



MASTER CRAFTSMAN

MASTER CRAFTSMAN CHARLES WILDBANK, PAINTER

The practice of bringing homes to life with vibrant art is a practice as old as man's need to seek shelter. From parietal art adorning prehistoric cave dwellings in Lascaux, France, to the wet-plaster frescoes of civilizations throughout the world, humans have always decorated the spaces in which we live. Many would argue that art within a home is the ultimate expression of its owner.

Jamesport painter Charles Wildbank embraces this historic paradigm, creating massive, photorealistic and often surreal pieces of art for the walls of luxury residences all over the East End. The artist makes works to fit any size home, but he most resembles his archaic forebears with the colossally scaled murals.

His most viewed of these titanic pieces are a pair of 19' x 10' paintings in Britain's mighty RMS *Queen Mary 2* (QM2) cruise ship. A commission



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from Cunard Line, they demonstrate Wildbank's talent for owning a space and making just about anything a client might want. He's done the same for many fine East End homes on both walls and ceilings.

“I usually paint on canvas so you can move it—people move every 10 years on average,” the artist explains, noting that these large canvases can be stretched on a frame or applied directly to a wall. Even better, he says, painting on perfectly sized wood panels allows for easy install and attractive presentation. One large piece can be split between several panels, fit through the door, and then seamlessly reconstructed inside a home.

Wildbank works in a home studio that would appear too small for the huge paintings he loves to create, but he's devised a number of techniques to make it possible. The monumental woodland scenes for the QM2, for example, were painted inside his living room, rolled and sent to Europe where Cunard's architect installed them on the ship.

“My ceilings are 19 feet high, so it fits,” Wildbank says, describing how he set up a scaffold and used a heavy-duty, inflammable Trevira canvas—which is a good idea for any mural. “It was so big I had to prime it on the street,” he continues. “You paint from left to right and you roll it out if you don't have that much space.”

Art comes naturally to Wildbank; he's honed his craft and the ability to perfectly recreate photographic images over more than four decades as a professional fine artist. “I think I did it all my life, using my photographs

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as a model, and I enjoyed it for a long time—then I wanted to start using my imagination,” he recalls.

While Wildbank can, and still does, paint photorealistic works featuring arrangements of objects, human and pet portraits, figurative scenes and landscapes, he’s taken to exploring more surreal and expressive applications. These new paintings access his skill for photorealism, but instead of simply recreating things from real life, Wildbank is putting his own spin on the work.

His recent paintings of cakes and sweets include realistic images of the colorful treats—now, however, Wildbank is painting ants into the pictures. His “Urban Delight” places ants in what appears to be a cityscape of rectangular white cakes covered in rainbow sprinkles.

Using a similar mindset, the artist has numerous works with compositions of water and waves. His 180-inch “Wave Panoramic” is a beautiful demonstration of this melding of real and imagined. In it, he takes a striking wave-scape and boosts it with fanciful curves that sit teetering on the edge of reality.

“When people ask me what I paint—I paint life,” Wildbank says, pointing out that the surreal is part of it. As a way of staying grounded while also delving deeper into his mind’s eye, he began meditating, and it opened him to new possibilities in the studio. “As I approached my late 40s and 50s, I noticed a lot of mental dialogue, even arguing going on,” Wildbank says, explaining that the practice allowed him to step outside his box and reevaluate his approach to painting and life.

He also came to realize that painting is also a meditative process. “The more you sink into it, the more that comes out of the woodwork,” Wildbank says. “The process of painting draws out what’s inside of you and there’s no limit to it.”

Wildbank is rare among painters because he’s gifted at both the making and business of art. He’s keenly aware of the effect a good painting has on a home, especially a home that’s for sale, and he’s lent his work to architects, home stagers and realtors for that reason. A house featuring about a dozen of his artworks recently sold for \$7.95 million in Water Mill, and it’s very likely the paintings helped close the deal.

“The architect was really pleased with the difference,” Wildbank says, describing the property after his paintings were installed. “It puts a flavor in each room,” he explains during a tour of the home. “You remember which room you just left,” Wildbank adds. “It’s more inviting—people feel comfortable and stay in here longer.”

For Wildbank, art makes the home—and the bigger the better. “It sets the vibe, the tone of the room—the ambiance,” he says. “When the painting has been removed, they realize what they’ve been missing.”

- Oliver Peterson

