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The Rare Art of Deluxe Decor

By Richard Nalley

A CIRCLING ZODIAC OF GOLDEN STARS BEAMS FROM THE MIDNIGHT-BLUE ceiling of the Albertine Books reading room, opened last September in the French Embassy on Fifth Avenue in New York. The effect is kinetic, dazzling: a mural—or is it a fresco?—that bends like the night horizon to the tops of the richly gilt-trimmed mahogany bookcases.

Except...it's not a mural, exactly. And despite the look of texture and depth, there's no plaster up there. There's no gilt or mahogany on the bookcases, either. And the spray of stars achieves its eye-roaming luster from a few scattered gold-leaf novae amid others merely painted gold.

"Partly, that was a question of funds," explains Philippe Courtois, 42, the CEO and impresario of Atelier Premiere, the New York-based branch of a high-end, semi-medieval French decorative-arts company, Atelier Méridet-Carrère, headed by his brother Antoine. Philippe's team of 50 artisans and apprentices, schooled in Old World skills—preppers, decorative painters, figurative painters, gilders, plasterers—have descended on homes and private airplanes, and on places as diverse as the White House (they repainted, repapered, and refurbished the Oval Office in 2011) and a yacht in Florida, with neoclassical landscape murals painted around the master bathtub, and walls and furniture sheathed in gold leaf.

The Albertine bookshop commission came via its designer, Jacques Garcia, a longtime collaborator of the brothers Courtois. Though Atelier Premiere is not typically engaged by budget-minded clients, Philippe relishes the ingenuity required to bring the Albertine work in on the numbers.

The central zodiac ceiling panel was executed in Atelier's studio in Harlem—wet paint and dusty construction sites don't work well together—and then affixed to the Albertine's ceiling. Its apparent depth and texture is created by an exuberant laying on of different paint effects, including sponging and bold brush strokes. The deep,

gleaming "mahogany" of the plain-wood bookcases came from stain and a wax satin finish rather than the pricey, multi-layer varnish process Atelier Premiere is known for. The moldings and trim are faux brass (another effect), and even the inset "panels" on the walls and doors turn out, upon closer inspection, to be painted.

The finished product at the French Embassy bookshop is a jewel box, and in its way a metaphor for the "hands across the water" approach that has served Atelier Premiere so well: "We are an American company with French skills," states Courtois, whose New York-based artisans at this point are in fact mostly Americans, the long-term employees now handing down the skills they learned from the French crew that founded the stateside company 10 years ago.

"They are really the old-fashioned school of an atelier, of apprenticeships," says interior designer Frank de Biasi, who has

collaborated with the Courtois brothers for 20 years. "People move up the ranks according to their skill levels; you just don't see that kind of thing here."

And the U.S. has proved to be a target-rich environment. "I don't want to do social studies," Courtois says. "But in America, people really give a lot of importance to their homes, and they really don't want to have the same thing as the next person."

For example: a house currently under way in Long Island, where Atelier Premiere is painting *faux pierre* (false stonework) in the entry, doing metallic leafing on the ceilings and on the capitals of columns, and executing French Empire murals ("like the Château de Malmaison") on the walls.

For example: an apartment just completed on Fifth Avenue, whose art-collector owners wanted "exquisite and refined" finishes on the walls behind the artworks. Atelier Premiere did all of the private rooms with a "French polish." The process, essentially a high-cabinetry furniture finish, involves laying down a coat of varnish, letting it dry, then returning to painstakingly remove with water and thin sandpaper any dust or particles that may have accumulated, and then laying down another coat of varnish—10 times. This can run up a tab. A French polish will add somewhere between \$30 to \$100 per square foot to your renovation bill, versus, say, \$3 to \$5 per square foot for a standard paint job.

Notes Courtois: "Somebody who doesn't appreciate these things can just walk through the rooms without noticing, but if you stop and look, it's something that's amazing. It takes months to have that kind of result, even though it's just a solid paint color."

To stay a step ahead of the demanding designers who recommend the company's services to their clients—names like Garcia, Jacques Grange, Juan Pablo Molyneux, and Peter Marino—the Ateliers maintain a research-and-development facility in Paris. Some of the results are literally cutting edge, like a laser-cut process for gilded leather; others are so old, they are new again. "They come back to me with ideas I'd never even thought of," says de Biasi, "with techniques from the 18th and 19th centuries. And that's the interesting part about what they do: It's fresh and new because we've never seen it." ■

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The Albertine reading room at the French Embassy in New York, where *trompe l'oeil* effects dazzle the eye.

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