



Keep it simple

Interview with Philippe Courtois of Atelier-Premiere



The Atelier-Premiere

9 JUL 2016 by NOELLE NEWELL

"New York is where everything is talking to us and propelling us forward." - Philippe Courtois

Welcome to Saint Nicholas Historic District and Striver's Row in Harlem. I'm blown away by a beautiful row of townhouses designed by Stanford White. In one of them we find the office of Atelier-Premiere decorative painting company and quite possibly America's finest. Here I met with Philippe Courtois who moved here from Paris with his wife and three children three years ago. They had originally purchased their light-filled Harlem townhouse ten years ago as accommodations for their artisans while working on projects based in New York. I always admired this enclave of New York where low buildings allow for an open sky - a rarity in New York and many a city where sadly buildings tend to be overreaching in their verticality. Jazzy, their adorable Pomeranian, greeted me at the door. Philippe spearheads the New York office with inspiring finesse, the space is as physically organized as their business procedures. I was delighted to find on a shelf little tidbits of curious finds from a by-gone era such as a 1920's lunch box, and an old architectural model that add a little charm and perhaps inspiration. The office is reminiscent of many offices today with its clean desks and computers. The difference here is we find samples of decorative painting finishes, neatly organized in boxes tagged with clients' names on each secured by a big clip, a book shelf with paint supplies, and more samples leaning against the wall above a desk.



On the street

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Atelier-Premiere has A-list clientele such as; Jacques Grange, Jacques Garcia, Studio KO, Jamie Drake, Peter Marino, Brian Mac Carthy, Victoria Hagan, Frank de Biasi, Louis Lisboa, Michael Smith and Alexandra Champalimaud. It is a firm of fifty people who specialize in faux finishes such as; patina, gilding, plasters, parchment, murals, églomisés and more. Murals are created off-site. The murals are painted on very thin canvases, carefully cut out with surgical knives, and then carefully mounted to walls and ceilings. The edges are finished on site and no one knows that they weren't directly painted to the wall or ceiling. As Thomas Friedman said, "The world is flat." Business takes Atelier-Premiere to the most exquisite projects in New York, Hamptons, Greenwich, Florida and California and to destinations in South America.

Atelier-Premiere is a thriving business for many reasons, such as Philippe's ability to pair top-notch European artisan skills of yesteryear with today's innovation. It appears to me that he has integrated Art and business so well that they are one. The members of his team comes from more than twenty countries and they are very experienced and talented. Despite their talent they remain humble and respectful, and open to changing the way they work by learning Atelier-Premiere's process. Like the hands of a clock, two teams work together, - one following the other. The finish dries quickly and this method avoids start and stop lines. His staff has stayed a long time with him something - that we don't see so much stateside, where talent frequently moves on after a couple of years. Consistency is a trademark enjoyed by all concerned, from employees to clients. Because the projects are in such wonderful places his employees are more likely to stay. The studio - once in the Harlem townhouse - is now in a separate adjacent building and it is here where orders for samples of custom finishes are created. Requests are clipped similar to meal orders in a restaurant kitchens. Two employees are dedicated to research, and development, and bulk of the work is done on site with the exception of murals. The design of the future is an optimistic one as Atelier-Premiere embraces today's technology by utilizing a 3 D printer to create new wall finishes that will raise the interior experience to a new level. Contemporary resins are mixed with stone powders to create decorative plaster for - their Artisone collection. The material is strong and fireproof without chemical emission.

In a recent project with Studio KO for Balmain's new flagship store in Soho - Atelier-Premiere created an exposed concrete look for the window display. Philippe explains that thirty or more years ago the texture of wood would leave behind a bit of an impression of its grain onto the concrete and this was the effect they were after. It's evident to me that he really enjoyed the process of creating this speciality finish and he seems to like texture a lot. I learned that today contemporary decorative painting is more about texture, where as before it was more about faux finishes. During my visit to Philippe's office, he shared that he is working on the most expensive house for sale in United States. It is his most spectacular current project - the Palais Royal in Florida. The photos I saw of this lavish villa were reminiscent of over-the-top French Riviera villas of the 19th century in all their splendor and grandeur - beautiful gilded mouldings done most tastefully, murals and faux marble that feels like real marble because of its French polished finish. I appreciate the delicateness of this exquisite craftsmanship and I see that this residence is fit for royalty or anyone who wishes to live with exceptional refinement that beckons the gilded age. He relishes each project since they are all so different and he takes delight that business has permitted him to be a part of creating beauty in this world of the most beautiful interiors here and abroad.

Philippe got his start in the late 1990's with a Paris - based company that specialized in murals and very large - scale outdoor paintings. This company had been combined with a very old Parisian decorative painting studio called Benard & Daugert. It was here that he acquired the benefit and privilege to work with one of the last and very best French old school decorative painters ever - Jacques Daugert. Daugert taught Philippe a lot of varied techniques - especially water colors, - how to look at an interior or - a finish, and how to use

his eye. Philippe recognizes how lucky he was to have this opportunity.

The show must go on

Coming to New York has had its challenges and I asked him to share his thoughts and his observations of the contrasts between Paris and New York. I can only imagine how difficult it is to move an entire family of five to a new country. He says life is very different in New York compared to Paris and these differences can be tough.

In Paris, his residential and historical projects tend to be very classical. When he's in France, he enjoys revisiting historical places such as palaces and castles. He focuses his attention on the details and the finishes. From a design perspective, he finds that Paris tends to be more classical and conservative than New York. In New York, he finds it's about new experiences and creativity. He has wisely observed that in New York everyone is taking note of whatever someone else is doing. He's got the right perspective with the show-must-go-on willingness to carry on. He and his wife Amandine are enthusiastic about their approach to incorporating their new experiences in the process of adapting to their new home. Philippe is energized and open to discovery of what could be interesting, and in this process he keeps his client wishes in mind. He notes that interior design is taken seriously in New York. People care how about how their interior design style will reflect on them socially. They want the very best quality and this is a creative push for Philippe. He adds if New Yorkers trust you, they let you work freely. I think Philippe is a keen observer. He describes New York so well in this one very sentence; "New York is where everything is talking to us and propelling us forward." He elaborates by noting the energy of New York: - its diversity, its visual Arts from the street to the museum, its music. He tells me that Harlem is more about music than anywhere else. He shared that some of his best inspiration comes from his museum visits to the MOMA, Whitney and in particular the Cooper Hewitt. Yet, it could be a texture in the street that catches his eye, or a graphic pattern in a magazine that he documents with his iPhone, prints it and then hangs it next to his desk. These could be a starting point for a new decorative plaster, a new finish - or anything. He might think about it for weeks and then suddenly makes up a sample in the matter minutes, that expresses exactly what he was looking for. Philippe likes the use of primary colors by painters such as Sonia Delaunay, Henri Matisse and Piet Mondrian. He finds the paintings of living artist and a personal dear friend of his, Caetano de Almeida hypnotic. Philippe is impressed by Frank Stella's; technique of mixing colors, textures, use of cut-outs, 3D printing and his continual changes of styles. Philippe compares Stella's varied work as to having several lives in one. Philippe's collection of lithographs includes the likes of Sonia Delaunay, Valerio Adami, Victor Vasarely, Alexander Calder and Jean Cocteau among others. He appreciates the work of the late interior designer Renzo Mongiardino for his creativity and the way he used decorative painting. The architect he admires most is Antoni Gaudi for his inventiveness and revolutionary architecture.

Phantasmagoric

I asked Philippe what one should not miss on a trip to Paris and it came as a surprise to find a Parisian suggest visiting the tourist neighborhood of the Champs Elysees, yet it isn't without good reason. After all it's a beautiful avenue to be seen and here we find a beacon of refinement and one of my personal favorites the Salon de Thé - Ladurée's at flagship location. Originally, designed by the renowned interior designer Jacques Garcia. Philippe shared that Ladurée's interior really gives the impression of a different time somewhere between 1750-1850. Sadly, it was devastated by a fire eight years ago. When he was with the Paris office - Atelier Mériduet-Carrère he explained to me that they put all of their heart and soul into the decorative painting and gold leafing so that the result is it looks as it was prior to the fire. Their efforts were gratefully appreciated in return by no other than David Holder

of Ladurée. Mériquet continues to work in all the other Ladurée locations.

What could be better than envisioning yourself ensconced in this sumptuous setting enjoying delightful pot of tea, perhaps a floral accented tea named after Marie-Antoinette or une coupe de champagne and the essential macaron. Perhaps - after this necessary indulgence, follow Philippe's very French and phantasmagoric suggestion to visit the Musée de la Chasse in le Marais. Weather permitting, I suggest that you take a leisurely stroll en route through the Tuileries Gardens from Ladurée to le Marais. You could take Metro to Saint Paul - the perfect entry point to this charming quartier of le Marais and the way to the museum at 62 rue des Archives.

High Line

A truly unique way to discover New York, he says, is to walk along the High-Line and take in the ever evolving city, including the completion of Hudson Yard. He recommends taking a look at the convincingly vintage interior decor at Kingside restaurant of the Viceroy Hotel at 120 West 57th Street. Here's a short list of helpful hints and thoughts from Philippe to assist you with your interior projects:

Keep it simple

Slightly mix styles with various periods

Play with light and dark colors

If you wish to give the illusion of height - paint the ceiling a darker color instead of a lighter one.

Finally, do not fall for what looks trendy. - As the French say, "What is trendy is not trendy."

When Philippe isn't working, he's with his family at their country home, a 17th century presbytery outside of Paris, or enjoying sunny summer days with his favorite color blue resembling the skies or sea at their home in Menorca. I find Philippe's work ethic inspiring and I know where I'll be visiting on my next Paris trip.

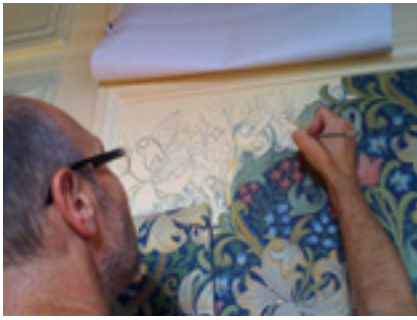


Noelle Newell

Noelle Newell is an interior designer. She believes that Interior design is about cultivating beauty and refinement. She is a Graduate of Curry College and Fashion Institute of Technology. She has also studied at The British Institute of Florence and The Sotheby's Institute of Art, London. Writing allows her to share her passion of the Fine Art of Living with the world at large. [Full profile »](#)

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Captions

1. Philippe Courtois of Atelier-Premiere
2. Decorative painting
3. Beautiful ceiling painting
4. The work of a decorator
5. Leather wallcovering
6. Incisions on leather

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