

Mural, mural, on the wall

If you've seen outdoor murals painted around town, chances are they were painted by Michael Cooper—some may even fool you

In the world of Michael Cooper, things are not always what they seem.

Oh, Michael is unpretentious and straightforward, all right—usually in a pair of pants smudged with paint and a jaunty ball cap. But take, for instance, the scene behind the little park on Church Street across from the library. Men can be seen putting together pieces of a puzzle on the side of the building. However, a closer look reveals that there are no men and there is no puzzle—only a wall that has been painted to fool the eye. Or gaze at the roof of the Frist Center. It appears to be marble all the way up. But is it? If you climbed up to the roof and examined it carefully, you would discover that there is no marble—only heavy-duty air conditioners painted to look like marble. Again, artist Michael Cooper has worked his magic, this time to disguise what might otherwise distract from a magnificent building.

This technique is called *trompe l'oeil*—that's French for "trick the eye." And Michael has splashed the technique, as well as standard murals and lots of paint, all over Nashville—inside and out—since opening his business, Murals and More, in 1990. Before that, Michael was a successful interior designer, doing mostly commercial work. Then came a time when he was burned out. "Mike, why don't you paint murals?" his wife Mickie suggested one day. "You're good at that."

"It was just the kick I needed," says Michael. He had been doing murals for fun—for his kids' rooms, for churches, for anybody and everybody. So he got an assignment to paint two logos inside the Belle Meade Drugstore. "It would take me about three hours now," he says, "but then it took me a week. I had to figure out how to do it."

Soon the work began to come in, and there was no looking back. Now, 13 years later, he couldn't be happier. "I just love it," he says. He looks forward to work every day, and his commissions are backed up almost until December—which is the only part he doesn't like.

One of Michael's first big wall murals—perhaps his most recogniz-

able—was for You Greek, Me Greek, a West End Avenue store frequented by Vandy students. The original owners wanted something on an exterior wall of their building, and Mike came up with the idea of putting the Vandy coaches on it. Each time there's a coaching change, he works with Vanderbilt to add a new face. Over the years, the wall has become something of a city icon.

The muralist's clients range from private homeowners to businesses like the Arcade and Phillips Toy Mart and organizations like Covenant Presbyterian School and the Brentwood YMCA. A recent YMCA job in Lynchburg, Va., created such interest that he has been commissioned to come back and paint a series of murals reflecting the city's history—the first one on a sloping, rough brick wall that sits near the riverfront. As with many of his projects, he will rent a special lift that raises him up to the top of the 35-foot wall.



photo by susan adcock

Oftentimes his assignment is to take a flat wall and create a three-dimensional scene such as the locomotive that "chugs along" in Phillips Toy Mart, or the window looking out on a classical garden that he simulated in the dining room of one private home.

Whether painting a flat mural or using *trompe l'oeil*, the artist uses the pounce method. First, he draws a pattern and then traces it onto the wall by making chalk marks through perforations in the pattern's edges ("It's like transferring a sewing pattern"). It's the same technique Michelangelo used when painting the Sistine Chapel, as Michael learned on a recent visit to Rome. "I looked on the side of the chapel, and, sure enough, I could still see the little chalk dots," he says. And like Michelangelo, Michael will soon be painting overhead—a 12-foot-by-20-foot tray ceiling for the bedroom of a large house in Goodlettsville—in true Renaissance style, with clouds and angels, et al. Giving spatial depth to the flat surface is his next big challenge. And like all his murals, it gets his creative juices going.

—Judith DeMoss Campbell