

Walls with Flair



Local artists



using unique painting techniques

"What are you doing with those brushes? You don't propose to cover up these magnificent walls do you?"

The Bozeman contractor had never seen anything like it. The colors were artistically applied to the walls in interwoven translucent layers; some areas vivid while other areas were more subdued. The effect was too beautiful to have it covered over by the three painters he saw standing near one of the walls with paint brushes ready to go to work. He was pleased to learn that they were local artists who were just then adding the finishing strokes using a technique known as lazuring.

Lazure painting began in Germany, arising from Goethe's studies of color and from the work of the 20th century philosopher Rudolf Steiner. Steiner

By Dennis Davis

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Photography by
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is better known as the founder of the Waldorf school which he initiated in post WWII Germany, but which has since become a world-wide alternative approach to education. And it was in the context of studying to become a Waldorf teacher that D.P. Wiess, one of the three local artists who apply the technique, learned to lazure. The other two artists he works with are Loretta Domaszewski, and D.P.'s wife, Jeanne Wesley-Wiess, who both had come to appreciate lazure painting through exposure in Waldorf environments and in hospitals and public schools in Europe where it is much better known.

The term lazure is German for glaze. As it relates to painting, glazing is a technique of layering colors to give depth and a translucent quality to an artist's work. Titian, for example, was a master of the glazing technique. His paintings have an almost ethereal glow because of the numerous layers he applied.

In a similar way, lazuring interior walls is done in layers, using specially mixed paints made with

natural earth pigments and/or ground crystals, often in a casein base. Such paints refract light and retain a more translucent quality, so that colors can be layered and gracefully transitioned from tone to tone as the artist (or artists in this case) sees fit.

"We are emulating the natural world, and trying to bring that experience of color into the home," D.P. explained.

Part of that natural experience is in the variety of colors and the way they will transition gradually from one to the other. Think of a fiery opal, or the vivid colors of a ripened mango, or more subtly, in the play of yellow, pink, green and blue pastels in mother of pearl.

The idea in lazuring is to use a variegated interplay of color to create an environment that is pleasing to the eye, but also one that corresponds to the utilization of the room and the temperament of the person who will live within those walls. For example, a living room might incorporate vivid stimulating colors, while more subdued colors might be more appropriate for a reading room or bedroom. And a hallway that connects the two environments will transition through tones of color so subtly that the change is hardly noticeable.

"In schools in Europe where lazuring has been used, hallways will be painted in hues that stimulate movement, while classrooms will be painted in hues that have a calming effect," D.P. explained.

Within a single room, a variety of hues will often be used, as in the home of Dennis Woods, located in the Gallatin River Ranch subdivision near Manhattan. He wanted an east-facing window to have a sunburst effect painted around it, giving it warmth and excitement. But to stay with those intense colors on the same wall would not be pleasing. Instead, the artists transitioned from the warm colors to cooler pastels with mediating hues between so that the effect of the sun burst would be enhanced and enjoyed more. The idea is to give the room what Jeanne described as a "breathing quality." So there is an intensity of color that fades, and then there might be another burst of intense color, but all worked together so that it feels organic.

Around the fireplace, the colors and patterns of the stones were used as the starting point for that wall, again to harmonize with and enhance the effect of the stone fireplace.

Many of the walls move from darker hues at the bottom to lighter hues near the top, such as a south-facing wall where earthy tones predominate near the bottom while lighter, sky-like colors predominate at

the top. Long rectangular windows rest at the apex of the wall, letting in natural light and providing a view of clouds and sky.

Woods commissioned the artists to lazure one room at the suggestion of the home's architect, Jack Ranieri. Woods was so taken with the effect that he commissioned most of the rooms in his new home to be lazured. Not all rooms incorporate intense colors, however. The entrance way, for example, was painted exclusively with light creams and browns that give the room a kind of stone-like quality, where a painting is to be hung.

The guest house, which has not yet been lazured, will be done with colors that create an under water quality, like what a trout might experience in the nearby Gallatin River.

While matching the color ideas to the function of a room is not difficult given the proper training, matching a person's temperament can be more difficult.

"We once had to repaint this entire wall just because we didn't know that the client didn't like blue. I nearly cried a whole night over it," said Jeanne.

"I think it's important to talk to clients and find out what art and colors they like before we begin," Loretta offered.

"And find out what colors they hate," D.P. said. "That should probably be the first question. Then we can avoid those colors. By temperament, they might be an inward oriented person. They appreciate serenity and a peaceful environment. So

we would then work with this in our design."

Obviously, lazuring is an approach that calls for artistic sensitivity, a good understanding of human nature, as well as an understanding of color theory, both in terms of how colors work together and how they affect emotional responses.

Yet as beautiful as the effect is, and as popular as it has been in Europe, it is virtually unknown here in the United States. "We are losing our appreciation of color," D.P. said. "We often choose white or off white. It's as if we've all become minimalists because we are all living complex lives."

Then again, few people in America have been exposed to lazured walls. If the reaction of the contractor expressing his shock that such a wall would be painted over is any indication, then it is likely that as lazuring becomes better known, it will be embraced. ☺

Dennis Davis is a freelance writer, videographer and software trainer who lives in the valley with his wife and five children.



Jeanne Wesley-Wiess, above, and Loretta Domaszewski, opposite page, paint recently at an area home.