



Rollie the Golden Retriever relaxes on a floorcloth in Lisa Curry Mair's Vermont studio.

EQ

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Traditional Styles are Young Again

BY BETSY STEIN

In the creation of EQ magazine, our editors visit many traditional New England homes, and we have always been drawn to two interesting design elements we've seen used

to dramatic effect. One is the strikingly bold geometric patterns on floors that somehow manage to feel both uniquely modern and historically traditional at the same time. Another is the folk-art-style murals on

the walls of historic homes that often represent a vision of the property from years past. We found that many of these décor elements originated from the same artist, **LISA CURRY MAIR**, at her Weathersfield, Vermont,



Lisa and Rollie; the sun-filled upstairs studio (Far right).



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farm and studio. Mair is a throwback to earlier times. Her paintings are made as they would have been hundreds of years ago—one painstakingly slow step at a time. Since 1994 she has created countless paintings which have made their way all over North America. They can be found in private homes, historic museums, and featured in publications such as *The Boston Globe Magazine*, *Country Living*, *Old House Journal*, *The Chronicle of the Horse*, *The Miami Herald*, and *The Washington Post*.

The dirt road to the Mair house crosses a typical Vermont covered bridge and passes by neighboring farms, whose chickens scatter at approaching cars. The oldest part of Lisa's house was originally part of the Henry Gould Farm, a dairy farm of about 200 acres. The house was built around 1790 and sits at the base of Vermont's picturesque Mount Ascutney.

The home was expanded into the existing farmhouse and carriage house (now the studio with a huge table) in 1840. In 2012, Lisa added a new garage and her sunshine-filled upstairs studio (above, right).

It seems that art is part of the home's past as well its present. In the 1970s, portrait painter, H. Thomas Clark lived in the house and turned the carriage-house wing into a painting studio.



The Henry Gould Farm, in Weathersfield, Vt.

When Lisa purchased the house in 1994, the studio had been converted into an apartment. "We converted it back to a studio in 1999, and in the construction we found one of Clark's painting in the attic crawl space," Lisa explained.

In the carriage-house wing of the Gould farmhouse is Canvasworks Studio, Lisa Curry Mair's primary workspace. With Rollie the Golden Retriever at her feet, Lisa discussed her art:

What are floorcloths?

Floorcloths, also known, historically, as "oylcloths," have been used in homes in this country since the late 17th century.

Worn sails from ships were used to create floor coverings, and they were popular in New England's coastal towns where sails were readily available. They were stenciled with repeating designs or painted to imitate carpet or marble floors.

In the 1800s, floorcloths were being manufactured up and down the east coast on an industrial scale, but when linoleum was patented in 1869, floorcloth began to be replaced.

A resurgence of floorcloths started in the 1970s, and now they have resumed popularity worldwide. Today they are frequently recommended by designers as a fantastic style statement, with a uniqueness often sought for distinctive homes.

Do they have any advantages over carpets?

Today many homeowners are getting rid of their wall to wall carpets for various reasons such as toxicity, lack of durability, and difficulty cleaning. Floorcloths are becoming very popular in the place of carpets, with durability, ease of cleaning (just damp mop), and the ability to customize size, design, and colors to suit any situation.

Where do your designs originate?

My designs are often from historical sources. I offer research services to museums and historic sites and owners of period and/or reproduction homes to ensure designs that are appropriate to the period being represented.

I also create original floorcloth designs, drawing from traditional sources and incorporating my own 21st century subtleties and motifs. My customers often offer the best new design ideas. They will ask me to meld multiple aspects of designs into one, sometimes incorporating specific details pertaining to their own lifestyles and interests. I work closely with each customer through site visits, telephone conferences, and sharing photo images to create the perfect floorcloth or mural design for them.



Are the designs available online, or are they all custom?

Many of my designs are available for viewing online and can be ordered directly from my website. However, most clients prefer to customize their floorcloths with specific colors, sizes, and design adjustments. I rarely make the same floorcloth twice.

Tell us about your wall murals.

My murals and commissioned paintings are created in a folk-art style reminiscent of Rufus Porter (of 19th century New England). I usually use scenes from historical records of a specific home, farm, town, or area and develop an idea which will visually take the room back in time. I meet with the client on site, online, or on the phone to get a good idea of their desires for the project. They supply me with as much historical information, photographs, and resources as possible before I begin to create a sketch of the mural. These begin as pen-and-ink drawings and proceed to a full-color painting on canvas. I can also demonstrate how the finished mural will look on the walls of the room using digital photo-editing software.

After the client approves the final design, I paint the mural in my studio on 100 percent cotton canvas using fade-resistant acrylic paints.

When the mural is complete it is shipped to the home and professionally installed using heavy-duty wallpaper paste. The canvas murals can be removed at a later date and rehung in a different location.

I have had people ask me to make canvases for their antique sleigh, for their refrigerator,



I love living in and working from an old farmhouse, and I love having my horses and dog right here.

for their boat, elevator, or fire board and to cover a table. Paint on canvas is wonderful because you can apply it to just about anything. It's tough, strong, and flexible, so it works great.

How would someone commission you to create a mural?

Interested people can call or email me to set up a meeting to start the mural design process. I don't need to go to the home, but I prefer being able to meet the customers face-to-face and to see the actual space where the mural will hang.

Do you do everything yourself?

I have part-time help with the floorcloth side of the business. Theresa Hooker has been preparing my floorcloth canvases for five years and does a phenomenal job shrinking and priming canvas and sewing hems. My husband, Bart, helps me hang 400-pound bolts of canvas and listens to my artistic woes. He's also the farm's manure-maneuverer, fence-fixer, and shavings-and-feed-fetcher.

And of course, Rollie keeps me smiling, and reminds me to take breaks, by requesting walks at regular intervals! The horses help with that too.



Horses are part of your life. And designs?

I started making and selling floorcloths to help pay for my horse habit. After 20 years, it's a good thing the business has grown, because my dressage habit has as well. My daughter, Lauren, also rides and competes in the eventing world, so Canvasworks has had to double up to cover her expenses as well.

Horses are a huge part of my designs, particularly in the folk-art pieces. I usually show them standing peacefully in a field in my paintings. That's probably because every time I look out any of my studio windows, I see my gang grazing peacefully in our stone-wall lined

pasture. The horses ground me and keep me in touch with the history I am trying to recreate in my artwork. After a busy day, I walk 100 yards to my barn, tack up Williamsburg (Willy) and proceed to unwind. Mucking out stalls in the morning is one of my best creative thinking times. I suspect there would be far fewer new designs if I didn't have my muck time!

Your life and home look idyllic.

I love living in and working from an old farmhouse, and I love having my horses and dog right here. My husband and daughter seem to think that I need to get out more! Some weeks I will not leave the property for six days straight. I don't see anything wrong with that, but they seem to think it's abnormal. The internet allows me to do most of my research online, although I do travel to historic sites throughout the country to get the most accurate historical information for those projects. I also travel to homes when necessary to help with mural and floorcloth installations.

I enjoy showing visitors around my studio and home, and often do that once a week or so.

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Lorna Brittan is redoing the antique home she purchased from actor Charles Bronson. She commissioned Lisa to create a mural in the dining room that celebrates how she imagines the property appeared a hundred years ago.