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Last of the master craftsmen

Who will fix our chipped gargoyles and flaking gilded ceilings if the city's dwindling artisans disappear for good?

BY ALBERT WARSON

It's tiring and tedious work. Standing on a scaffold 10 metres above the floor, arms stretched overhead, Jean-François Furiere inspects the intricately hand-carved plaster ceilings and mouldings he's been working on for the past two and a half years.

He's finishing his latest commission — restoring a crenellated ceiling covered with hand-painted and gilded provincial shields in what was once a Dominion Bank of Canada banking hall. The 1914-era structure opens in January as a dining room in the Suites hotel/condo at 1 King West.

"It's like changing light bulbs a few hours a day," Mr. Furiere quips when asked to describe his work, which may also help explain why

there aren't many master plasterers in Toronto these days. The work is physically demanding, and less alluring in an architectural era now dominated by pristinely unadorned, marble, concrete, glass and steel structures. So the number of artisans like Mr. Furiere who can work on preserving the city's 19th- and early 20th-century buildings is dwindling.

Stephen Dupuis, executive vice-president of the Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association, says the shortage of workers in the GTA in most skilled trades is critical. And specialty artisans like Mr. Furiere? "There are fewer of them and they've been going flat out over the past seven years. Many of them have retired or are getting ready to retire and they haven't been replacing."

Plasterers aren't the only craftsmen whose numbers are shrinking. Highly skilled stone masons who can work on period details such as crumbling gargoyles are also disappearing.

Neil Puyte, who is a partner with his father in Noel's Masonry Limited, a historical restoration company in Mississauga, estimates that about 100 of the city's approximately 500 stone masons have stopped working or left Toronto during the past five years. And he guesses that most of the remaining ones are in their late 50s, which means that many will retire within the next few years. "Sadly, we don't have that many coming into the business. We turn away a lot of work because we can't find the skilled

trades. There are 10 of us and we could use another 10."

So far, there are still enough artisans to meet demand, but Michael McLelland, a principal of ERA Architects, heritage project specialists, says the handful of skilled people with heritage experience available in each trade are "contacted early on in a project. There is little apprenticeship these days, so the firms that do this kind of work are usually small ones and very much in demand."

For those who continue in their field, the work is as much an art as a trade. Mr. Furiere says master plasterers have to be dedicated, because apart from anything else, "it takes a long apprenticeship to be able to create a Corinthian capital from scratch, for example." Dilettantes don't become master plasterers. It takes many years of tedious training and learning.

A third-generation master plasterer, Mr. Furiere, 50, who presides over Iconoplast Designs Inc., says it can take 10 to 12 years of apprenticeship to be able to claim that distinction. (Master plastering should not be confused with "flat" plastering of bare walls and ceilings.)

When he began learning his craft, it was secretive work. Mr. Furiere recalls apprenticing in his father's shop and studio in Cannes, France, where "tradesmen from Italy and Spain who did *scagliola*, a technique for creating an authentic marble look out of plaster or cement, would draw curtains around themselves so nobody could see how they did it.

"You couldn't learn from the older guys who were protecting their knowledge, so many tradesmen have died with their secrets," he says. "A lot of techniques have disappeared."

There are no secrets at Mr. Furiere's shop and studio in downtown Toronto. Iconoplast is one of the few companies in Canada capable of highly specialized work, with only six apprentice/workers, at most. They also design and turn out functionally modern plaster pieces to stay busy, though Mr. Furiere says he has other commercial and residential work lined up for at least the next six months. (His professional credits include the Royal Ontario Museum, the National Club, and the former Pantages Theatre, now known as the Canon.)

His work at 1 King West included moving large sections of the plaster ceiling to accommodate the construction of a new tower attached to the existing building.

"When that was done we had to replace the ceiling decoration, but inconspicuously, so it looked like it never happened. We also had to duplicate some ceiling panels that were beyond repair," he says.

"It's a very technical process to do a proper restoration," he says, involving a knowledge of chemistry to recreate the right kind of plaster and enhance it with new materials, and also geometry, "to be able to return pieces to their exact position and something of the history of their origins."

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