

Choosing the Right Molding

by John Leeke



Early in the 19th century all flat boards and moldings used for finished woodwork on houses were planed by hand. You can imagine the toil and sweat involved.

The industrial revolution changed woodworking techniques. Toward the middle of the 19th century, wood-working mills began to produce stock moldings. Production millwork was a boon to busy carpenters, who created striking decorative effects in much less time. The millwork added great value to a house at lower cost. That notion of increasing value at low cost is even more important today.

Names of Moldings

For many years I was confused by the names of moldings. As a finish carpenter I knew what I had to ask for at the lumberyard to get a certain molding. But when I began talking with architects and historians, they used an

unfamiliar vocabulary. At first I dismissed it as academic pretension.

Then I realized that each shape has a formal name, used often by academic types, and a more common name, used by the rest of us (see Figure 1). In the 17th and 18th centuries, the basic shapes were defined and named by scholars who studied ancient buildings in Greece and Italy — thus the fancy names.

I also began to notice that a few basic shapes could be combined into a wide variety of moldings. These shapes are named after the type of line in their profile. Crown, bed, and string moldings are built up from these basic shapes (see Figure 2). Full moldings are often named for where they are installed or for their function.

Of course there are exceptions in the modern construction industry. A new kid on the block is an astragal — an interior molding attached to one of a

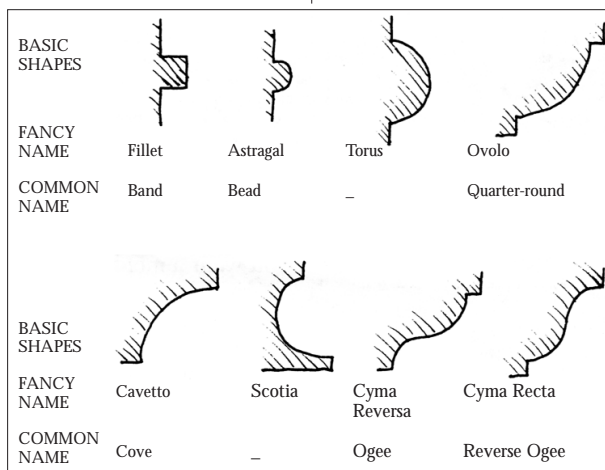


Figure 1. Basic molding shapes go by two names: a formal name, used by academics, and a lumberyard name, used by everyone else. Here are both sets of terminology.

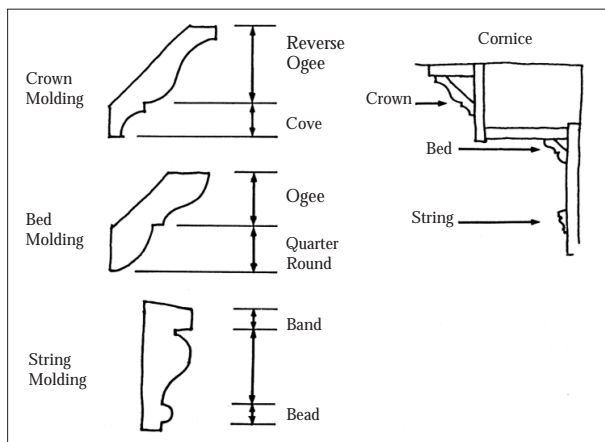


Figure 2. These most common style moldings, such as the crown, bed, and string, are made up by combining the basic shapes (left). These moldings are found in most old houses, for example, in a cornice at the top of a wall (right).

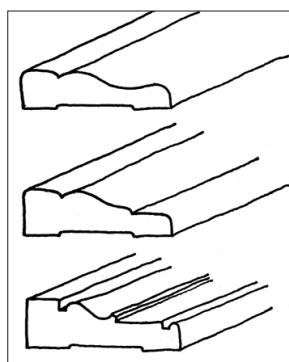


Figure 3. Shop carefully for moldings. These three off-the-shelf moldings cost the same, but the bottom one has distinctive crisp edges and traditional curves not found in the top two.

pair of doors "in order to seal the division and prevent swinging through."

Purpose of Moldings

The most practical purpose of moldings is to hide surface or angle joints. But beyond that, moldings are used as design elements to ornament buildings. They do this by creating shadows and lines. When the sun rakes across deep, bold profiles, shadows blend across the curves, and lines show up as crisp edges. Moldings with rounded edges and shallow curves don't have nearly as striking an effect.

I often hear complaints about the lack of good design in modern production molding. The examples in Figure 3 illustrate the difference among different moldings. The top molding is what these complaints are about. Its features are not very definite, its corners are

If you want a molding close to the original, you can use wood, plaster, even plastic. Or, if you need molding that isn't a stocked item, you can make your own. Use a profile gauge to transfer the profile to a piece of paper.

rounded, and the groove is shallow. This molding looks bland and washed out. The middle molding isn't much better, but at least it has two shallow grooves. The shapes of the bottom molding, on the other hand, are boldly formed. The design of this molding is influenced by the classical basic shapes. You can see there is a band, an ogee, and a bead. This molding would be appropriate for some historic buildings.

All three of these moldings are listed on the same page in a popular millwork catalog, and they're all the same price, 69¢/linear foot. The top one is in stock at the local lumberyard. The bottom one has to be specially ordered, with a 10-day delivery. With advance planning, you can use much nicer moldings.

Materials

Carpenters who have worked exclusively in new construction are most familiar with wood window and door moldings. But in renovation work, you'll find moldings made of many dif-



Figure 4. You can copy a molding profile with a profile gauge, a row of slender pins held loosely in a frame. The pins lock in place allowing you to transfer the shape.



Figure 5. Using an antique #55 Stanley plane is an economical method to cut short molding runs. Other companies make similar planes with replaceable cutters.

ferent materials – wood, plaster, and even pressed wood. You'll need to match the molding profile if you're filling in a missing piece, but if all the molding has been removed and you want to put back something that is reasonably close to the original, you have a number of choices. You can use wood, plaster, or even plastic.

If you need a molding that isn't a stocked item, you can make one. Use a profile gauge to transfer the profile to a piece of paper (see Figure 4). You can use this method to transfer profiles of wood or plaster molding. (I use a "Form-a-gage," made by Penn Industries, Philadelphia, Pa., available from the Preservation Resource Group, 5619 Southampton Dr., Springfield, VA 22151; 703/324-1407.)

Wood. If you're duplicating a wood molding, decide whether you'll use a hand plane or a shaper. I learned to make wood molding in my father's shop. For short runs, we used a wooden molding plane or a "combination" plane (see Figure 5). But we made most of our moldings on a power shaper. It takes a lot of sweat, toil, and a half a day to plane out a hundred feet of 2 1/2-inch molding with a hand plane.

Plaster. Duplicating moldings in plaster is a great deal easier. A few years ago a plasterer showed me how to run plaster moldings with a "horse" on a bench. You mix the plaster, and slap it into the corner of a vertical board along a bench. Then you take a couple swipes at the plaster with a wooden "horse," which holds a piece of sheet metal cut to the profile of the molding. In a few minutes the plaster sets, and you ease the molding off the bench and start another run. I had 100 feet of 5-inch molding finished in a couple hours with no sweat. I found out that plaster was much easier to work than wood.

Plastic. If you're intimidated by plaster and wood, you can now get plastic moldings. Some of them look as if they were designed by Daffy

Duck. But a few are accurate reproductions of historic moldings. Once installed and painted, you can't tell them from wood or plaster.

Suppliers

If you don't have the inclination or equipment to make your own molding, you can order out. Whether using stock moldings or custom reproductions, we look for cost-effective ways to increase the value of our projects with decorative moldings.

- Piscataqua Architectural Woodwork Co. produces hand-made reproductions of wood and hand-run architectural 18th century Georgian style moldings, using original period wooden planes or reproductions based on original profiles (Malcolm G. MacGregor, Jr., Bagdad Rd., RFD 2, Durham, NH 03824; 603/868-2663).
- Center Lumber Co. offers machine-made custom moldings of wood (85 Fulton St., Patterson, NJ 07509; 201/742-8300).
- Northern Plasterwork makes custom plaster reproductions and does installations (James Calabro, Jr., P.O. Box 344, Bethel, VT 05032; 802/234-9843).
- Outwater Plastic Inc. provides plastic reproductions of European moldings, imported from Belgium (Carolyn McCrystall, Outwater Plastic/Industries, Inc., 4 Passaic St., Wood-Ridge, NJ 07075; 800/888-0080 or 201/340-1040).
- Focal Point offers plastic reproductions of American moldings (P.O. Box 93327, Atlanta, GA 30377-0327; 800/662-5550). ■

John Leeke of Sanford, Maine, is a preservation consultant who helps contractors, architects, and homeowners maintain and preserve their historic buildings. If you have questions regarding preservation work, you can contact him c/o The Journal of Light Construction, RR #2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.