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The Columbian

At Home

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The Green Knight, a mystical and hard-to-kill druidic spirit, stares from a large gesso panel done by CJ Hurley in mixed media including paints, metal and glass.



Portland artist taps into many influences to help homeowners express themselves

By JOHN BRANTON
Columbian staff writer

PORTLAND — With his buzzed scalp and nose ring, artist CJ Hurley is a modern-looking guy, even if he is haunted by the old architectural and home decorative styles of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Take a visit to the solidly built 1913 three-story four-

CJ HURLEY CENTURY ARTS

■ **WHAT:** Portland-based business that produces custom home artwork in several styles.

■ **OWNERS:** CJ Hurley and Barbara Pierce.

■ **ON THE WEB:** www.cjhurley.com.

■ **PHONE:** 503-234-4167.

square or box bungalow that Hurley shares with his wife and business partner, Barbara Pierce, in Portland's historic Laurelhurst neighborhood. You'll find much to charm the eye and intrigue the mind.

The couple are home artists, designers and consultants. Their

home doubles, triples and quadruples as their art studio, business office and showroom, by appointment.

Strikingly rendered on the wall level under the home's high ceilings and crown molding are designs, often in the sinuous curves of the art nouveau style, that Hurley painted

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Hurley's approach to redecorating Home sweet art showcase



Photos by JEREMIAH COUGHLAN/The Columbian

CJ Hurley shows one of his watercolor paintings, this one resembling a stained-glass artwork featuring roses, with an oak frame in the Arts & Crafts style. Roses are a favorite symbol for the Portland-based artist.

The handpainted frieze in the couple's gold-toned front room is based on a Moorish arch with symmetrical designs in the sinuously curving art nouveau style. The lamp, in the same style, is from the 1920s.



The dining room of the 1913 bungalow that Hurley and his wife, Barbara Pierce, share in Portland's historic Laurelhurst neighborhood features a handpainted frieze honoring Portland's roses, frequent gray skies and rain.

Hurley:

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by hand. His philosophy of art allows no stencils, no prints, no copies.

Among their several creations, one of the most time-consuming and costly are handpainted friezes. In their living room, which features antique furnishings and traditional rugs, the frieze paintings are based on a Moorish arch, an interior architectural feature of the home, and what look like symmetrical flowing vines.

You've seen similar elegant and traditional designs before, although perhaps not hand-painted on walls.

Now step into the dining room and you'll see the traditional morph into the neo, the next level, fresh and alive. It's a bit like recalling that many old artists favored excitement and bright color along with their traditional forms.

Or maybe it's realizing that you can do old things in new ways, and vice versa.

In shades both dramatic and subtle — black, green, brick-red, white and gold — the dining room features a wide handpainted frieze depicting stylized roses, a bow to Portland's identity as the Rose City. It also portrays Portland's frequently gray skies and rain.

On the wainscot below are dark panel strip dividers and wall sections painted in dappled shades of gold, both light and dark. It's called a Tiffany finish, almost like lightly tanned leather.

And what are those human-like images that emerge from some wainscot panels like apparitions from a golden fog? As in a half-forgotten memory of an old pagan legend, the images depict anthropomorphic spirits of the rose, said Hurley, whose tastes also draw from the Middle Ages in Britain, including Arthurian legends.

Did we mention that Hurley has studied many artistic styles?

The dining room showcases a wall buffet with stained glass in rose motifs, designed by Hurley and built by a specialist, and light sconces Hurley designed.

Other details in the dining room include the table, its top painted by Hurley in a geometric design based on works by the Viennese painter and illustrator Gustav Klimt, who died in 1918. And the ceiling is decorated with medallions, resembling pewter, that Hurley



JEREMIAH COUGHLAN/The Columbian

In a blend of artistic styles dating from the late 1800s and early 1900s, CJ Hurley painted the dining room tabletop in designs modeled after painter Gustav Klimt. Painted on the wainscot at Hurley's left is what he calls an anthropomorphic rose spirit, reflecting his interest in older styles.

fashioned from aluminum.

Most dining rooms probably doesn't have names, but Hurley's does: "The White Rose." He said he worked on it for about six months. In part because metallic paint was used in some areas, and there are windows, the room's appearance changes from day to night and season to season.

Art lecturers

Hurley and Pierce, who recently lectured together at Portland Community College, are historians and devotees of the Arts & Crafts Movement, which began in the mid-1800s in England and later moved to the U.S.

Since the 1970s, the style has again become popular.

A slew of magazines now offer photos and stories about homes decorated along these lines, including "Old-House Interiors," "Oregon Home," "Style 1900" and "American Bungalow."

The magazines advertise products, many spendy, ranging from Stickley-brand furniture to gorgeous lamps, copper sinks and artistic tiles. The objects adhere to the Arts & Crafts Movement's philosophies and several artistic styles, including art nouveau, art deco, some from Asia and others.

Pierce said the movement was a reaction to the early days of the Industrial Revolu-

tion, with its mass production by factory assembly lines. Ever more efficient and dehumanizing for their workers, the factories stamped out objects that were cheap and functional, but identical and less than artful.

"There was a movement by architects, philosophers and artists for things that were handmade," said Pierce, who handles the business operations of their studio and consulting company, called CJ Hurley Century Arts.

One offshoot of the movement was the Roycroft community of artists and artisans, founded by Elbert Hubbard in East Aurora, N.Y., beginning in the late 1800s.

"There were leather workers, metalsmiths, furniture-makers and potters," Pierce said. "They also had a printing press and did a lot of hand-illuminated printing."

The Roycroft has since been revived, and Hurley is one of about 49 recognized modern-day Roycroft artisans, Pierce said.

The Arts & Crafts Movement called for handcrafted home objects that combined beauty and utility.

Another tenet required respect for nature. In what is called bringing the outside in, such home decorations often feature flowers and other plants, the weather and an area's natural materials, whether they be wood, pottery, glass, metals or others.

Furniture that adheres to the philosophy, whether designed in the simple mission style or others that came later, is known for its craftsmanship and materials, including the finest and most beautifully grained woods.

A homeowner steeped in the philosophy would be unlikely to paint over an older home's original varnished woodwork or paint walls white, according to a story in the spring 2005 issue of "Arts & Crafts Homes and the Revival," a publication of "Old-House Interiors."

It's a way of thinking and creating that's alive and breathing today, wrote editor Patricia Poore.

"I have no doubt that the current revival, which in America has already gone on longer than the original period lasted, is producing work equal to and sometimes better than that of a hundred years ago," Poore wrote. "My opinion would have been denounced even a decade ago, when the antiques dealers ruled and 'reproductions' were heresy. Now I say we are living in the period of Arts and Crafts."

A fine-arts graduate of Guilford College in North Carolina, Hurley said he's been influenced by a long list of artists including Frank Lloyd Wright; Scotland's Charles Rennie Mackintosh and his wife, Margaret Macdonald; and the Japanese art historian Kakuzo Okakura, known for bringing his country's art to

the United States, who died in 1913.

Hurley and Pierce offer several services, including consulting on colors to be used in a home. Although most of the homes they work on across the nation are older, there also are owners of newer homes who are interested in these styles.

"Our work is very specialized, so people who hire us tend to be unique individuals," Pierce said. "They have an appreciation for history, fine quality and art."

Many but not all of their clients are wealthy. While a handpainted frieze can take weeks or months of work and cost \$10,000 to \$30,000, some of Hurley's paintings can sell for as little as \$600.

Questions first

When Hurley and Pierce begin a project, their first step is to spend time with their clients and ask questions.

"Sometimes we learn about the family's history," Pierce said. "Sometimes it's favorite flowers, a favorite place, a feeling people want to evoke. Possibly things they want to inspire in their children."

They base their work on knowledge of the clients and other factors.

Once a project is done, it's confidential, the couple said. Their customers often don't want to see the decorations they commissioned, whether color schemes, paintings or other artworks, duplicated somewhere else.

The couple have based their operation in Portland for the past 4½ years. Last September, they appeared with other specialists in an Old House Fair and Tour of Vintage Homes at Vancouver's Esther

Short Park.

Among the most intriguing of Hurley's artworks are two large gesso panels, done in low relief with mixed media: metals, paints, twine, glass, ceramics and others. The complex panels, to which Hurley devoted hundreds of hours of research and work, are based on a late-14th century poem from Arthurian legend, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight."

The panel depicting Gawain shows the knight standing, his jeweled helmet on his head, with his huge sword in front of him, hilt up. Beaten metal bands suggest the harshness of the era, and glass jewels its wealth for some.

In some ways, the panels resemble old tapestries or illustrated manuscripts, with many details alluding to deep forests and their ancient and ceaseless growth.

Two female figures hover at Gawain's sides, as if whispering in his ears. Two hands posed on the sword's hilt could be those of the women, or Gawain's.

The prayerful hands, and the cross of the sword's hilt, suggest the coming of Christianity to Medieval England, but the second panel is full-blown paganism.

The green-skinned knight is a druidic nature spirit from ancient Celtic religion. In the poem, Hurley said, he's an immortal who baits Gawain into cutting off his head, which fails to kill him. The green man then meets Gawain a year later in what turns out to be a mystical test of Gawain's honor and chastity.

So maybe the moral is: Don't underestimate the Green Knight, whose rebirth is like that of the ancient forests. And like the renewal of the old artistic styles that Hurley and Pierce so admire.