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As Good as Old

Scratching, Scraping and Faking One's Way Toward a House That Feels Historic

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They say that a marked age difference shouldn't get in the way of a good relationship. But what are you supposed to do when your heart is 100 years older than your house?

Perhaps your personal muses are a band of English painters from the 1880s, but your living room is a boring, builder-grade white box from the 1980s. Or you look at your unblemished, shiny wood floors and secretly wish they bore the scratches and scars of hard use. Or maybe the previous owner of your century-old rowhouse put up an unsightly popcorn ceiling, instead of the glorious -- and contemporaneous -- tin ceiling that you feel the house deserves.

People who live in older homes, where decades (or even centuries) of wear and tear have taken their toll, can always

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renovate: a word that comes, after all, from the Latin *re + novare* , "to make new."

But how do you make the new seem *old* ? In a city as rich with tradition as ours, it should come as no surprise that there are people who want to do just that: to give their floors, walls and ceilings the patina of age -- and with it, the suggestion of a long and interesting history.

Ellen Eanet is one of these people. The costume designer and native Washingtonian has always loved the art and artists associated with the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic movements, which emerged in late-19th-century London and celebrated beauty and sensuality above all else. Among her favorite artists from the period is James McNeill Whistler, who painted and decorated the Peacock Room, a fixture inside the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery of Art for more than 80 years.

"I've loved that room my entire life," says Eanet. "It transports me to another era." The extravagantly decorated dining room, whose walls and ceiling were painted by Whistler in 1876-77, was brought over from England by Charles Lang Freer and installed in the museum shortly after his death. For Eanet it has been a constant source of personal and professional inspiration.



A living room faux-finished to evoke 19th-century style. (Michael Temchine - for The Washington Post)

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How hard it was, then, for Eanet to sit for more than 20 years in the living room of her 1980s residence near Chevy Chase Circle in Northwest, a dishwater-dull space with no architectural details that "was painted builder's white when we moved in, and that stayed builder's white until 2004," she says. "I didn't like it. I didn't have any sorts of glowing, warm feelings about it. I just felt nothing, no connection at all."

And so, armed with a coffee-table book filled with paintings by the Pre-Raphaelite artist John William Waterhouse, Eanet approached Cheryl Campbell, whose Washington-based company, Urban Revivals, exists to help area homeowners sensitively restore their older homes -- or, in cases like Eanet's, create the illusion of age using architectural and painterly tricks that fall under the category known as "faux finishing."

To achieve a slightly mottled, almost skylike effect, Campbell applied gray and green paints to the ceiling with sponges and rollers of different sizes and textures, then subtly marbled the result by hand. Next she created a "frame" on the ceiling out of trim with a gilded bamboo pattern, evocative of 19th-century British colonial styles; around that she placed a border of Anaglypta, a heavily embossed wallpaper that was popular in England during the Victorian era. Below that, yet another band of walnut-colored trim (cross-hatched, by hand, to give it added character) rests atop walls that were once blank slates but that now resemble old Venetian plaster -- thanks to a faux-finishing technique that calls for paint to be applied with a trowel rather than a brush.

Eanet, who used to avoid spending time in her own living room, now sits in it every morning, drinking her coffee and meditating. The different finishes and elements have taken the room back in time, she says, "to an era that I like, an era that I feel really good about. Now when I sit in that room, I feel cozy."

Floors, too, can be antiqued using a variety of different methods.

Sprigg Lynn, whose company, Universal Floors, has been servicing the Washington area's hardwoods for more than 50 years, recalls being asked by one customer with newish floors and a grand fireplace if he could make it look as if the hearthside planks had endured a century's worth of popping embers. (A soldering iron did the trick.) "We've taken wire coat hangers, that top part that squiggles around, and straightened it out and beaten it right into the floor to make a wormhole," says Lynn, describing another technique to age floors. "We've applied lye soap to floors, then gone over them with a wire brush -- it takes away that fresh, new look."

Suffice it to say that this is not what most customers want in a refinishing job, and Lynn acknowledges that requests for such artificial weathering are relatively rare. But they're getting less so, he notes.

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