

Solving Artistic Mysteries With Brunswick's Renaissance Man

By David Goska
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BRUNSWICK, Md.

Michelangelo, working on cramped scaffolding in the Sistine Chapel, likely endured the same working hazard as James Fauntleroy—a severely stiff neck.

Fauntleroy, a self-professed “old-time sign painter” who works in several rarely practiced artistic media, became acutely aware of the physical rigors that come with spending long hours applying brush strokes while lying supine on a scaffold. He recently spent nine weeks restoring extensive stencil designs on the ceiling of an 1880s house in Frederick, Md.

“I was so stiff and sore when I came down, I wanted to give up on the project. But when I looked up and saw my work, it was worth all the effort,” Fauntleroy said of his restoration of the highly detailed “Oriental rug” ceiling stencil.

The artist said he believes the project was the second time he was called upon to restore the century-old work of an anonymous “itinerant Austrian stencil artist.” About five years ago, Fauntleroy restenciled a design in the Frederick courthouse that he said was probably painted by the artist.

The ceiling stencil on the Frederick house was discovered by new owners who removed wallpaper that had hidden it, Fauntleroy said.

To re-create the design and original colors, he hand-cut new stencils and mixed pigments for accurate color matching.

The 19th century Oriental rug stencil, so named because it resembles a Persian carpet, included a large rosette center bordered by piping and blue lines.

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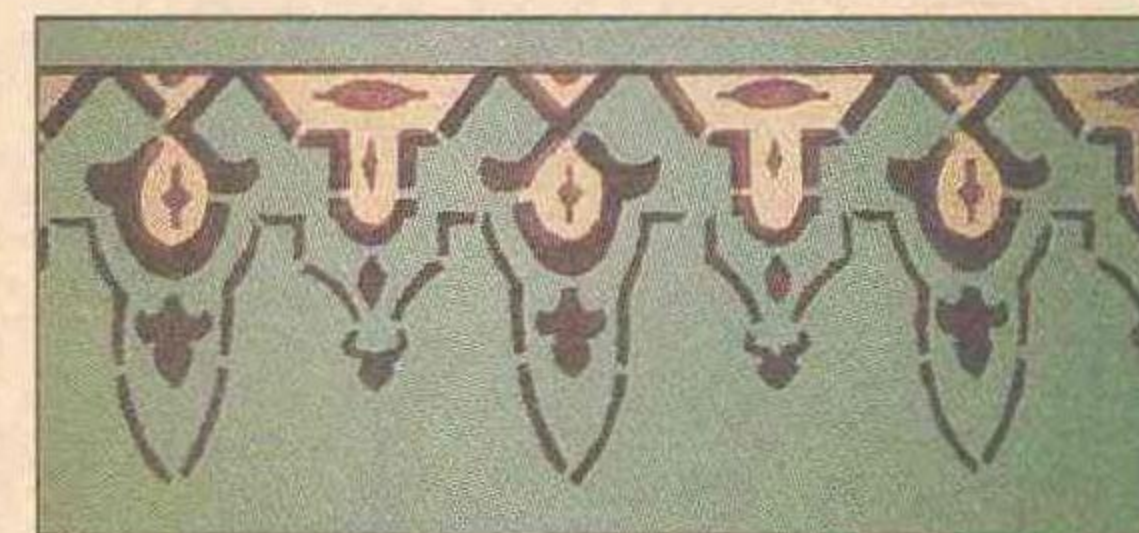


PHOTOS BY DARREL ELLIS—THE WASHINGTON POST

John Fauntleroy admits to feeling stiff and sore after spending hours on his back on a scaffold to restore stencil designs on ceilings.



Even the pipes got into the act in the Frederick house.



Fauntleroy's handiwork restores the detail of original stencil designs that had been covered by wallpaper. He hand-cut new stencils and mixed pigments for accurate color matching.

Brunswick Artist's Labor of Love Revives Techniques of the Past

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"The colors were just magnificent," Fauntleroy said.

The stencil restoration typifies jobs that Fauntleroy, 52, routinely undertakes.

He is frequently hired in situations that require "a lot of searching for solving a problem or a mystery." But, he added, "it's a lot of fun."

In 1974, Fauntleroy was hired by the Smithsonian Institution to restore artwork on antique industrial machinery in preparation for a major exhibit celebrating the nation's Bicentennial two years later.

The artist stayed with the project for five years, eventually restoring highly intricate designs on 36 machines built before 1876. The exhibit, which re-creates a Philadelphia exposition celebrating the country's emerging Industrial Age 113 years ago, continues to be a popular attraction of the Smithsonian's Arts and Industry Building.

"There was no documentation on some machines," Fauntleroy said. "I used photos and plates to get ideas of what the styles of the period were. In some cases, we invented designs."

Working in the ancient Italian medium of scagliola, more commonly known as marbleizing, the artist was again called on by the Smithsonian two years ago to apply the coating on a laboratory desk for the institution's retired director, S. Dillon Ripley.

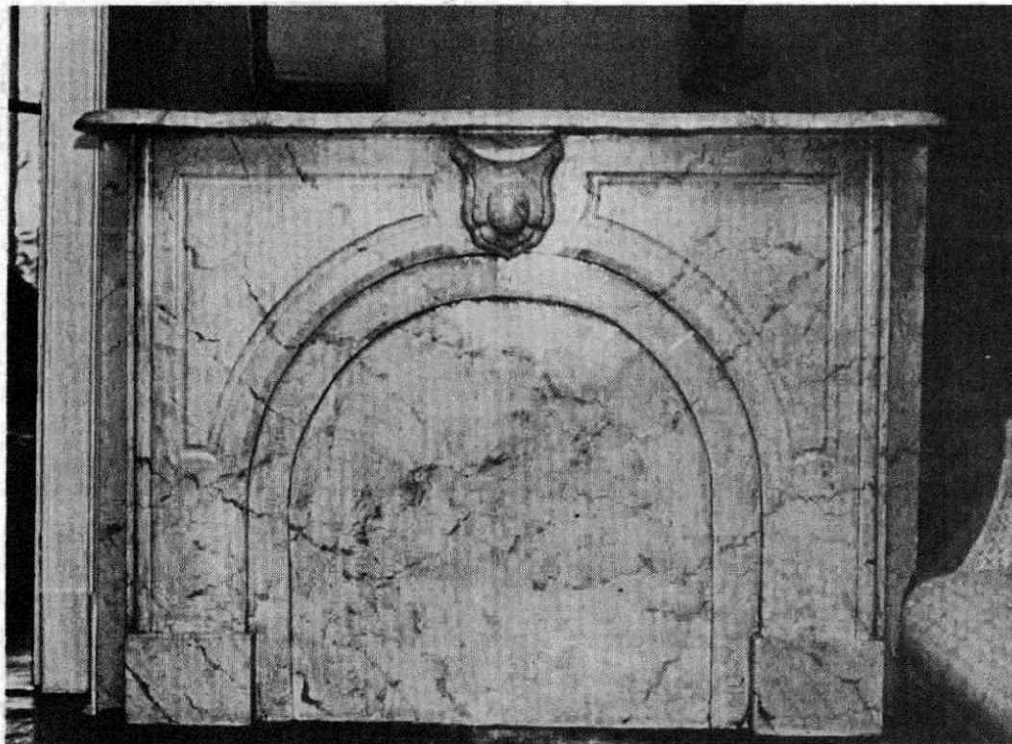
To satisfy Ripley's taste for the desk, Fauntleroy developed three marbled samples for the secretary's selection, with Ripley finally choosing a brown-tone piece.

Scagliola, usually applied over wood to simulate marble, is a process that "goes back to the Renaissance. It was defying the gods," Fauntleroy said.

The process requires use of about 15 colors used in oil- or milk-based paints, the artist explained. To create the appearance of marble, he also uses torn-up linen sheets, pieces of corncob and sewing thread to create more dramatic effects.

Sewing thread, Fauntleroy said, pointing to a sample in his workshop, is dropped on the surface and quickly picked up to create the look of fractures in natural marble.

Linen and pieces of corncob dabbed on the surface also create patterns found in the stone, he said.



James Fauntleroy restored this fireplace in an 1880s house in Frederick, along with the "Oriental rug" ceiling stencil.

Fauntleroy also sometimes works as a grainer, painting a false wood grain on surfaces.

Another medium in which the artist often works is the ancient craft of gilding—applying microscopically thin sections of nearly pure gold to signs and picture frames, among other items. The gold leaf used, he said, is hand-hammered between sections of animal skins to a thickness of just 1/300,000th of an inch—so thin that it is transparent.

Recently, while trying to gild a piece of plexiglass at the Smithsonian, Fauntleroy discovered "it wouldn't take."

After conferring with a Smithsonian researcher, he said it was discovered that plexiglass has a different surface tension from glass.

The researcher suggested that Fauntleroy add two drops of dish detergent to the gilding solution, a step that solved the problem and was written into the Smithsonian's computer records in case a similar problem again surfaces.

A native of Northeast Washington, Fauntleroy moved his one-man operation from Kensington to Brunswick, a small Frederick County town on the banks of the Potomac River, a dozen years ago.

Completing much of his work in a small design studio

and a woodworking shop adjacent to his century-old house, Fauntleroy is rarely without some project in the works.

Occasionally, however, he admits to undertaking far less challenging tasks, such as pinstriping trucks or building decks, to stay busy.

Items displayed throughout Fauntleroy's home and studio highlight work completed during his career, which spans more than three decades.

A large standing cow resembling a longhorn steer peers at visitors entering the dining room. The cow, one of seven created by the artist for a 1983 Library of Congress exhibit, "The American Cowboy," was built of redwood and masonite so that it was light enough to be easily transported to other exhibit sites, he explained.

Another leftover from a Library of Congress exhibit, a Royal Crown Cola billboard that Fauntleroy patterned after a 1930s soda bottle, hangs in his garage.

Next to it is the artist's "pride and joy"—a 1973 Harley-Davidson motorcycle, also decorated with his stencil art.

A Victorian gazebo gracing the artist's back yard appears to be an original outbuilding of his circa-1890 home.

However, the structure is just eight years old, designed and built by Fauntleroy after Victorian gingerbread trim he sketched in the area.

On occasion, Fauntleroy works on projects with his wife, Susan.

A large avant-garde painting, a collaboration by the couple, hangs in the garage.

Susan Fauntleroy, who is mayor of Brunswick, was also hired by the Smithsonian several years ago to clean the sarcophagus of James Smithson, the institution's founder, her husband said.

The task required extensive research to discover the proper acid mixture that would dissolve oxides on the surface without damaging the stone, Fauntleroy said.

His wife applied a South American carnauba wax to the cleaned sarcophagus for added protection.

Fauntleroy—who began his career painting sales signs such as "tennis shoes—\$7.99. I could do 70 or 80 a day."—eventually gravitated to more sophisticated work.

"I was a good listener," he said, "and always curious about materials and technique. That has to rub off if you want to try and improve your work."

