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Stepping out for art under foot

By Nicole Swengley

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The ancient Egyptians enjoyed them. And they were all the rage in Italy during the Renaissance. Now 21st-century home-owners, too, are succumbing to the charm of decorated floors.

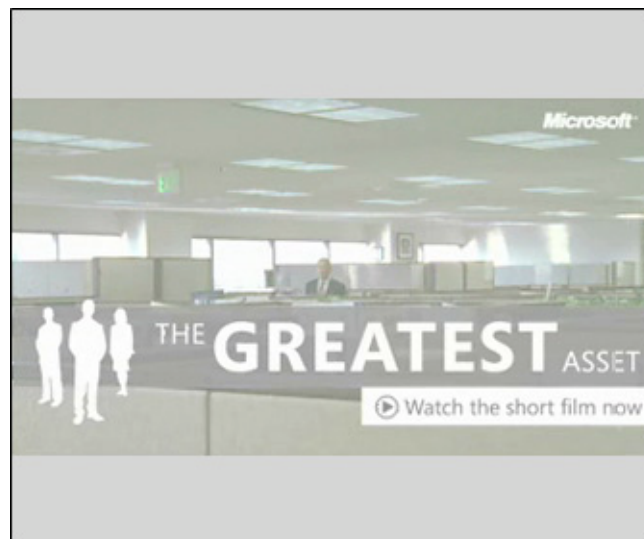
“Commissioning a bespoke, hand-painted floor is a way of putting a very personal, unique stamp on your property,” says Liam Hennessy, managing director of Ebony & Co, a specialist in hand-crafted, solid wood floors. The company, which has showrooms in New York, London, Amsterdam, Moscow, Copenhagen and Dublin, has recently met several requests from clients for painted floors. The designs are created by Gilles Giacomotti, a trained interior designer and graduate of decorative painting at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris, who then hand-paints them on to the installed floors.

One of his first commissions was to paint the living room and hallway floors of a Manhattan brownstone house. A classical-contemporary design was chosen to offset the elegant, pale interior; a series of octagonal medallions give the maple floorboards an inlaid, parquet effect. Further commissions included an upbeat red-, green- and ochre-chequerboard floor in a brownstone off Broadway, a saffron-coloured floor with an energetic orange and green filigree design in a Park Avenue apartment and an elaborately bordered blue-grey floor for a traditionally decorated interior in a modern penthouse in Moscow.

These creations don't come cheap. Ebony & Co charges from £150 to £250 per sq metre for hand-painting on top of the £75 per sq metre it costs for the floor itself – and you can't take it with you when you move. So the commissioning process includes a fair amount of hand-holding. Initial sketches based on a client's ideas – or suggestions from the artist – progress to computer-generated images and then to 3ft by 2ft wooden panels painted with the design before any work begins. “One client saw six different panels before finally deciding which to choose,” Hennessy says.

Giacomotti uses oil- and acrylic-based paints then adds a protective coating of crystal-clear, water-based polyurethane on top of the design. This makes the surface as durable as any other wooden floor and keeps the colours sharp (some protective finishes can alter the depth of colour). Even so, Hennessy warns: “Home-owners

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should address any initial signs of wear immediately so that it doesn't reach the paint level." The company will touch over worn areas with another coat of polyurethane as part of its after-service.

Gracewood Designs, a US floor-treatment specialist, has also found a growing market for hand-painted floors and recently completed a kitchen floor in a modern mansion in San Francisco. "The client wanted to replace the existing floor with a very dramatic artistic statement," says Gwen Jones of Gracewood. "He'd seen a floor-cloth we displayed at an open studio event and loved the design – classic interlocking circles inspired by an authentic, historic floor pattern found in the Isaac Buck house in Hanover, Massachusetts, dating from around 1800. The zigzag border was created by us to match a stove grate pattern."

After an initial site visit, Gracewood tweaked the design and colours then made a sample floor-cloth and created a drawing to show how the pattern would look over the whole floor. When the client gave the go-ahead, "we replaced the kitchen's rubber flooring with wooden floorboards to which we applied three coats of black latex wall paint and then stencilled the central pattern dark grey. The border pattern was stencilled using a glittering, micaceous silver paint. Four coats of floor polyurethane were applied on top and a coat of finishing was applied once the polyurethane was cured. The overall effect is stunning."

Jones estimates the cost of decorating a similar 200 sq ft floor at \$6,000 to \$7,000 depending on preparation and finishing.

Another of Gracewood's commissions involved painting the pine floor of a restored 18th-century farmhouse in Vermont. "Painted floors were quite common in the era when the house was built and the owners wanted period touches incorporated in the restoration," Jones explains. "They chose a classic, black compass rose pattern, 6ft in diameter, which greets guests as they enter the property and provides an arresting view from the landing above the entrance." A similar scheme would cost around \$1,100.

British decorative specialists DKT also has clients opting for hand-painted floors. "It's a way of introducing decoration if the rest of the interior is very minimal," co-director Steve Keeling says.

He finds that geometric and abstract designs are the most popular, although one American client – a keen sailor – commissioned a wooden floor with a blue border of knots for his Victorian townhouse in Belgravia. Another client asked DKT to paint a bathroom floor in a west London house to resemble marble.

Specialist paint finisher Renee Kopal had a similar commission: to paint the dining room floor of an old Norfolk vicarage with what look like Italian tiles. "My client liked the look of tiles but didn't want a cold floor," she explains.

According to Lena Eriksson, owner of London-based interiors company The Swedish Chair, this was a device favoured in Swedish homes in the 18th and 19th centuries when wooden floorboards were painted with a chequerboard effect to resemble tiles. The hallway of her own London house has been painted with yellow-ochre and off-white checks, while she gave the hall in a client's Edwardian house a smart grey-and-white checked floor.

Not all clients, however, want their floors hand-painted with a specific design. Fashion designer Donna Karan has an antique oak floor with a simple white wash in her house in the Hamptons, while a home-owner living in London's Holland Park ordered Ebony & Co floorboards painted black to match the exact shade of his Steinway grand piano.

And anyone who thinks they might tire of a specific design could contact London-based designer Linda Florence, who paints patterns on slate tiles that evolve into different designs as the upper layers wear away. That should certainly qualify as a walk of art.

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