HOME DESIGN

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Trompe l'oeil murals

expand on a room

and its occupants'

conceptions of reality.

"Art Imitating Life Imitating Art Imitating Life" is artist John Pugh's title for this trompe l'oeil creation in San Jose. Can you tell where the real ends and the illusion begins? Look closely at the point where the outermost layer of bricks turns the corner inward toward the room. From this line inward, everything in the image is a painted illusion. Panels from Pugh's "Secret Garden" series deceive and delight through illusion

fooling the eye

By BILL ROLLINS, Special Sections Writer

i t is said that students of Rembrandt painted coins on the studio floor to fool the master, who would stoop to pick them up.

In the same way, in these days of virtual reality, artists, designers and decorators use the magic of murals to combine existing environments with imaginary space.

Viewers often try to converse with the painted figures of muralist John Pugh of Los Gatos.

"Everyone likes being tricked," he said. "There's a universal appeal to illusion. They might be shocked at first, then discover it's just paint, but once a person has been tricked via the use of illusion, you can start bringing them into the concept.

MURALS: Illusion and reality

Pugh has painted more than a hundred murals in Los Gatos, Santa Cruz, the San Francisco Bay area, Los Angeles and New York. Although murals have traditionally been seen as a way to decorate public spaces, more and more homeowners are showing interest in the art form, he said.

Trick of the light

Rather than paint directly on the walls, Pugh uses preprimed removable panels which he prepares in his studio then moves piece by piece to a site. He works from top to bottom, background to foreground, using durable, color-fast acrylic mural paint and paying particular attention to how light reflects and casts shadows.

"Everything we see depends on how light is working," he said. "I couldn't create the illusions I do without understanding the inner workings of light.

"To mock reality and to integrate into the architecture is the key. I paint life-size and create the illusion of an environment that would be appropriate for the setting, that would make sense in the setting and integrate it with a consistent light

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source and perspective geared for the correct vantage point.

"I walk through and figure out where the 'first impact' will be. If you do it for closer viewing, it doesn't work so well. The floor tends to tilt up if the perspective is done from a closer vantage point.

"You have to be able to get the viewer pretty far back, or else it creates a shallow depth of field. For example, if you're focusing with a camera on a close subject, it goes in and out of focus really easily, but farther back you can get away with a lot of depth."

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One of Pugh's favorite tricks is to paint a person looking at the scene he has created.

"If the (painted) person looks like they are standing with in-fashion clothes and anchored to local reality," Pugh said, "the viewer may not get that they are part of the illusion. They get that the mural is an illusion, but there are layers of discovery."

There have been viewers who asked the painted person what they thought about the art work," Pugh said, but his favorite story is about a cat in an alley that he painted at the Stanford Shopping Center in Palo Alto.

"Several people told me they had seen dogs go after the illusionary cat," he said. "but I didn't believe it until I saw it myself."

Some panels can just be hung on

Art can be used to create depth as in "Passage," a mural by John Pugh in a San Jose home. It is so realistic that guests have walked into the wall.

the wall and become an illusion if they are in the right environment, whereas the larger murals are more site-specific, he added.

"If anything," Pugh said, "trompe l'oeil gives a sense of expansion to the space and creates a new architectural focal point."