



A STELLAR CAST

Plasterwork has been used to stunning decorative effect since ancient Egyptians first put it on their walls. Meet the artisans keeping the craft alive – and reinventing the mold

BY RACHEL LOOS

This page: Geoffrey Preston contemplates the new ballroom ceiling at Great Fulford in Devon. Opposite: Undertaking precision work on a stucco panel.



For proof that happy third acts can happen in interior design, take a look at the history of ornamental plasterwork. In 1937, the Second Ward branch of the First Wisconsin National Bank in Milwaukee commissioned the master craftsmen of local company Conrad Schmitt Studios to create a dazzling ornamental plasterwork ceiling in the Beaux Arts classical style for its 19th-century building. With intricate gilded patterns framing recessed panels of a rich sky blue, the ceiling's opulence reflected the status of one of the few financial institutions to survive the Great Depression.

However, the following years saw another economic downturn and the Second World War. By the time the world emerged from almost 20 years of struggle, a more pared-down aesthetic reigned, and ornate decoration, once a sought-after luxury, was now considered gaudy and old-fashioned. And so, at the First Wisconsin National Bank, the once celebrated ceiling was painted over and hidden away behind dull acoustic panels. But times – and interior fashions – change.

Fast-forward to the beginning of a new century and decoration is once again in the ascendant after years of minimalism. And so, almost 75 years after creating the ceiling, Conrad Schmitt Studios was called back to the Milwaukee bank, the headquarters of the Milwaukee Historical Society for the past five decades, to restore it to its former glory. "It was a fantastic project that assisted the rebirth of proper plaster restoration and new plaster installations internationally," says Gunar Gruenke, the studio's president.

PLASTER PAST

New York state-based Hyde Park Mouldings, whose projects include residential and commercial properties such as the flagship Ralph Lauren store on Madison Avenue, is also finding itself working in ornamental plasterwork – but not only because decoration is back in style. "The tendency of wood, traditionally used for decorative work, to expand and contract has made many architects and builders realize the benefits of using plaster for moldings and trimwork," explains the company's principal, Adrian Taylor. "It's a secret that has been known to the builders of fine homes and palaces for centuries."

Indeed, plaster is one of the oldest decorative materials – as a coating for walls, it can be found as far back as ancient Egyptian times. However, it was the Persians who finessed both the method of making



Clockwise from top: Locker & Riley's artisans at work, pressing wet gypsum into a mold; sculpting a piece of bespoke plasterwork; the company's work at Hanover Lodge in London's Regent's Park; plasterwork ready to be fixed.



"Ornamental plasterwork infuses interiors with a sense of history and timelessness." Suzy Annetta

and designing in stucco, as ornamental plasterwork is technically called, using it to decorate the interiors of palaces with highly detailed geometric, floral, and figural motifs.

Plaster is traditionally made by mixing gypsum with water and adding natural jute, hemp, or sisal fibers for tensile strength. Now, minuscule pieces of glass can also be added to the mix to create an extremely hard yet lightweight product. Sculpting was originally done by hand, but in the 19th century, gypsum became more easily available, resulting in the development of casting: a quicker and less expensive process that made stucco accessible to many. Today cast plaster is the dominant form – a mold in clay, wax, or Styrofoam is made from a three-dimensional drawing and the liquid plaster poured in and left to set. The finished design is then fixed in place.

Stucco is most often seen as cornicing, ceiling roses, columns, dado rails, and friezes, and it can be used to spectacular effect, as seen at California's Hacienda de la Paz. "Many of the rooms feature vaulted ceilings with textured plaster wall surfaces and detailing," says Marcie Hartley of Hilton & Hyland Real Estate, an exclusive affiliate of Christie's International Real Estate, who is marketing the property.

ELEVATE YOUR INTERIOR

But even the plainest of cornicing gives the illusion of space and height, and adds depth through the play of light and shade. And a chandelier or modern statement light hung from a ceiling rose looks spectacular. Add delicate tracery to a ceiling and the decoration can truly lift a room or finish a total look.

Ornamental stucco works equally well in contemporary-style buildings. "It infuses interiors with a sense of history and timelessness that is appropriate to the location and the story behind the property," says designer Suzy Annetta of Studio Annetta in Hong Kong. "Here most properties don't have the same ceiling heights or overall grandness in scale as

in Europe, so the plasterwork is scaled down to work with the proportions, but it still brings detail and personality to a space."

Geoffrey Preston is one of the few to practice the art of handmade stucco. In 1989, fire destroyed the elegant 18th-century manor house of Uppark in the rolling hills of England's South Downs. Preston, a sculptor, was brought in to recreate the original hand-molded stucco ceilings – which meant rediscovering techniques that had not been used in Britain for more than a century. Although he continues to work in cast plaster, Preston now has a soft spot for stucco. "A hand-modeled work is absolutely unique as there is no cast or mold," he says. "It's designed and made by hand especially for the room it will belong to."

Most recently, Preston has created four large panels for the dining room of a newly built house, featuring foliage with squabbling finches and a serene little owl. Over the past decade, plaster has moved beyond being a material used simply for restoration or the replication of old designs, to one that can create spectacular original artwork.

UK-based Locker & Riley has restored some of Britain's most iconic historical buildings, including the Grade II-listed London Palladium and the John Nash-designed Hanover Lodge in Regent's Park (where the plasterwork alone cost more than £1 million [\$1,613,760]). But while restoration and the creation of classic designs in modern homes around the world continues to be a large part of the company's work, it is now enjoying an increased demand for striking bespoke plaster works of art. "Clients want something that can't be found anywhere else," says managing director Jon Riley. "We created a Trojan battle scene that was 20 meters (65 feet) long and almost three meters (10 feet) deep as the backdrop to an indoor swimming pool of a private house."

Artist and designer Jonas Everets's New York-based SuperStrata specializes in using traditional materials such as limestone plaster; when combined with marble dust it makes Venetian plaster, which looks like marble but is much less weighty. As well as single-color and textured finishes, customers can also choose from many innovative finishes such as broken gold and silver leaf applied over limestone plaster. Says Everets: "It's all about using classic materials to create inspiring and totally new results." ●

Rachel Loos writes for The Daily Telegraph and The Times, and is former editor of Elle Decoration UK.

ON THE MARKET

Plasterwork palaces



RIVERVIEW MANOR
McLean, Virginia, USA

Commanding five acres along the banks of the Potomac River, this magnificent six-bedroom property (above) is elegantly decorated throughout, from a gleaming marble foyer through to its richly carved moldings, a coffered gold-leaf ceiling, and cherry-wood paneling.

\$14,000,000
Contact: Kathleen Coumou
+1 212 468 7140
kcoumou@christies.com

LA FENICE

La Jolla, California, USA

Decorative plasterwork is just one of the finishes on display in this formal European-style mansion, which boasts coffered, carved, and high-beamed ceilings, as well as extensive use of marble, hardwood floors, Venetian leaded glass windows, and hand-crafted wrought iron.

Price upon request
Contact: Zackary Wright
+1 310 385 2690
zwright@christies.com