duff and Lady Diana Cooper's home in France in the 1940s. When the British ambassador's wife moved back to London after his death in 1954, their murals, embedded with personal details — books, musical instruments — came too. The theatrical-looking panels brought a frisson of Gallic grandeur to the setting in Little Venice. They also, says Burns, resonated with "stories and imagination... which is the essence of a good mural".



Ceiling designed by Scott Maddux — Ricardo Labougle

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