

The Ladder: It's Ups and Downs

By Dennis Knight

The ladder is among the earliest of all the tools man has created. Evidence is in a 10,000 year old Mesolithic rock painting found in the Spider Caves of Valencia in Spain depicting humans using a ladder to harvest honey. I learned that from Wikipedia.

The ladder is also among the most perverse of all the tools man has created. I learned that from the top of one while painting a ten story building. Or so it seemed, because when I started it was just my own two story house, but from the upper rungs I could swear I was a hundred feet high.

If you are planning your own painting job, I am happy to share some tips. First, your ladder should stand on hard, solid ground. Not on a slope, not in the mud, and not in soil that has just been turned for a flower bed. Even then, the feet should be at least a size fifteen lest one of the legs sinks into terra not so firma. Never trust a ladder with little feet.

The ladder should lean against the structure, for the more vertical a ladder is, the more propensity it has to fall backwards. For that reason, you will be inclined to incline it as far from the base of the building as you can, as long as it has sufficient extension to get you up to the task. You will discover on your ascent, however, that a ladder gains bounciness for every degree from vertical, and with too much lean, as you reach the midpoint of your escalation, it will take on the awful character of a trampoline.

Getting the paint up the ladder to the business end is a challenge, as it is difficult to carry a bucket and still hold on for dear life with both hands. You could suspend it between your teeth, but you will find that to be painfully distracting and the bucket will push your center of gravity too far away from the precarious assembly of rungs that is your connection to home sweet earth.

A better solution is to load the brush while you're at the bottom. If you hold it upright all the way, there will be enough paint left when you finish the climb to cover a good square foot. That will be plenty because at the spooky top you are not about to reach out more than the length of your forearm. When you have applied that load, go back down, inch the ladder to the right, get more paint, and go back up.

There will be many such incremental moves, and you may miss a stroke here or there, but perfectionism is a relative thing. And speaking of relatives, when you return the borrowed ladder to your brother-in-law, who has been gleefully observing from his picture window, he will be so amused he won't even expect you to thank him. And you won't.