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based Venetian, which are not plasters at all but a melange of marble and limestone in acrylic emulsion. The water-based offerings dry like paint instead of setting hard the way lime-based ones do, and can be applied over a variety of surfaces, including drywall, wood, even kitchen cabinets. "It's like baking a cake," Liptak says about the many versions of Venetian. "You can make flourless, eggless, layered, or sponge cakes. They're all good; what's best depends on your taste."

Liptak herself prefers the hard, monolithic beauty of traditional pigmented lime-marble mixes, despite their exacting application process. Starting with a perfectly flat plaster or drywall surface, a Fresco crew trowels on three to seven thin layers using short, quick strokes to bring out the inherent color variations. Each plasterer has his or her signature technique, every wall becomes in effect a distinct work of art. Such artistry takes time—Liptak estimates that 30 to 100 square feet of Venetian is a good day's work—and uses expensive materials: up to \$300 for a 5-gallon bucket. All of which means that doing a room in Venetian could cost from \$8 to \$18 per square foot in New York City, versus less than a dollar for fully finished drywall.

The U.S. has its own homegrown tinting tradition. In the Southwest, generations of plasterers have been adding pigments and colored sands to gypsum-based products to get the subtle color shifts of Venetian, but with a softer-looking, more earthy finish. One



To give a Tucson, Arizona, residence its unique wall hue, architect Rob Paulus had his plasterer pour colored sand into the mix.

type in much demand, according to Ed Jakacki of U.S. Gypsum, is a Structolite plaster made from the naturally pigmented gypsum mined in Sweetwater, Texas. Jakacki says that the craftsmen who use Structolite have to "trowel it like crazy" to get it smooth, but that the results they get are stunning, with hues ranging from a peach blush to a deep rose. Unfortunately, as with all gypsum plasters, no one can predict what the exact shade will be after it sets.

At least until now: Jakacki and his team at USG have developed an easy-to-apply, gypsum plaster that allows people to pick pastel tints as easily as they pick paint colors. This material is also tough, 10 times harder than drywall. Even if it does get nicked or scratched, the blemishes will be hard to spot because the color goes all the way through and because, as Jakacki puts it, "This is a semi-smooth covering with occasional porous areas that will show certain idiosyncrasies." Translation:

It isn't smooth, nor is it intended to be. Finally, it can be applied over regular drywall by someone with basic trowel skills—one or two 1/8-inch-thick coats are all that's needed—so the installed cost is relatively low: just \$2–3 per square foot.

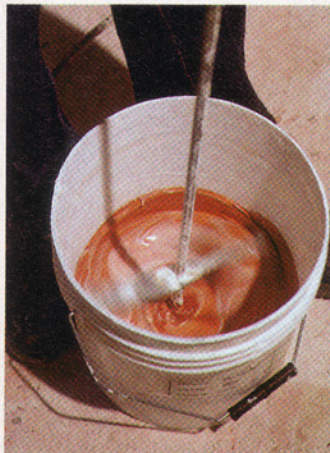
Whether one chooses to tint a wall with age-old Venetian lime and marble plasters, or with the more modern gypsums or acrylic emulsions, the fact is they all offer far more visually interesting, subtly textured, and durable ways to dress up drywall than is possible with paint. ■

TROWELING LIKE A VENETIAN

Traditional lime-based Venetian plasters, with such liiting names as marmorino, intonaco, and stucco-veneziano, are the Rolls-Royces of tinted wall finishes.

Applied in a succession of layers (total thickness: just 1/8 inch), these hard-setting materials take on the seductive depth and rich color reminiscent of polished marble. Tracey Blaser, a former decorative painter and now plaster artisan with the New York City firm Fresco, says that even the best faux paint jobs still show traces of brush marks or spraying. "Venetian plaster is so shiny and smooth at the end, it's like there was no hand involved," she says.

Blaser blends lime-resistant tint into a bucket of aged lime and marble dust to get just the right color and consistency. Once she stops mixing, she has three to four hours to apply the plaster before it hardens.



Blaser scoops wet plaster off her hawk and trowels it over primed drywall covered with a thin coat of sanded lime. She has to maintain consistent hand movements and pressure over the entire wall to prevent seams, darkening, or flaking.

As the last layer sets, but before it's dry, Blaser burnishes it as flat and almost as reflective as a mirror. After the wall dries for several days, she'll coat it with beeswax or a stone sealer.



A Subtle Tint

Pigmented plaster warms up rooms in ways no paint can

BY STEVEN THOMAS

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here's a lot to recommend drywall. It goes up quickly, and as long as the studs behind are true, the panels create a smooth, fairly uniform surface. Slap a little joint compound over the seams, screws, and any other imperfections; roll on some latex; and there you have it—instawall. Exceedingly practical, easy on the wallet, but also more than a little, well, boring.

Assuming you don't want to hide those walls beneath wallpaper or paneling, there's another highly attractive alternative: tinted plaster. That's right, good old-fashioned, messy, applied-with-a-hawk-and-trowel plaster, the same rock-hard stuff that drywall helped make obsolete. When infused with pigments and worked with a skilled hand, this grayish-white substance can acquire the lustrous, shimmering depth of polished stone, or the softness of suede, or the look of a billowing cloud bathed in an ochre sunset.

People have been looking for ways to beautify plaster for as long as it has been around. The Egyptians were probably the first to color their plasters, some 3,000 years ago, and judging from the ruins at Pompeii, the Romans also had a fondness for the same hued finish on their walls. These techniques and materials were forgotten after Rome fell, but in the 17th century the Italians (fittingly) created their own versions, blends of slaked lime, marble dust, and animal protein (such as boiled rabbit skins). Highly trained *stuccatori* would slather it on walls with tiny trowels, layer upon layer, then burnish it to a high shine that mimicked marble. Because of its popularity in a certain wealthy, canal-laced city on the Adriatic, the material became known as Venetian plaster. It once again went into eclipse after Venice's decline in the 18th century, only to be rediscovered in the 1940s by Italian architect Carlo Scarpa.

In this country, a few dozen practitioners of this ancient craft still trowel away using imported mixes minus the rabbit skins. At Fresco in New York City, Agnes Liptak and about 25 other artisans travel all over the world doing Venetian for high-end clients. To step into Liptak's studio is to be dazzled by the hundreds of sample colors and textures: everything from white Carrara and onyx black to pitted travertine and buttery French limestone. "We can create anything," Liptak says. This range is due to the wide variety of products made for Venetian plasterers, including cement-based mixes that can be used outside and the so-called water-



Infusing pigments into plaster produces a rich but subtle mottling. This room is finished with a new gypsum-based plaster that promises predictable colors at a modest price.