

FORWARD, INTO THE PAST

The promotional literature on Goldfarb Properties' apartments at 920 Riverside Drive reads like a J. Peterman catalog entry, "...*Aim Higher in Upper Manhattan's Gorgeous Washington Heights Neighborhood. 920 Riverside Drive offers Large, One to Three Bedroom Apartments, Many with Spectacular Views of the Majestic Hudson River and The George Washington Bridge.*"

Sound good? Sure. But just a year ago, the word "gorgeous" might not have been the first thing to come to mind when walking into the lobby. The pre-World War II apartment building was in need of a freshening up and the new owners contacted a local artist and interior remodeler to put the old building in a new light.

That's important for any apartment building, but especially so in a place where hardwood floors, two bedrooms and a view of the river can run around \$2,999 a month.

FOR LOVE OF ART

Jeanne Santomauro-Schnupp is the owner of Jeannie's Designs Inc., an

Jeanne Santomauro-Schnupp of Jeannie's Designs Inc. uses fine detail plaster work and an artist's approach to paint to restore an apartment building on Manhattan's Upper West Side. **By Alex Lundberg**

interior renovation company working in decorative painting, restoration and faux finishing. The Long Island, N.Y.-based contractor has been in the business, in one way or another, for 35 years.

"I got my start as an art teacher and did painting on the side," Schnupp says. "I've always been interested in art."

While taking a break from school to raise a family, she did occasional work running a hand painted clothing business at home while picking up occasional work as a muralist.

After several of her friends saw her work around the house and asked to do work on their homes, she started a new painting business that would cater to homes and businesses of all kinds. It was during this time that she started work

at her local Home Depot teaching people how to do their own work. This was an advantageous time to be working, she said, as it was 30 years ago and the very beginning of the DIY revolution.

Schnupp was doing good work at the store, but her business, by then Jeannie's Designs Inc., was starting to really take off. She continues to study; she's already got some of her artistic education from artists in Europe and has built a business around making her customers happy by bringing their wishes to the walls, as it were, and meeting those needs while also meeting her clients' budgets.

RESTORING A FADED JEWEL

She was contacted by Goldfarb last year to work on the restoration of the Riverside Drive apartment

building near the George Washington Bridge. The grand old building had seen better days and its owners wanted to see those days returned.

“The ceiling was plaster relief and they wanted to see what I could do,” Schnupp says. “There were cracks and the details in the plaster had faded under several layers of paint. There were other parts where the cracks were so extensive that entire pieces had come away and had to be reconstructed from fresh plaster.”

The fine work on the plaster, originally done in 1939, had slowly been worked on over the years with different layers of paint in different color schemes. The upshot is that a lot of the ceiling had been filled in and what had once been intricate work had become nearly flat. The people at Goldfarb wanted it to stand out again.

It wasn’t the first time the company had called her.

“I actually found her on the Internet,” says Goldfarb Senior Vice-President Tim Ross. “I called her to work on a project on the East Side that was very much the same—beautiful reliefs and details that had faded over time.”

The company had hired Schnupp as part of a general restoration of the Riverside Apartments, which they had purchased earlier that year. The company was hitting almost all of the building’s major systems (boilers, elevators, plumbing, intercoms and the front doors, amongst other projects) and the front lobby was of special concern if they were going to keep the building as an attractive place to live.

HARD WORK IN HOT WEATHER

“We wanted to bring back the original look of the building,” Ross says. “There was some cleaning we had to do that hadn’t been done in 50 years.”

Over six weeks of eight- to 10-hour days, Schnupp and a crew of six workers labored to restore the building to its original grandeur. A few of the workers did plaster prep, filling the cracks and using fine tools to recreate what time and wear had destroyed. Later, she and another group of workers did the artistic painting.

“Everything starts with a plan on paper,” she says.





Schnupp said the hardest part was not the plaster work, or the detailed painting or even the task of matching old designs to new materials. The hard part was environmental.

“It was really hard on our necks, those were 10- and 14-foot ceilings,” she says. “There was a heat wave in the city when we were there, 100 degree-plus temperatures

the whole time. I had a fan in a bucket on my scaffold.”

But while she and her employees were painting away in the heat, they got welcome respite in the form of many breaks (about every two hours) and the praise of the people from Goldfarb, the residents of the building and others who were amazed to see the transformation of the old building.

“People would come by and get excited about what we were doing,” Schnupp says. “Even the residents were saying they never saw those details before. They were happy to be living in a beautiful place.”

With their praise, she says, many brought cold drinks.

RIGHT ARTIST FOR THE RIGHT JOB

“She did an incredible job on the plaster relief,” Ross says. “You can see more of the urns, cherubs and fruit than you probably could when the building was new. It was very artistic work. She took plaster reliefs and made them look three-dimensional.”

The company has a lot of properties in Manhattan and employs a lot of workers to keep them up and running for renters. He says that while there are many plasterers and painters around the area, there aren’t many who can do what Schnupp does.

“People who do this kind of work, this kind of detail are not a dime a dozen in the profession,” Ross says. “In the future, if I have plaster work, I would not call anyone else.”

Schnupp is a member of the Professional Decorative Painters’ Association and the International Decorative Artisan’s League. Jeanie’s Designs is registered with the state of New York as a minority-owned business. **W&C**

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