

O breaking the rules

Who Says... Traditional Decorative Arts Can't Be High Tech?

Trompe l'oeil techniques go digital, but the design sensibilities stay connected to a handcrafted past.

EVEN UPON CLOSE INSPECTION, THE FOYER at right appears to be a veritable bacchanal of marquetry, the art of using thinly slivered wood to create designs. Timbered garlands, urns, and flowers decorate every surface. The wealth of woods used is mind-boggling: It includes mahogany, ebony, rosewood, tulipwood, maple, and several varieties of oak. No tree is safe—or so it seems.

The truth comes out when you actually touch the surfaces. *They are seamless and smooth, and that's because they are merely images printed onto veneer bases, sealed and then varnished as the wood itself would have been.* "What used to be hand cut or handpainted, we now create digitally," says Alan Carroll, who, along with his ▶

At last year's Kips Bay Decorator Show House, the firm Decorative Imaging took over a foyer, filling it with its high-tech digital ornamentation. The piece on the right is a radiator cover, with simulated marquetry and neoclassic vignettes printed on premium maple veneer and glued to a plywood box.

photographs by michel arnaud





ABOVE: The designer inserts shadows to give a three-dimensional appearance to the plaster shapes on a ceiling medallion.

RIGHT: This digitally inlaid floor, which is made up of panels in various sizes, employs the same wood tones and textures that would have been used in a 19th-century English house.



partner, Mark Kusek, founded the New York City-based design firm Decorative Imaging. "It's a lot faster and more intricate."

The men choose wood from the thousands of high-resolution textures in their digital library. "We have scans of 600 different sheets of oak," Kusek says. "It's like having a lumberyard in your computer." To simulate a patina, they add layers of computerized grime.

When Carroll and Kusek—who draw by hand, on a computer as well as on paper—come up with a design, they insert a giant sheet of veneer into a top-quality digital printer and then apply a finish, such as shellac or polyurethane, to the print. They create bas-reliefs using a similar technique; for a "raised plaster" medallion, a design is printed onto fire-retardant canvas, which is then mounted to the ceiling as if it were wallpaper.

Decorative Imaging also has developed a line of do-it-yourself flooring components—borders, parquet squares, medallions, and more—that work with any hardwood or laminate flooring. "This will allow you to get a palace floor," Kusek says, "for a fraction of the price." **O**

—Lise Funderburg

Pieced by Piece



When 15th-century Italian cabinetmakers began to apply marquetry to furniture, they used chisels to shape each piece of wood. Today, some forward-thinking craftsmen use computers and lasers to take marquetry in stunningly complex directions. Other artisans, however, have stayed true to the *hand in handcrafted*. At North Carolina-based Baker furniture, on-staff inlayers (as they were called in 18th-century England) still cut and assemble every piece of marquetry by hand. The design of Baker's Demi-Lune console, above, was adapted from a 1780 English commode. (Not surprisingly, the piece retails for \$7,392). The only difference between then and now, says Baker's lead case-goods designer, Shaun Melvin, is that now the veneer is made in an air-conditioned room. *For details, see Shop Guide.*