

Airbrush art makes a comeback
Interest in airbrushing at level not seen since 1970s

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EDMONTON - Airbrush art had already vanished along with many of the 1970s domestic vans it decorated by the time Shane Baker began his auto body career in 1982.

But after 20 years in the auto body business, Baker says he never lost interest in airbrushing. A nearby business that once had potential as his competitor now is referring their clients to his shop that is well known for its airbrush artwork.

"They had an airbrush artist at one time for a while," Baker said of the Heritage Harley-Davidson retail outlet in south Edmonton. "But after one of their clients came to me for an airbrush paint job on his Harley, I started getting more of their customers. I've been doing mostly motorbikes ever since."

The real story, however, is that air brush art is chic again -- and unlike the '70s, it has a different flavour to it.

Rather than those politically incorrect airbrushed curvy female nudes splashed all over the sides of those 30-year-old "boogie" vans, the rage in air brush art is hot racing flames. Skulls, snakes, dragons and hell fire are rebellious, but at least they're politically correct. Demand for this kind of art is growing, even if it will fill nothing more than a market niche.

"A lot of the bikes that get painted and airbrushed before they even leave the Harley Davidson dealership. I've had business agreements with Honda motorbike dealers too," Baker added. "From the start, we used to do one bike every six months. Now we're doing eight or nine every month."



CREDIT: Brian Gavriloff, The Journal
Shane Baker of Special FX Autobody demonstrates his airbrush technique on a sheet of plate glass. Behind him is the mural he painted on a 1997 Freightliner.

Although motorbike enthusiasts have pushed the airbrush art market to where it now is, he says a handful of collector car owners are starting to take an interest in airbrushing cars at his Special FX auto body shop.

Mitch Peacock, owner and operator of Jus Cuz' Customs, says there's a stigma that suggests only Harley Davidsons get chopped and air brushed. "People want all kinds of things airbrushed and painted." The proof is in his showroom.

"Signage, guitar cases, welding masks, goalie masks -- we've even painted a prosthetic leg," Peacock said, motioning to where the prosthetic stands on a desk, tucked inside of an old shoe, serving as a candy dish. A lot of the items people bring to him are items of a personal nature.

Jus Cuz' doesn't paint a lot of cars. Most of his customers are motorcycle enthusiasts who also own cars and might bring one in once in a while. Peacock estimates that 75 motorcycles have passed through his shop. He attributes the renewed interest in airbrush art to U.S.-based media and TV shows that demonstrate what airbrush artwork can do for a high-dollar car or bike.

Although Baker says he always did like the brash and rebellious airbrush art of the 1970s, he never had much time for it. Very few airbrush art customers came to his shop.

The orders which did come in were outsourced to those who did it more often than he, but Baker says he quickly learned that outsourcing such jobs was problematic for business. Often the results were not what the customer wanted. That changed one day.

"I thought if I could keep it in house, I could protect quality control and process and allow customers to come in and see the work any time they wished."

Baker recently finished painting a complete tractor/trailer that will be hired as a rented unit transporting sports cars to racing events. After painting a nude on the side of the truck, the order comes in to put clothes on the figure. The offensive potential for business arrangements was too much of a risk.

He says the airbrush art he does in his shop is superior simply because the customer has full control over the outcome. It has become a boon for his business, which does traditional and alternate murals not seen in decades. He attributes better quality control to better-quality paints and more user friendly, precise airbrush tools. They're designed for a finer, more realistic detail control.

He admits he never thought the market would make the return that it has. About one year after his initial jobs, he began to notice a distinct increase in demand among motorcyclists. Most paint jobs average between \$3,000 and \$5,000. Some can even range between \$9,000 and \$15,000.

Baker says he even knows of an airplane that was airbrushed and painted. But Peacock says this artwork, at least in the automotive sector, will never become mainstream. Most consumers have no practical interest in such work.

"You will never see this on grandma's car or on the family minivan. It's a form of individualism. It's like getting a tattoo for a project. The custom market is only for those who want to paint outside the lines," he says, pointing out that he has done maybe a dozen cars so far.

He recently painted a collectible Ford Thunderbird with a custom "crystal effects" paint job using AlsaCorp painting products. It's a five-stage painting process in which the base coat is masked off with a design.

The second layer of crystal effects paint is applied and left to dry, which forms a crystallized pattern that produces a complex texture of lines that look as if they were etched into the car's surface. The third step calls for an AlsaCorp candy paint job and finally a clear coat. Excess crystal effects are washed away before the candy colour is applied.

It's not a common paint job but it highlights the lengths that Canadian airbrush artists and auto body painters go to excel in the trade. Baker says he's noticed that U.S. airbrush artists seem to get better media exposure than Canadian artists.

"To make it in the (airbrush painting) industry and get world-wide recognition is harder for a Canadian than an American artist in the U.S. There seems to be more support for this work in the U.S."

Norm Tessier is the assistant program head at NAIT's autobody school. Interestingly, he said an airbrush seminar that was co-ordinated and introduced by NAIT's industrial supporters featured Mickey Harris, a renowned U.S. airbrush artist. The seminar attracted 190 people from various artistic occupations.

"At that time we did not offer an airbrush course, but someone slipped up and said we did offer an airbrush course. The phone calls began pouring in to the extent of up to 38 calls one day. We have held four courses to date and they all fill to a maximum of 15 students. So the interest is not slowing and we will offer basic airbrush as well as advanced courses next year," he said.

NAIT recently sent an instructor to California for a custom mural course upgrade because school staff could not locate any Canadian technical schools teaching airbrushing. Although the interest in it is facilitated by large amounts of disposable income in a hot economy, those who dabble in airbrush art don't have a lot of outlets in which to focus their practice or learn new artbrush skills. Tessier agrees that there is very little promotion of airbrush art simply because there is not a lot of initiative among airbrush artists to promote the industry at an institutional level.

FX body shop owner Baker conducted an airbrush seminar similar to that of NAIT's last January in his south-side shop. He plans to hold another airbrush seminar July 29-30. He says he is not doing this so much as a promotional activity for the industry, but rather to cater to the interest in airbrush art before he opens an airbrush supply store in the near future. He says his personal endeavours are simply an expression of the love and passion he has for his work.

"I had always dabbled in airbrushing but didn't take it too far. I do this because I find this relaxing. I had no idea this would become a mainstream business until about one year I began to do this as side-work for whomever wanted it. I do this because I've always felt more comfortable with my artistic side than anything else."