



Veneer Plaster

A Premium Finish in One Step

by David Matte

Veneer plaster is a one-coat finish that was designed to reduce much of the cost and time required by old horsehair plaster. In addition to being faster, the veneer system is cleaner—there is no sanding, so there is no dust. When it is dry, veneer plaster has a white, very durable finish with a pleasing texture all its own. The surface is hard to dent and, if damaged, can be fixed quickly.

Anyone handy with a trowel can, with enough practice, master veneer plaster. But before getting started, familiarize yourself with the system. It is not very forgiving.

The plaster comes in powder form and is mixed with water to a creamy consistency. Once mixed, the working time is 45 to 60 minutes under normal conditions. Once you start on a wall or ceiling, it's best to finish the area before the plaster sets up. Once it dries, it is difficult to sand. A poor job is hard to fix, so take your time and enjoy doing the job.

One important caution before you get started: Always keep in mind that the plaster blend contains lye, which is mixed in for the chemical reaction that is needed for bonding. If lye comes in contact with the eyes, it can cause permanent loss of sight. Even a tiny amount can cause damage, so any accident must be treated by a doctor. If plaster gets in your eye, immediately flush with water and seek medical help.

I want to impress on you the importance of wearing goggles or safety glasses whenever you use plaster. (I speak from experience, having just gone through the pain of a lye burn. I got all my vision back—but I was lucky.)

Starting Out

Once the house is closed in, wired, plumbed, and insulated, it is time to think about plaster. The first couple of steps are about the same as a drywall job. (One difference is that butt joints do not show up in the finish, and take little extra time. So let them fall where they may.)

The one-coat plaster system uses a plasterboard that comes in the same thicknesses and sizes as standard drywall. Examples are U.S. Gypsum's Imperial Board, or Gold Bond's Kal-Kore. I generally use half-inch board unless the span is greater than 24 inches.

Install the base plasterboard the same as drywall, preferably using screws rather than nails. Remember that you will be applying a coat only 1/16- to 1/8-inch thick, so keep your screws and nails flush with the board.

Once the plasterboard is hung, you should decide on your interior trim. I prefer to install interior trim prior to



The first step, after hanging the board, is to put a thin coat over all the joints except corners.



Next, the walls and ceiling are coated with about 1/8 of an inch of plaster. The author prefers to install the moldings first and finish the plaster to the wood.

plastering, and I finish the plaster right against the trim. That way, any variations in the wall can be filled against the trim. Also, this eliminates any later chips and repairs.

But if installing the trim first is not feasible, use plaster grounds instead. The plaster grounds should be about 1/8-inch thick, and should be fastened about halfway between the jambs and the outermost part of the casing. The ground creates an even thickness of plaster so the trim will fit evenly against the wall finish with no gaps.

Before you mix any plaster, you must assemble the right tools. You will need:

- two to three very clean five-gallon pails
- a garden hose, nozzle, and ample water supply
- a small table that can be moved from room to room
- asphalt-felt paper to cover your table
- a stiff brush to clean tools and buckets after each batch
- various sizes of putty knives for small areas
- a 12-inch flat trowel, one 18-inch swimming-pool trowel, and a hawk (to hold plaster)
- a supply of self-adhesive fiberglass joint tape
- a half-inch drill and paddle-mixer attachment
- safety glasses or goggles, and a supply of extra-clean water in a closed container to flush eyes.

Taping and Jointing

Take your fiberglass tape and put it over all the joints. Make sure you get all the joints and corners. Fold the tape in half to span each wall and ceiling corner.

Next, take one of your clean pails and put in the amount of water that is recommended on the bag for a half bag

of plaster. (Keep in mind that this will be your mixing pail, so you must keep it clean. Rinse it immediately after every batch.) The second pail can be filled about three-quarters full and will be

too stiff, you will become sore from the pressure you will have to apply to smooth off the plaster.

Once you have the right mix, empty the pail of plaster onto the table, which

If the mix is too loose, it will be difficult to keep on your trowels. If it is too stiff, you will become sore from the pressure you will have to apply to smooth off the plaster.

used to rinse off the paddle mixer after each batch.

Now take your mixing pail, and empty in a half bag of plaster. Let it stand about one minute before mixing with your drill and paddle. Mix it to the right consistency—similar to joint compound. If the mix is too loose, it will be difficult to keep on your trowels. If it is

is covered with the "tar" paper. Take the empty pail and rinse thoroughly. (If possible, avoid rinsing your pails and tools over a lawn. The lye will burn the grass and the lawn will need to be replanted there.)

Now for the fun part. Take the 12-inch trowel and the hawk and load the hawk with plaster. Put a thin coat over



A job well done. Plaster offers a pleasing texture all its own.

all the flat joints. (Leave the corners alone: they are done with the finish coat.) Again, remember that there is only a 1/16- to 1/8-inch-thick finish coat, so try not to leave any ridges or lumps beyond that thickness.

When you've finished all the joints, clean your tools and get ready for the final coat. You'll probably have to wait about 45 minutes for the plaster to set up and dry enough for the veneer coat. During this time, change the paper on your table or scrape it completely clean.

Finish Coat

About a half hour after completing the joints, mix your second batch the same way as the first. Now you are ready to apply the veneer coat over all the walls and ceilings. Using the swimming-pool trowel, start on the walls. Apply only a very thin coat. It's advisable to start in a closet or some other hidden space for practice.

Working the plaster to a finish is similar to working with cement. Do not hold the trowel too flat against the wall or it will stick to the plaster. If the trowel is held at too great an angle, you will scrape off the thin coat.

Try angling your trowel at about 10 to 15 degrees and adjust it from there to whatever angle works best for you. Over time, you will develop the skill to apply an even coat. Generally, unevenness is not a problem—particularly if you apply the moldings first.

In applying the veneer coat, remember that the working time of the material is limited. The plaster sets up quickly on the wall. Take the time necessary to finish one area completely, even if you have to throw out plaster that sets before you use it.

If you need to touch up spots after a half hour or so, spraying lightly with water may soften the finish enough to make it workable for five or ten minutes. But do any touch-up as soon as possible. After an hour, the plaster is not workable—with or without added water.

It is difficult to blend in wet plaster to an area that has fully dried. If you finish a batch in mid-wall, mix another batch quickly to finish up that surface. Dry plaster absorbs the water too quickly from the new plaster, so there is no time to smooth the joint and the resulting "cold joint" will be visible. One method I've used is to thoroughly wet the dry plaster just before blending in the new batch.

I must stress the importance of keeping your tools and water exceptionally clean. Even the smallest pieces of foreign material will make your job a lot more difficult.

When you have completed a wall, stand back to see if more troweling is needed to obtain the surface you desire. If you want it smoother, try a wet trowel. If this does not work, your plaster is too dry to work anymore. At this point, the best strategy is to smooth the area with joint compound.

In pricing a veneer-plaster job, remember that usually only one coat of paint is needed for a finish. The surface dries white to begin with. Including painting, some contractors can offer a veneer-plaster job for about the same cost as drywall or a little more, but with quicker completion time, easier scheduling, less mess, and—most important—a superior end product. ■

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