

VENETIAN PLASTER

By Cat Faust

“Venetian” plaster formulations have changed over the years as have the techniques used to apply them. Originally, Venetian plasters were made of a slaked lime and marble dust combination. The applicator could simulate high-shine marbles with tremendous undulations of color and depth or more “Tuscan”-style matte finishes, always leaving a breathable surface that was extremely durable, long lasting and naturally mildew resistant.

There are now many variations of the true lime-based material available, including pre-tinted, synthetic or mineral blends that offer flexible durability with easier application and burnishing capabilities, soap and water cleanup and the ability to paint over your plaster finish without neutralizing the surface first. New Venetian plaster formulations can help create not only the beautiful traditional-style finishes, but also highly reflective metallic and iridescent options. These options were previously impossible when using a lime-based plaster, because the high pH level of the lime in a traditional Italian plaster caused dulling of the reflective quality of a metal- or mica-based colorant. With these new formulations, the professional applicator can now offer an endless variety of plaster finishes, visually bringing the customers from old-world Venice, Italy, to modern-day New York City, all by the application of one type of material.

Here are a couple of popular application options:

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- ▶ High-quality acrylic paint with low-luster sheen
- ▶ Stainless steel application trowel or spatula and burnishing trowel
- ▶ Clean putty knife
- ▶ Venetian plaster (high-shine smooth, untinted or pretinted)
- ▶ Quality pigments/colorants (if using an untinted plaster)
- ▶ Bucket of warm water and rag to keep trowel clean

APPLICATION METHOD

1. Prepare your surface as needed.

Fill in nail holes, sanding smooth any surface imperfections, etc. An initial coat of primer may be needed before the base paint, depending upon the substrate (bare drywall will need a drywall primer first). Once the surface has been prepared and is clean and dry, apply at least two coats of a high-quality acrylic paint and let dry thoroughly, at least overnight. Make sure that the surface is as smooth as possible. Even the smallest of imperfections on the surface, whether it's a grain of sand or hardened material in the paint, can telegraph through the plaster finish once it's compressed/burnished.

2. Tinting your Venetian plaster to a desired shade is a “science” all its own. A true lime-based plaster requires natural mineral pigments that can tolerate the high alkalinity of the lime (do not use universal colorants in lime-based plaster). Lime plasters will dry approximately 50 percent lighter than the wet tinted color. Mineral blends are not as high in pH as lime but may still alter or break down the color of a universal tinting system, so they, too, should be tinted, using a compatible colorant system. These can dry upward of 20 to 30 percent lighter. Finally, synthetic plasters can dry very close to the wet color and can be tinted using universal colorants. Given this broad range of colorations upon drying of various plaster systems, it is highly recommended to

create numerous samples before attempting to apply a Venetian plaster finish on the job site. This will help prevent any unwanted surprises for you and your clients. When tint-

ing your plaster, it's also recommended that you use an electric mixer to ensure that the colorant is dispersed evenly throughout the material.

TIP: Sometimes Venetian plaster can become quite thin after a colorant is added and blended. Allow the material to settle for 24 hours, covered, before applying.

3. Using your putty knife, place a half-dollar-sized dollop of plaster onto the corner of your stainless steel application trowel or spatula and apply a sheer, very thin coat of plaster to the surface, using short upward strokes. This first coat should be applied as smoothly as possible; some graceful trowel lines are permitted in this first base layer.



TIP: If you are a right-handed applicator, begin the process in the upper left-hand corner of your wall (reverse this rule for lefties). This will help prevent creating “cut” marks (straight lines) in the plaster from the edge of your trowel.

4. Continue this process until 100 percent of the surface is covered. Allow this layer to dry completely. Dry times will vary depending upon thickness of the application and environmental conditions.



6. Apply a third, “burnished” coat. Best results are achieved by applying a minimum of three coats of Venetian plaster. This will ensure optimum film formation and ultimately a more refined look. For the highest shine, Venetian plaster should be compressed/burnished when it is approximately 80 to 90 percent dry. This is the point when the plaster is pliable enough to compress and shine evenly.



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TIP: Use the putty knife to help keep the plaster on the edge of your trowel and not spread out on the trowel's flat surface. If this happens, the plaster can dry and harden, potentially scratching your finish. Also, to help prevent the Venetian plaster from drying in the bucket and possibly scratching your finish, keep a damp cloth or lid over the material bucket while working.

5. The next coat will be a bit thinner and applied in the same manner, achieving 100 percent coverage and allowed to dry.

TIP: You may decide to use a complimentary color or colors during this coat as well as the third coat to create more visual depth.

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This coat is applied quite thinly and because of this, it won't take long for it to reach this crucial stage of dryness. This makes it easier to work in tandem with another applicator to make sure that the burnishing process is started during this optimum compression time. Holding a stainless steel burnishing trowel at a slight angle (20-30 degrees), run the edge of the trowel over the surface, using light pressure. Cheesecloth, terrycloth or a plastic bag can also be used for the initial burnishing. Once this step is complete, go back over the entire surface, using increased pressure on the trowel, gliding

over the surface from top to bottom, side to side and bottom to top. This motion will polish the material from all angles, leaving a flawless, even shine.

7. For added protection and water resistance, the option of applying a compatible sealer or wax material is available. Some finishers will add mica powders or colorants to the topcoat material, adding another dimension to the finish. **NOTE: When applying a topcoat over Venetian plaster, make sure to use the material recommended by the Venetian plaster manufacturer to ensure adhesion and compatibility.**



TRADITIONAL APPLICATION USING A MINERAL-BASED VENETIAN PLASTER (WITH METALLIC STENCILED EMBELLISHMENTS)

These days, many applicators who offer Venetian plaster finishes are going one step further and combining old-world charm with a new, more contemporary twist. One way of doing this is by embellishing a more traditional finish with a reflective metallic contrast.

the metallic plaster through the stencil. **NOTE: Make sure not to scrape too firmly or you could force the plaster under the stencil creating a blurred pattern.** Remove the stencil/tape slowly. The plaster may look darker where the stencil and tape were, but it will lighten once the moisture escapes.



ADDITIONAL MATERIALS NEEDED:

- ▶ Small styrene trowel (or you can use your burnishing trowel)
- ▶ Stencil of choice
- ▶ Metallic Venetian plaster

1. Apply the Venetian plaster as described in steps 1-5.

2. Apply a third, thin coat. Once you arrive at the 80 to 90 percent dry stage, do not burnish/compress the final layer completely. **NOTE: Once the plaster is compressed to a high shine, the adhesion quality of the metallic plaster to the base plaster will be greatly reduced and the metallic plaster may peel away. It is similar to trying to paint over slick glass.** Run the edge of your trowel over the plaster a few times to develop a slight surface shine, but do not compress.

3. Place your stencil where desired and gently affix it with low-tack painter's tape. Carefully, trowel a small amount of



4. Once the metallic plaster is at the 80 to 90 percent dry stage, you may then burnish/compress the entire finish. At this time, the all-over Venetian plaster finish will not compress as easily, thus leaving an uneven shine, which will contrast nicely with the high shine and reflective metallic pattern.



This finish can appear quite bold or very elegant, depending upon the color schemes selected.

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VENETIAN PLASTER HELPFUL HINTS:

- ▶ Before beginning a high-shine Venetian plaster finish, make sure the surface is clean, dry and very smooth.
- ▶ Before application of a high pH/lime-based Venetian plaster, apply an initial coat of quartz primer. A quartz primer is commonly used to prepare surfaces so that they are perfectly absorbent, smooth and transpiring and will create a good foundation for applications such as stucco or lime-based Venetian plasters.
- ▶ When selecting a base paint color, it's best to use a complimentary color, at least two steps lighter in value than the dry plaster itself. This will allow for more visual depth in the final finish.
- ▶ Do not apply a water-based/acrylic sealer over a lime-based plaster. The high pH in the plaster can eventually break down the resins in an acrylic sealer.
- ▶ When using lime-based products, make sure to wear protective clothing and eye-wear.
- ▶ There are interior and exterior Venetian plaster options. Typically, the true lime-based plasters are both interior AND exterior. Inquire of the product manufacturer as to which plaster can be applied where.

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