Wallpaper as an Art Form

The next time you see an image of the Oval Office in the media, be sure to check out the wallpaper. After all, it is a hand-painted design of alumna Elizabeth Dow, ’78.

It has become a presidential tradition to redecorate the famous White House office. When interior designer Michael Smith redecorated for President Obama, he worked with Dow and her company, Elizabeth Dow Mixed Media of Amagansett, New York, to choose the wall coverings that now adorn the president’s private office, the solarium, and the bedrooms of Sasha and Malia Obama.

“It is absolutely the most respected house in the country,” Dow said. “It’s a huge signpost for our company to be featured there.”

The custom pattern of “Buff Stripe” now forms the backdrop of meetings between the president and many dignitaries he hosts. Each stripe was hand-painted onto the buff-colored base by the same artist to achieve a uniform look.

Dow’s company is situated in the upper level of a renovated livery stable in the Hamptons. The lower level is an art school that Dow took over five years ago when she moved the design business from New York City. As of press time, she plans to move the mixed media business to a former church on Amagansett Square for more space.

The company features high-end wall coverings and textiles. Her clients include Tiffany’s and Neiman Marcus, as well as celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow, Paul Simon, and Steven Spielberg. For the right price, you can cover your walls with linen, a material made from woven grass cloth and silk fibers, or a hand-painted paper similar to “Buff Stripe.”

Dow was experimenting in the early 1990s with a style then in vogue of crinkling a wall covering for texture, but the material kept tearing. Her solution was to repair it with a special glue and rice paper, which led to one of her design innovations. “I realized if I could collage the back, I could collage the front,” a technique that developed into one of her company’s signature styles.

A native of Buffalo, New York, Dow came to Michigan at age 9 when her family moved there for work. At Lahser High School in Bloomfield Hills, she studied under artist Clinton Kuopos, who went on to teach at Parsons The New School for Design in New York City and other places. She said due to his tutelage and her own ambition, she graduated from high school a year early and enrolled in the U-M School of Art at age 16. She also gained mightily from the teaching of Al Mullen at U-M, along with his mentee, special guest lecturer Sy Sillman.

Dow painted in her own studio for a while after college and started doing historic preservation. She views her preservation experience as informing her current work, including how the unique and complex Victorian color palettes influenced her interests as a colorist. She gained valuable experience on a decorative ceiling in a historic building on Main Street in Ann Arbor, as well as the Honolulu House in Marshall, Michigan. Other projects in Nantucket, Massachusetts; Norwalk, Connecticut; and Portland, Maine, eventually led her to make New York City her home base.

She later worked as an artist in residence at the headquarters of Saks Fifth Avenue. She started Elizabeth Dow Mixed Media 20 years ago.

Visit elizabethdow.com to learn and see more.