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Venetian Polished Plaster – the revival of an ancient art

by Gill Tesh

Venetian plaster is a general term given for decorative polished plaster, traditionally made with mature lime putty and fine marble dust. By applying several thin coats and polishing the plaster it can be made to imitate quarried marble. Marmorino is another version of Venetian plaster made coarser marble dust which gives it a matt stone-like finish.

The term "Venetian Plaster" was allegedly coined in the US. The Italians themselves call it decorative stucco, stucco duro, or sometimes "Women's Stucco" because the plaster polishes to a high sheen without too much effort.

Apart from being beautiful to look at, Venetian plaster, properly applied, provides a surface that is durable and water resistant. Depending on composition, it can be used inside or out, and applied to curved surfaces. It's also very versatile – a range of decorative techniques can be used including inlay, embossing, modelling, incising (sgraffito), stencilling and stamping. And of course it can be veined to resemble marble.

History

Decorative finishes go in and out of fashion, but "Venetian" plasters have a long well-documented history. Because of their durability, remains have been found among the ruins of Mesopotamia dating back over 3,000 years BC. The Greeks and Romans (who "imported" examples from Greece) used them extensively. Vitruvius Pollio – the Roman architect writing in the first century AD, recorded that lime used in these plasters should be very carefully selected, burnt with wood and left to mature for a long time before use. During that time it was to be constantly beaten with heavy sticks, and chopped about with an axe or hammer and subjected to frost. When considered ready to use, it was mixed with sharp sand, or with marble dust to make it capable of being polished to a mirror-like sheen. On the question of application, Vitruvius recommended that it was good practice to lay on at least three backing coats of lime and sand plaster, and then a further three coats of lime and marble dust plaster. The walls could then be painted while still damp, and the wet lime would absorb the pigments making the art work very durable, particularly when burnished. (Nowadays pigments and mica are generally added to the plaster). Remains of Greek and Roman "stucco-duro" are still in existence and examples of fine bas-relief work can be seen in the V&A museum.

With the fall of the Roman Empire these techniques largely vanished in Europe. In his book "The Art of the Plasterer" George Bankart credits Cardinal Giovanni de Medici with the revival of the art Venetian plastering. Giovanni, who became Pope Leo X, was instrumental in excavating the ruins of ancient Rome and discovered the remains of painted stucco work and statuary made from lime and marble dust. He re-

produced these fine plasters in line with Vitruvius's instructions, and commissioned Raphael to decorate the loggie of the Vatican in this material. The art of stucco duro was very highly developed during the Renaissance and many examples can be seen today.

In England, the Tudors oversaw a building boom in great country houses and palaces. Henry VIII levelled the village of Ewell to build the huge Palace of Nonesuch which was plastered by craftsmen brought over from Italy . Although the palace barely survived the Tudors and Stuarts, an engraving by Hoefnagel shows that externally the lower walls and towers were covered in Italianate stucco bas-relief.

Venetian plaster flourished only briefly in England, probably because of the lack of marble quarries in this country. Lime, sand and hair plasters however, were used extensively, and the art of ornate plasterwork and pargetting thrived from the sixteenth century onwards with their characteristic designs of scrolled stem and leaf, fruit and flowers, heraldic birds and animals.

Venetian Plaster today

It is good news that this ancient art is making a resurgence in this country, thanks in no small part to a recent television programme. While it may take several years to develop the skills to maximise its full potential, it's a material that is accessible to anyone with an eye for detail and a good plastering arm. The technique for applying the plaster differs from general plastering in that it relies on small strokes from every direction using one side of a lightweight trowel or spatula to lay on a thin layer of plaster. Three or four of these almost translucent layers are applied to the surface and then burnished with a spatula to achieve the glassy sheen associated with this material. The surface can be oiled and waxed to enhance the shine further or to waterproof it.

While traditionally the basis for Venetian plaster was lime and at least 40% marble dust, and sometimes sand, a range of other ingredients such as fig juice, beer, rye dough, wax, animal fat, blood, egg white and curdled milk were added to improve its strength and setting power. Waxes, oils and fats were also added to aid polishing and offer water repellancy. Production methods have evolved and polished plasters on the market today commonly include a range of other relatively modern materials, such as white cement, plaster, resins and acrylics. However it can be argued that the traditional ingredients haven't been improved on in terms of producing a plaster that can be burnished to a high polish, replicating the appearance of marble and its cold, smooth, touch.

Gill Tesh is a Partner of Mike Wye & Associates who specialise in traditional lime plasters. They produce Venetian polished plaster in 54 stunning colours and also run practical courses in its application. For more details visit their acclaimed website www.mikewye.co.uk or phone them on 01409-281644