

# In Good Taste

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Plaster decoration  
at Palazzo Contarini  
Polignac, built  
in the late 15th  
century, in Venice

## *The Power of PLASTER*



ITS EXTRAORDINARY  
ORNAMENTAL IMPRINT  
AND SOVEREIGN RISE  
TO DESIGN ROYALTY

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEFANO SCATÀ

## Style Revival

An Italian-inspired swag crowns a mantel in the ballroom at Calhoun Estate in Atlanta.



Shining examples of contemporary plaster artistry: high-relief sea creatures at the Goring bar in London (at left) and a cast tulip panel (below), both by Geoffrey Preston



CALHOUN ESTATE, PETER BLOCK; GORING BAR, NICK ROCHOWSKI; TULIP, JENNY LAWRENCE/GEOFFREY PRESTON

Hyde Park Mouldings. “It’s the point where art, architecture, and construction converge.”

Out of this brilliant confluence arose a vernacular, a romantic dialogue spoken over centuries. It was an affair that began in earnest, says Taylor, when a cache of ornamental chambers at Rome’s Baths of Titus was discovered, each fashioned from piece-modeled gypsum. For Renaissance artist Raphael and his apprentices, “this was something new and exciting,” Taylor notes of the 16th-century revelation. “They took their findings back to their workshops, where they began experimenting and devising new methods they could incorporate into their own projects.”

Most notable perhaps was the Vatican’s plaster loggia, built as a soaring, sculpted canvas for a series of Raphael’s triumphant frescoes. Stretched 215 feet across 13 bays,

THE IDEA WAS PARIS ON THE prairie: a luminous white city that would set Chicago’s south lakefront aglow in neo-classical magic. The ivory, ornamental buildings of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition were sculpted and embellished out of a centuries-old mixture of plaster and fiber that was, at the time, roundly embraced by European architects, as were the artistic reliefs and entablatures that arose from it. But it wasn’t quite as familiar in the lexicon of American building materials. Without a glut of artisans skilled in plaster’s use, most had to be shipped in from overseas to complete the project.

As relatively foreign as the concept seemed, skeptics wondered if Chicago (viewed then as an emerging center of New World modernity) shouldn’t put forth something more au courant than this Romanesque vision. But lead architect Daniel Burnham held firm. A devout Beaux Arts classicist, he and his contemporaries saw the star plaster material (known as gypsum) as timeless, adaptable, and entirely capable of novelty.

The response was overwhelmingly positive. Many of the imported craftsmen never even sailed home, instead rightly gambling on a stateside boon in their craft. “It can be argued that the exposition in Chicago was really the moment in which decorative plaster sparked the American imagination,” says Adrian Taylor of New York-based studio

## A MATTER OF FORM

Classical embellishments endure as today’s artisans sculpt ancient motifs into modern masterpieces.



1 A French Baroque-inspired **acanthus ceiling rosette** with highly ornate leafy detailing  
jpweaver.com

2 The sculpted outscrolling design of **Corinthian capitals** originated with the Greeks and Romans and re-emerged during the Renaissance.  
White River, 800-558-0119

3 A **scrollwork capital** modeled after the curved stylings of classical architecture’s Ionic order  
decoratorssupply.com

4 A **fretwork frieze** reminiscent of Islamic or arabesque decoration, later embraced by American Colonial architects  
hyde-park.com

5 A **laurel leaf embellishment** like those used extensively in the Louis XIV and Louis XV periods and in the Georgian designs of Robert Adam  
hyde-park.com

6 This **Marcellus capital**, a reference to the Roman open-air theater of the same name, shows the more masculine characteristics of the Ionic order.  
decoratorssupply.com

7 A pair of **Victorian-style corner blocks**: a large feminine floral and a petite bloom set in a deep-relief geometric  
lornekollmeyer.com

8 A **French-inspired corbel** bears Baroque influences but maintains the more theatrical touches—like the scrolls and tassels seen here—of Rococo decoration.  
jpweaver.com

they might as well have blanketed the world. France’s King Francis I immediately ordered a kindred decoration at his great palace of Fontainebleau by some of the very same artists from Raphael’s team. Henry VIII of England followed, and experiments in the medium flourished throughout Europe. “Ornate, decorative plasterwork became very much a symbol of wealth and power,” says Elizabeth Graziolo of Manhattan’s Yellow House Architects. “The most affluent members of society began commissioning works by architects and artists for their estates, and it was understood that the more intricate the decor was, the more money the family had.”

But the success of the medium was also a reflection of its ease. “There’s an amazing freedom to it,” she adds. Stephanie Croce of JP Weaver Co. agrees, adding that what further distinguishes plasterwork is “its luster or gentle sheen” and, when finished, the fineness of the carvings and reliefs. Her California-based plaster

studio houses a library of more than 10,000 historic pieces, from rosettes and swags to cameos and urns, for fabricating new pieces. “We have based much of what we design on references from 18th-century France and the palaces of Italy, Germany, Spain, and Portugal,” she notes. “But there’s inspiration everywhere.”

A steady uptick over the past two to three decades has helped both strengthen and broaden the traditions. For Graziolo, who trained in modernist architecture, “traditional motifs offer a proven method to draw upon that I can then adapt to designs that are more current.”

“The classicism of today is generally a less-embellished interpretation of earlier style periods,” adds Taylor. “I think today’s designers are embracing the human proportions and interplay of clever geometries that are so inherent to traditional design. And when done well, good plasterwork doesn’t come across as classical or modern—just timeless and elegant.” ♦

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN WOODCOCK; STYLING BY RACHAEL BURROW.