

# WALLS & CEILINGS eNews



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Plasterers conquer a new application when technology is infused in an old-world look.



While most commonly associated with traditionally styled buildings, venetian plasters also lend themselves to modern architecture.

Venetian plastering is seeing a revival in the new world, as applicators in the United States try their hand at this ancient decorative art.

Antique plasters originated among the peoples of the Mediterranean, who mixed together aged slaked lime, fine marble dust and pigments. The plasters they created were distinguished by their visual richness, luster and durability and could be used in an endless variety of decorative finishes, including highly polished, burnished and textured surfaces.

In current usage, the term venetian plaster has been expanded to include a range of decorative, integrally colored plasters and stuccos reminiscent of the finishes during the Renaissance in Venice. The materials are at home in both exteriors and interiors of high-end residential and commercial work and can express both traditional and contemporary design motifs.



## No faux

"Venetian plasters are not faux finishes, but authentic mineral-based plasters with a visual and tactile appeal not available from ordinary plaster or paint finishes," says Nurit Regev, president of TexSton, a manufacturer of decorative plaster, based in Canoga Park, Calif.

The plasters, she adds, come in a wide range of textures. Veneciano, for example, produces an almost translucent finish in which thin patches are applied layer upon layer with special stainless steel spatulas or knives to create a burnished surface that can range from satin to high gloss.

Marmorino has a heavier body for producing creative, textured interior and exterior finishes. And venetian-style stuccos yield textures ranging from suede-like finishes to boldly raked interior and exterior walls. Additional effects can be created by combining the plasters with cut foam moldings, glazes, waxes, color washes and other accessories.

Part of the revival of these ancient plasters is due to the availability of new products that blend polymer additives into the traditional formulas.

"Venetians brought the finishes up to an outstanding quality but they could require a 30-step process, including hot irons," explains Howard Kells, CEO of One Management Inc., a property management and general contracting firm in Austin, Texas. "With modern technology, the same finishes can now be done in three or four steps."

Kells says he discovered venetian plaster during a trip abroad. Using the finishes throughout his own home became a stepping stone toward adding decorative plasters to the palette of services his firm offers.

"I fell in love with it the first time I saw it," he says. "It's nice to make money, but there's also a part of me that wants to be creative and release the artisan in me. Venetian plastering fits part of my soul that I need."

Michael Stanford, owner of Stanford Designs, based in Cool, Calif., experimented with different kinds of venetian plasters.

"I was impressed by the new products which have acrylic polymers in it, something that I've used extensively as a painter," says Stanford, whose company specializes in thematic environments. "I've found them to be far superior to the more brittle compounds in traditional cement-like plasters."

He describes his experience creating a Moroccan-themed house in which, halfway through the project, he switched from hard plasters to a polymer-modified plaster. In comparison, he found the new finish was easier to repair and touch up and was less prone to cracking and checking.

The polymers, he says, "give it an unparalleled amount of bonding, as well as flexibility and increased open time."



## Getting started

While some contractors learn venetian plastering through trial and error, many find it helpful to enroll in a class or certification workshop.

Peter Rich, a plastering contractor in Santa Cruz, Calif., stresses the importance of finding a class that's in-tune with American plastering practices. He recalls the teaching style of one European master with whom he studied.

"The guy couldn't speak English, but he could sure say, 'Nein! Nein!'," says Rich. "According to him, there was just one way to do things."

He says a subsequent class he took with TexSton, "was open to a lot of different approaches, so it made the class more fun and educational."

Kells recalls a similar experience with foreign suppliers; one he considered wanted him to travel to Milan for training before it would sell to him. He stresses the importance of finding a supplier with a domestic distributor network and technical support.

Once the principal of a firm has a grasp on the craft, he has to train and manage his crew to produce consistent results.

Rex Pratt, owner of Creative Artisan Group Inc., of Thousand Oaks, Calif., says that because the plasters are so versatile, "two guys working out of the same bucket can make two different things happen."

As a result, he tries to have only two people working in a room at a time, and to keep them working together until the room is complete.

"It's essential that they apply it the way I applied the original sample that was approved," Pratt explains. "There's a lot of supervision, constantly reminding the guys to trowel a certain way. I stay right on them until everybody's working with the same movements."

Steven R. Pepper, president of Pepper Plastering Inc., in Santa Barbara, Calif., describes his company's technique as "attacking a wall."

"You get everybody psyched by showing them samples and the feel that you need," he says. "Then you hit it and just don't stop until you're done. The key is to have the same flow throughout the room."



## **Financial rewards**

Pepper says the skills required for these specialty plasters come at a price.

"You have to explain to your client that what he's really paying for is the added supervision, manpower and time required for venetian plaster. It's not just a wall he's getting but a work of art."

Despite the price, he says he's seen demand triple in the past few years as architects and others have become more aware of the plasters.

In the same vein, Pratt advises newcomers to the field to not be afraid to charge enough money.

"Some plasterers think that they can charge just a little bit more than they're charging for conventional plaster," Pratt says. "And it is not even close because it takes so much effort to satisfy a customer and utilize the full potential of the materials."

By doing so, he says, "You can create some amazing finishes that people are willing to pay quite a bit for." He reports that he charges up to \$12 per square foot for Venetian finishes, not including the drywall or plaster substrate.

Mark Sturdefant, owner of Sturde Construction Co., Malibu, Calif., diversified into venetian finishes three years ago, adding a specialty to perpetually undercut painting and drywall business. He says he now has a waiting list of customers willing to pay top-dollar for his crews of artisans.

He commands even higher prices for some of his more exotic finishes. He uses venetian plasters to replicate stonework, leather, and architectural ornament for a clientele that includes a number of Hollywood celebrities. Fees up to \$35 per square foot may seem steep, he says, but he points out to his clients that he actually saves them money.

"If they tried to use real stone, it would cost far more than that just to engineer the building to carry the weight of the stone," he says.

Venetian plasters may also become more affordable if when considering the overall project. According to Stanford, painted finishes require very high-quality drywall work to create a smooth substrate. With heavily textured venetian plasters, on the other hand, he says he can reduce the amount of substrate preparation and eliminate the costs of painting and texture coats. He adds that it is easier to conceal touch-up work with the polymer-modified plasters than it is with spray-applied flat or satin paint.

Other applicators point out that their work is competitive with ceramic tile, paneling, high-end wall paper, and other premium wall finishes.

"Venetian plaster is a wonderful addition to a drywall or plastering business because it enables you to introduce a very high-quality product to your existing clientele," says Rich. "Everyone that sees it likes it, so it's almost a self-selling product."

The bottom line in venetian plastering, however, is the opportunity for creative expression. Pratt, for instance, is constantly exploring ways to embellish his finishing techniques.

"It's been a lot of fun working with tints, colors, waxes and metallic powders, taking the materials and running with them and see what else we can do," he says. "Every stroke becomes an artistic decision. It's not just spreading mud, but creating something beautiful."

Pepper delights in the challenge of creating the perfect finish to enhance the architecture or decorating scheme of a client's project. Instead of only bidding specs, he develops projects by meeting with homeowners and designers to discuss the client's tastes and to develop suitable color schemes and finishes.

"You've got to be patient when you're dealing with people who are picking colors and textures," Pepper says. "You've got to be able to listen and allow extra time for working with the client. Color's so powerful that you've got to be willing to go the extra mile to make a customer happy."

"Venetian plastering is not for every contractor," says Regev. "But those with an artistic sense and an open mind will find it a richly rewarding and satisfying addition to their wall finishing business."