

MASTER CRAFTSMAN



HEATHER DUNN-KOSTURA FAUX FINISHES

HEATHER DUNN & COMPANY

It's a rare moment when one celebrates the artificial, but a well-considered and beautifully crafted fake can be absolutely essential for completing a room and, by extension, a home.

Whether it's painting a wall, a window frame or fixing a piece of fine furniture, the art of faux finishing is indispensable in any luxury homebuilder or interior designer's toolbox. Think of it as design prosthesis.

Since 1996, Heather Dunn-Kostura of East Hampton's Heather Dunn & Company has been applying masterful faux finishes to houses and businesses from Montauk to Manhattan. Working with her husband Richard

"You have to approach [a project] like it's brand new every single time," she explains. "A high level of humility is really, really important...the process is always different."

Kostura, the duo has proven they can accomplish just about any task they're given—and that's no easy feat.

"I take things and make them look like something they're not," Dunn-Kostura says, describing her work in the simplest terms. From basic jobs—such as matching an outlet to a stone or wood wall—to intricately rendered murals and theme rooms, the local artisan says each project offers its own set of difficulties, even if she's done it a hundred times before.

"I'm always up for a challenge," Dunn-Kostura says, noting that location, humidity, individual surfaces and dozens of other factors can affect the way she achieves her final result. "You have to approach [a project] like it's brand new every single time," she explains. "A high level of humility is really, really important...the process is always different."

Dunn-Kostura is a natural when it comes to faux finishing and the related work she does, but it took some time to find her niche. She painted houses and waitressed in college before becoming a business agent for a healthcare industry union.

After a couple years, Dunn-Kostura found herself in desperate need of a career change. "I wasn't happy," she says, explaining why she walked away from her job, went back to painting and waiting tables, and enrolled in school to learn the art of faux finishing.

"I spent every penny I had to pay tuition," Dunn-Kostura recalls, but she quickly found her risky decision to be the right one. "I had a knack for it," she says, pointing out her surprise at the time. "I went through life with no idea I had an artistic bone in my body."



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In short order, Dunn-Kostura completed her training and went to work in 1996, first out of Huntington Village before eventually moving with her husband to East Hampton in 2005. These days, the woman who never saw herself as an artist even creates paintings on canvas—a far cry from the life she'd imagined during her days with the union.

“Now my husband and I do everything ourselves—I love it,” Dunn-Kostura says, explaining that Heather Dunn & Co. has actually shrunk in terms of employees and manpower over the last two decades, but the business is flourishing.

The small company has a loyal clientele, including celebrities such as Justin Timberlake and Alec and Hilaria Baldwin, who provide them with an increasingly diverse array of projects. “I find you have to be about what the client wants, what the decorator wants,” Dunn-Kostura says.

Heather Dunn & Co. is in hot demand for all kinds of jobs and they've learned to deliver. “We'll paint anything,” Dunn-Kostura says, listing a skull-and-crossbones patterned car hood among her more unusual commissions. It required a special type of paint that would look good and remain strong during the normal wear and tear a car experiences.

Other endeavors include an electrical box made to look like the colorful mosaic surrounding it, doors, crown molding, stencil work, ceiling tiles, outdoor sculpture, sign and furniture restoration, lamps, boat lettering, fireplaces,

mirror and picture frames, and just about anything one could imagine. She makes new things look old and old things look brand new.

Dunn-Kostura is also an expert at Venetian plaster—a three-dimensional wall finish offering a classic European look and feel—and she recently added wallpaper installation to Heather Dunn & Co.'s list of services. They've created about a half-dozen available wallpaper designs so far. Or, for the wallpaper averse, Dunn-Kostura can use stencils and hand painting to make a wall appear covered in paper or fabric. “Some people just really hate wallpaper,” she says.

Painting comprises the bulk of her work, but Dunn-Kostura must be flexible in her approach, whether that means ripping apart an old deck to find well-worn wood, or shopping at “funky antique places” to acquire the perfect accoutrement for an installation. It could take months to perfectly match a requested finish or design, painted or otherwise.

She acknowledges that the work requires an inordinate amount of patience and a bit of a compulsive streak, but Dunn-Kostura is entirely suited for it. “I intuitively mix colors and match colors...I never know how I do it,” she says, noting that her memory for such things is uncanny despite never keeping recipes.

“If you set your mind to it, you can pretty much do anything,” Dunn-Kostura points out. Besides, she adds later, “I found my passion—I love what I do.”

—Oliver Peterson