


Painter Profile

Neil Pope

*Taking painting
to new levels*





In an industry as competitive as painting, where the average business lasts only two years, Neal Pope of NPC Services can already claim success. He's going into his fourth year – not bad for a guy who got into painting by accident.

The short average operating lifespan of paint companies elicits little surprise from Pope. "I have no trouble believing it because it's very tough. There are lots of people out there competing for a limited number of jobs." He runs his business from what used to be a furniture manufacturing plant in Garden Hill, Ont., a tiny village just north of Port Hope and Cobourg. The two towns have more than their fair share of historic and heritage buildings, both residential and municipal, which are Pope's bread and butter. "Our work is very specialized. We concentrate on restoration work. We use techniques, some old and some new, which are suited to that kind of building." It's these properties today that have kept Pope's

company in the \$1million per year sales range for the last four years. They also led him into painting.

If I were a . . .

Pope started as a carpenter in 1985, and that was the meat of his business until he expanded into painting in 2001. The carpentry business was always directed at restoration work. When the job required painting, Pope hired a local company that had a great reputation in the heritage restoration business. But in 2001 the owner of the painting company wanted to slow down and offered the company to Pope. "I got their equipment and several of their painters, and combined our carpentry business with the painting and plastering business. That was when I started painting." And so was born NPC Services.

The number of employees at NPC varies with the seasons. During the last three years it has peaked at 16. Currently the number is 12, split between the two specialties. Generally, "the carpenters work with wood and the painters paint," says Pope. There is almost no crossover, though one painter is a dab hand at cabinet-making who consequently turns his hand to both trades. The workshop is primarily set up for woodworking, but it has a painting area where pre-finished windows, doors and the like can be primed and painted prior to fitting.

Painting the past

Cobourg is a community of almost 20,000 on the northern shore of Lake Ontario. It developed dramatically in the 1800s and at one time had ideas of becoming Ontario's capital city. In the first 50 years of the 1800s the town enjoyed a building boom. In true Victorian

fashion the properties were large, lavishly ornamented and grand.

Not to be undone, the city fathers planned a magnificent town hall. It began construction in 1850 and was finally opened by the Prince of Wales on a state visit to the dominion in 1860. The four-storey building was christened Victoria Hall and features a huge clock tower, an ornate reception hall entered through a series of towering Corinthian columns and a large courtroom built in the style of England's famous Old Bailey. It is one of Canada's last remaining "deep-well" courtrooms, and is still in regular use today. In addition to the normal run-of-the-mill municipal offices, the building also contains an art gallery and a concert hall. The concert hall, also opened by the Prince of Wales, is large, befitting such a facility, with a magnificent hand-painted ceiling and walls in the style of trompe l'oeil. (The name comes from the French, "to trick the eye," which is what the decorations do.)

Both the building's exterior and the concert hall provide

clear evidence of Pope's workmanship, although, paradoxically, if evidence of Pope's work is visible, he has failed. His aim is to leave few signs of restoration. When the work is finished, the building and decor should look as it did when it was first constructed.

Windows of opportunity

Two years ago, Pope won a tender to repair and paint the building's more than 100 windows. Pope set about doing the job as he does all his restoration projects, by getting back to the original.

"Sometimes people just walk up to an old building and put another coat of paint on it," he says. "We seldom do



Victoria Hall, Cobourg, Ontario

that. Half of our work is in the preparation." Usually this means mechanical scraping using scrapers or sandpaper. Workers strip it down to the original bare wood or masonry. When Pope sees that the original paint is letting go, "it doesn't matter how many new coats of paint are put on. It's going to start peeling again soon. At that point we always recommend to the customer that we strip everything away."

Tricks of the trade

Pope says given the age of the buildings he tackles, when original wood is exposed there will be one of two problems: either the wood will have dried out or large areas will have become rotten.

"Often we find the original wood so dry it will not hold paint, so I use a glaziers trick that the old-timers used when replacing windows." To prevent the dry wood from absorbing the oil in the putty and drying it out, old-time glaziers applied two coats of a mixture of linseed oil and turpentine to the wood before using the putty. "I do the same thing," Pope says. Before painting, NPC painters apply two coats of double-boiled linseed oil and turpentine in a fifty:fifty mix. The turpentine penetrates the wood and sets up a hard. "You then have a base to paint on that will last a long, long time."

When the stripping shows up rotten wood, it's time to pull out the epoxy. Unfortunately the linseed-oil-and-turpentine mix doesn't work well over epoxy patches, so Pope has to revert to an epoxy primer. He prefers primers with some elasticity specifically designed for wood and concrete. But even when this combination of old and new techniques was used on the hall's windows, some were in such poor condition that they defied Pope's best efforts. In these cases it was back to the workshop where the carpenters took over and made authentic replacements.

Another dimension

Inside Victoria Hall there is a yet another example of Pope's renovation work. In the concert hall the walls are decorated directly onto the plaster. A mural runs around the top of the auditorium walls, featuring a complex repeating pattern of curls and spirals.

The walls are painted with columns

whose three-dimensional effect suggests they are supporting the roof. It is all an illusion. To create it requires a sophisticated blending of colours to the 3-D effect. Additional specialized resources had to be called in for that delicate work so two artists were conscripted to the cause.

"Because the pillars are straight lines and even the shadow is an illusion, they are all solid colours," explains Pope. "There's a little mixing of the paint to give some texture, and because it's a fresco, some of the plaster shows through as well."

The process, which Pope describes as similar to pinstripping, involved using masking tape to delineate the lines before paint was applied. The mural around the top also needed an artist. It was originally restored in the 1970s.

"I'm sure they used a stencil and air-brush, but we were only touching it up so it was all done by hand." The process requires a lot of repetition. In addition to the fresco painting, the artists applied the faux graining to the hall's woodwork. It wasn't cheap. Not only was the detail great but there was only a small window of time when the work could be completed." The contract called for completion in 16 days. The deadline was met. The cost: \$90,000.

High art

For the expensive jobs, estimating becomes an art in itself, says Pope. Is providing high quality an obstacle when estimating? "It obviously narrows our market down to people who want a quality job or who can afford it," says Pope. Labour is the highest component of most painting jobs. In his work, labour is more expensive than many other painting operation because skilled tradesmen are so expensive in his area.

Pope admits he has made estimating mistakes by quoting too high. "I don't usually under-price a job," he says. "I've seen competitors spend longer on a job than I would have and yet they still underbid me. I don't know how they do that. Still, I am happy with my process." And if an error does occur, it is typically in the area of preparatory work, the hardest to estimate because it depends

on a few factors: what kind of paint is in place, how many layers are there, and how long will it take to remove. "Until you get started on a job, it's a bit of guess," Pope says.

Of course the first order of business on a restoration like Victoria Hall is to select the right paint stripper. Pope has a variety he uses and he insists his painters do a number of test patches before starting to ensure he is using the best one for the application.

The largest project ever undertaken by NPC was the restoration of a 12,000-square-foot mansion just north of Cobourg. It was originally built as a summer residence by an American industrialist in the 1800s



Good restoration means leaving no trace of your work.

when Cobourg had a daily ferry service to Rochester, N.Y. and was a favoured vacation destination for New Yorkers. The mansion caught fire two years ago. "The roof was completely burned down to the second floor, and we spent 10 months on that job over a two year period. We used 12 painters in all; our own, plus painters from three other companies." The renovation crew moved through the house followed by the painters. The interior is now completed but the exterior "still needs some

work." Although Pope is reluctant to discuss individual job costings, his website claims individual projects up to \$1.5 million and it seems a safe bet to assume that this major project accounts for that sum.

Hard slogging

"A lot of this work sounds interesting," says Pope, "but in reality it is dirty hard work." The stripping involved in the fire-damaged mansion engaged four people working through an entire summer. They did nothing else. "Three of them were my daughters, I didn't think they would stick it out, but not only did they stay with it, they did a first-class job."

Success in any business requires keeping a careful eye on technical development, and Pope watches these developments with great interest. "There have been changes that we have had to adapt to. I understand why they took the lead out of paint, but it definitely weakened the paint, it doesn't have the same ability to stick to itself."

Likewise, the switch from oil-based to latex, in Pope's view, reduced quality. He says oil-based paints haven't produced a good exterior finish for the last five to six years. But he has high praise for the new ceramic coatings. "We use ICI's Enviro Coating and like it a lot," says Pope. The manufacturers claim that in addition to its other attributes, it carries a high insulation rating. "We use it almost exclusively for exteriors. It has a bridging capability - if there's a void or gap in the surface it will span that space. It's good for masonry and wood and metal. So far there's been no peeling."

Later this year, NPC will open a showroom alongside its workshop to sell custom-made traditional wood windows and entrance doors, all made on site and hand-painted. The need to diversify and find new customers is particularly important when a company operates with the principal espoused by Neal Pope. "All our work is high quality and the selling point is that the paint will last. The old-time tradesmen did their work to last for years. Our painting is done to the same end. We want to be able to tell our customer it will be 10 to 15 years before they have to paint again." ■■■