



10 PaintPRO's Painter of the Month:

Murals and More Franklin, Tennessee

Michael Cooper's murals
blend whimsy and reality.
What's real and what isn't?
You be the judge.

by John Strieder

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Muralist Michael Cooper (above left and above) indulged his love of trompe l'oeil in painting a fiberglass Gibson guitar sculpture for GuitarTown, an exhibition in Nashville, Tenn. Cooper's contribution is a road-worn 1959 Les Paul.

Michael Cooper completed his first publicly displayed mural when he was in first grade. It was part of a class project, and for all he knows, it still adorns the walls of a school in Memphis, Tenn. He is somewhat hazy on the details (a school bus, something about fishing) but not the tone. "Something goofy," he says.

After he grew up, he continued to paint murals for his parents, friends and family, but only for fun. He pursued a career in interior design for close to 20 years, laying out restaurants, offices and conference rooms.

Then came 1990. He had just moved to Nashville, and his girlfriend had noticed his murals were actually pretty good. So she challenged him: Why not do them for a living? Cool, he said. He was sick of interiors.

Cooper, 53, has since logged 15 years as a professional muralist. The girlfriend, Mickie, is now his wife, co-worker and partner at Murals And More LLC.

The firm is energized by the vivid colors and cheerful imagery of Cooper's work, which often depicts things and people from the real world interacting with the whimsical and the fantastic. He has painted for churches, hospitals, a children's clinic, a toy company and a produce store. He transformed an entire pediatric dental office into a castle with queens, knights and dragons. He painted a park view for employees at a conference

center who had complained about a lack of window space.

Many of his designs are personal, springing from his fancies and those of his clients, he says. "When I do a project, I invite people to become part of the design process. I talk with them and pick their brains."

For a mural in Dickson, Tenn., that is the first piece of public art in the city's downtown, he collected all kinds of input from city officials, and even held a public meeting for community comment, before settling on a vintage postcard design.

A mural in the bonus room of a hardcore University of Texas fan shows her family whooping it up to a game on the radio. A mural for a baby's room includes a panoramic view of the Grand Tetons, with moose, dogs, and, in a delightfully arbitrary touch, real wall outlets painted to look three-dimensional.

When it comes to artistic inspirations, Cooper admires good trompe l'oeil. His primary influence is Richard Haas, who does large building exteriors. He also likes John Pugh and Kent Twitchell. "They do projects that, when you walk by, your jaw drops," he says.

He aims to get the same reaction. "I want people to walk by and look a couple times before they realize it's painted. And I want them to smile. I want them to have some fun."

Reality blends with fantasy

One of Cooper's favorite tools is a digital camera. He takes shots of actual people who work or play at the building he is working on, posing them to fit the concept of the mural. Then he incorporates those images into the painting.

A Cooper work at a Salem, Va., YMCA features portraits of children who actually attended the center's programs. A mural he painted at a fishing equipment store depicts employees wearing the gear they sold.

Cooper is also fond of incorporating real-life elements of surrounding space into his work, a tendency he says comes from years of detailing while an interior designer. "Basically, I know it sounds simple, but I just paint what I see, trying to replicate the color and texture of what is there," he says.

Recently, while giving a porch an Italian villa look, Cooper painted two extra windows on a wall that already had a couple. As the real windows had blinds, so do Cooper's. However, the blinds on one of Cooper's windows are opened to reveal a view of the Mediterranean Sea.





Among his favorite paints is Acry-Shield, an acrylic exterior paint from Porter Paints that he uses indoors and out for its toughness. He also likes Liquitex and Golden artist acrylics.

He is also fond of silicate paint, intended for bare masonry, concrete and other porous surfaces. As it dries, it fuses with the surface in a process called petrification, making it extremely durable. The traditional European coating still looks new even on buildings where it was applied a century ago, he says.

A head for business

When Cooper started looking for work as a muralist, he had no idea where he would find it. "I had such low self-esteem," he says. "I thought I would be doing cartoons in kid's rooms."

Instead, his first jobs were commercial — a logo for a drugstore and a lobby logo, conference room mural and more work for another company. "Being in the design business, I knew all these designers and architects," he says.

While Cooper is primarily a muralist, his business is called Murals And More for a reason. He will take on marbling, frottage, faux stucco, oxidized copper and other decorative finishes.

The gig that he calls his strangest to date was a job painting furniture. He put big white and dark swooshes on three red sofas for the TV show "American Idol." The sofas are used in the program's "Red Room," designed by show sponsor Coca-Cola.

He makes more money from commercial projects than residential ones because their budgets are often bigger, he says. And he is not shy about encouraging clients to have more done and pay more. It will improve the end result, he says. "You don't want to sell a mural if it's not going to work. I've walked away from projects and told them, here's a color, paint the wall."

Often, when he pitches his services to residential clients, they are expecting the murals they know — the cutesy cartoons they've seen on other people's walls. Then they look at his portfolio and realize what can be done. "It blows them away," he says.

Cooper is an artist, but a businessman in equal measure. "I'm not controversial by any means," he says. "What I do is a business. I've got people to answer to. My job is to come up with something fun, something whimsical. But it is a business. I've got to take a ton of things into consideration."

Murals And More is a one-artist, two-person team. For the past three years, Mickie Cooper has worked with Michael full time. In fact, Mickie Cooper is the sole owner of Murals And More LLC on paper. This arrangement is intended to help the company win bids. She is a woman, and one-eighth Cherokee

to boot. "So we are a minority-owned business," Michael Cooper says.

He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Memphis State University but never took a business course. He's had to pick up that part of the job over the years.

But he makes sure to pass along that knowledge in workshops at his 3,000-square-foot backyard studio and in classes at trade shows. He teaches marketing, taxes and portfolio creation alongside perspective, lighting, shadows and tools. "I try to cover it all."

Now seems to be a good time to be a muralist. More towns are commissioning public art these days, Cooper says, and cities such as Philadelphia are even becoming known for their

murals. "They are using them as tourist attractions," he says. "People who go there, that's what they want to look for. It's a part of going to the city."

Cooper ran his own business when he was an interior designer, too, and expanded beyond cubicle placement into designing clubs and other entertainment spaces. But even those jobs were not as colorful as his current gig. "It still wasn't as satisfying as what I'm doing now," he says. "What I'm doing now, I should have been doing it when I was born."

Murals And More

Michael Cooper, artist

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