



## Bella e Classico

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A Michigan-area contractor shows the importance of tools when attempting to master exotic plaster techniques.



Photo 1: Some of the common tools used in Venetian plastering.

One of the skills needed to learn and master with Venetian plasters is how the tools differ from conventional wall and ceiling work, and how the tools effect the end result of the plaster job. Photo 1 is an example of some common tools of Venetian plastering. The picture easily identifies some of the tools to be nothing like the tools most plasterers typically work with. The trowels also have differences that are not as obvious. It needs to be noted the tools used with Venetian plastering are not limited to those identified here. Conventional tools may be used and some plasterers have developed their own tools for specific looks and/or tools that are job specific.



Photo 2: Custom-made tools from the Nov. 2002 W&C cover story.

Photo 2 shows tools Ofer Regev, from Texston, made for the job that was the cover story “A Home to Marvel” (W&C, Nov. 02). Although that job did not use Venetian plaster, it was in line with the typical decorative plastering pursued by those who do this type of work. The job of that story was to make the walls and trim appear to be made from cut and profiled stone block. These tools were made to match various wood trim profiles, and to suit various approaches to wall and ceiling intersections and curved walls.



Photo 3: Putting the plaster down in an amount no larger than the square of the blade.

## Hybrid tools

Before discussing the tools in photo 1 individually, the difference in the corners of the tools should first be noted. Some are square, while others are rounded, though all of these tools are available both ways. The rounded corners are available for a couple of reasons.

The first should be familiar to all drywall finishers who remember when they first started. While trying to smooth out areas of wet joint compound that are wider than the knife being used, there was the ominous railroad track from the edge of the knife as it was pulled through the compound.



Photo 4: "X-ing" over the plaster, removing the excess.

Some Venetian plasters are more like joint compound than plaster. There is no going back over the plaster once it begins to set and these track lines will be highlighted in the completed plaster finish if they are not removed. The round corners offer limited control over this happening. This effect is limited to the acrylic plasters from my experience.

Another reason for the round style tools are they help with applying plaster into inside corners. They provide a snowplow-like effect whereas the scraping in the corner caused by the sharp-cornered tools may affect the tones and hue in the color of the completed finish.

The third reason is simply that the difference in corners offer different finish appearances. Subtle differences in the application of plasters can greatly affect overall finish appearance. The tools of the trade in photo 1 (clockwise from noon) are Japanese scrapers, double blades, plastering knife and trowels.



Photo 5: Using thin applications before slowly building up the thickness.

## Simply classic

Japanese scrapers are what I will concentrate on in this article and will cover the others in future writing. In my opinion, scrapers are the mainstay of Venetian plastering. Scrapers come in packages of four blades\scrapers ranging in size from approximately 1 1/4 to 4 inches. This will vary some between different manufacturers. These tools are used for what I learned to be the “classic” Venetian plastering technique. I’m not sure I agree with this anymore as the results of my research shows that how things were done in antiquity really depends on where the tradesman practiced his trade (“classic” to one may not be classic to another).



Photo 6: The plaster on one blade (the hawk) with the second blade positioned perpendicular to the hawk.

Anyway, the classic application is done by using a “cross hatch” technique. This technique involves putting the plaster down in an amount no larger than the square of the blade (photo 3) and then “X-ing” over the plaster, thus the excess (photo 4). How much plaster is put down and how much is removed will affect the completed

finish. Note in photo 3, the hard, straight edges of the plaster caused by the blade. Notice in photo 4 how coming back over the plaster on the bottom right has pulled the plaster over and removed the hard edge. The manipulation of these plaster edges will affect the final finish more than any other nuance to Venetian plastering.



Photo 7: By pushing the blade across the plaster, it is picked up and put on the second blade that now becomes the hawk.

While in Los Angeles recently, I was shown a large Venetian plastering job that was rejected by the customer because of the hard edges of the completed finish. Photo 9 is a dining room done with a soft crosshatch technique. The sharp edges are not a predominate feature of the finish. Photo 10 is of a finish that is very busy using the sharp edges of the blades. Photos 11 and 12 are a mixture of the two techniques.

Some applicators use very thin applications and slowly build up the thickness (photo 5). Others will remove less. The thinner the plaster application, the more translucent the plaster and the more movement in the plaster will show through. This can be seen in the picture by the underlying basecoat of paint showing through the plaster. This technique will also affect color if more than one color is used. Thick applications will bury the underlying color(s).



Photo 8: Taking the plaster off the blade for application.

## **Patience and skill**

Using scrapers is a very slow, labor-intensive process. The applicator starts with the largest blade, works through to the smallest and follows the same process through each blade size. I am often asked why the tools are so small. I remember asking the same question. The answer is certain finishes can only be obtained by

using certain tools.



Photo 9: A soft crosshatch technique.

A couple of things to consider when using the cross hatch technique. Thin applications dry almost immediately when using acrylic plasters. Even the natural plasters will dry very fast. It's important to get it right the first time. There is no second chance except starting over. Since the amounts of plaster being used at any one time are small, the plaster has a tendency to dry and “chunk” on the scrappers. The chunks are usually disastrous to the finish as they leave a scrape mark through the plaster. Something any plasterer or finisher has seen but critical to the final finish: These lines will flash.



Photo 10: A busy finish attained by using the sharp edges of the blades.

The method for keeping the plaster fresh on the blades is by constantly moving the plaster on the blades. This is done by using two blades and scraping them perpendicular to each other, moving the plaster from one blade to another. This is also how the plaster is kept to a size smaller than the blade, so that during application the plaster does not plow out the sides of the blade creating those railroad tracks mentioned earlier. Basically, one blade is used for the application of the plaster and the other is used as the hawk. Photo 6 shows the plaster on one blade, the hawk, with the second blade positioned perpendicular to the hawk. By

pushing the blade across the plaster (photo 7) it is picked up and put on the second blade that now becomes the hawk.



Photo 11: A mixture of busy and less busy techniques.

This moving of the plaster is something Venetian plasterers constantly do to keep the plaster useable. Taking plaster off the blade for application is shown in photo 8. Notice that the plaster on the hawk is beaded to a size smaller than the application blade. Again, this helps prevent the plowing effect of the plaster when applied to the wall. Explaining this takes much more time than the 10 or 15 seconds it would take to demonstrate.

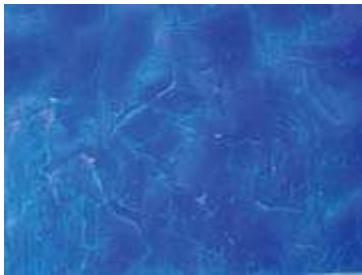


Photo 12: Another mixture of sharper and softer techniques.

The completed finish of this “classic” technique is a very busy looking plaster. When highly burnished, it can be made to look like a polished, large chip aggregate marble or a very mottled look of color tones and hues. With practice, different colors can be used to simulate all the different varieties of this type of marble. If left unburnished, it can be made to resemble the matte finish of unpolished marble. It can also be used to create what in the faux business is known as a “fantasy finish.” The plaster is not meant to simulate anything naturally occurring, but instead is used to create a color-coordinated effect.



Photo 13: A fantasy finish.

Those who work with interior designers will often be asked to create these finishes. Examples of fantasy finishes are shown in photos 13 and 14. Also, different painting techniques can be added to enhance the desired finish. A common example of this is a weathered look.



Photo 14: Another fantasy finish.

Venetian plastering is a skill where, over time, the plasterer will develop his or her own style and technique. This is good--even desirable--until in a situation where more than one plasterer is expected or needed to work a job. It's not unusual on large surfaces to be able to identify where different plasterers worked. A way to avoid this is with experience and proper training.

## Sidebar: Big City Nights

In December 2002, I was invited to participate in a TexSton class at its studio in Los Angeles. I have often used the company's plasters, so I took advantage of the kind offer. Another motivation for taking this class was that I had never taken a product\manufacturer-based class before. My roots in Venetian plastering were self-taught. Drywall and conventional plastering were not new to me but this was. I was fortunate through my faux and decorative painting work to know many people in the faux community who were eager and willing to help me. Over time, I did take classes and train with various people but the training never centered on one product line.

One immediate difference with this training was the others in attendance. All but one was a fellow contractor. From my training with faux artists, I was almost always the lone contractor while everyone else was a faux artist.

Besides the different personality of the class from my previous experience, many of the plastering basics were bypassed and more emphasis was put on integrating Venetian plastering with the more conventional skills of a drywall finisher and plasterer. The lone faux artist participating in the training was not ignored though. In fact, from all the others present, he actually received more attention for his basic

deficiencies than he ever would have received from participation in other training among his own peers. He left this training with knowledge of skills he would have never received otherwise in that short of a time.

Another quick note to remember: A lot of people and places limit training to small sample boards. This does not allow for any experience with an instructor present plastering on a wall surface. Pursue training someplace that offers at least some instruction on full sheets of drywall.

What the training covered was all of the company's product line, various techniques of application, a long list of what to do, and what not to do and a lecture on various ways the company's plasters have been successfully used on various jobs. The "what to do/what not to do" is very important because the various Venetian plasters are not identical. I've seen more than one on-site failure because the plasterer assumed what had been done with one plaster in the past could be done with any plaster.

One unique finish of this manufacturer involves what it calls a "wet-on-wet" finish. This is exactly what its name implies: the application of a plaster coat on top of an underlying coat that has not dried. Obviously, the timing of this is very important but it is not a finish anyone can assume be accomplished with another plaster. Another important factor of Venetian plastering is the colorants used. Many will accept conventional paint universal colorants, but a lot of the plasters are too hot for these colorants and will slowly eat away at the color in the plaster. For these plasters, natural oxide colorants are required. This affects the color palate that a particular plaster can be offered in.

I would highly recommend pursuing training to begin to develop Venetian plastering skills. In my own situation, even with the pre-acquired skills I brought to the table, my learning curve would have been much shorter than what I did experience.