Although they have been around for centuries, specialty finishes based on crushed marble, lime, plaster and other materials are enjoying a modern-day renaissance. Their surging popularity is due in part to the increasing numbers of home and business owners who love the rich texture and color that they give walls and ceilings. To satisfy clients’ demands, architects and designers are specifying specialty finishes faster than paint can dry, and now a variety of specialty-finish products is available from building products suppliers, direct from manufacturers and even over the Internet.

All of this is good news for plasterers, drywall applicators, painters and other contractors looking to expand their business. There are classes offered that teach various application techniques, and at least a few products and systems on the market incorporate skills and tools most contractors experienced with trowel work are already familiar with. Then there’s the bottom line—the profit potential can be great, making these finishes as attractive to the contractor as they are to the many customers who are hungry for the look.

A Brief History

You might say that specialty finishes are as old as the pyramids, with made-from-scratch recipes of
minerals, natural pigments, sand and even animal by-products used over the centuries in places such as Egypt, Morocco and 17th-century Italy. During the European renaissance, artisans known as stuccotori would painstakingly apply layer-upon-layer of specially blended finishes to walls, then burnish the finish to a sheen that rivaled marble.

Today, dozens of sophisticated products replace secret ancient recipes, yet adopt their romantic-sounding names. Venetian plaster, marmorino, fresco, grassello, decorative finish and intonaco are just a few examples of the terms manufacturers use to describe their products, many of which come from Italy, California, New Mexico and Texas.

Beyond their name, these finishes are made from a variety of materials: plaster, marble dust, lime, resins and aggregates top the list.

“The range of products is huge,” said Agnes Liptak, president of Fresco, a New York City-based firm of 30 artisans that specializes in decorative finishes. “They vary in texture, sheen and level of aggregate, as well as the coloration imbued. Some can be used straight out of the can while others require careful application of multiple layers.”

Liptak, who founded her company 10 years ago and installs specialty finishes in upscale commercial and residential properties in New York and as far away as Istanbul, advises checking with local paint stores (those for house painters as well as artists) to ascertain what finishes are available in a contractor’s area. Building supply dealers who carry plaster products are an excellent source of specialty finishes as well.

“Begin by offering a limited number of finishes,” Liptak suggested. “Work these out first before you sell them. Start with small jobs in a ‘friendly’ environment where the owner will understand that you are developing a new skill.”

More Advice from the Pros

Another decorative finish specialist, Chris Pedrin, concentrates his work in several affluent communities about 30 miles south of San Francisco. He had a very strategic approach to founding his company, Alton-Kelly Corp., which employs three to 24 plasterers at any time, depending on the size of the job.

“To learn the business, I treated it like college,” he said. “I read everything I could get my hands on and often went to antique stores looking for old books on forgotten techniques. Then I went where the money was. I began my business in the early 1980s when we were in the middle of a bad recession. I figured that rich people had money regardless of economic conditions and would pay for fine work. I began by using a pebble-dash method I’d learned in England on a large summer house after quoting the highest price I’d ever asked for my work. The owner not only accepted my bid, but I made more money on that job than plastering three smaller houses.”

Pedrin, whose background is in ornamental plastering, expanded his business to integrally colored specialty finishes and concentrates mainly on the residential market. While he has used marmorino finishes, he believes they are easier to sell to the commercial market, which he views as more adventurous.

“Businesses tend to close or remodel every five years and don’t have the sense that dec-
"orating is permanent the way homeowners do," he said. "Choosing a specialty finish can be scary for a homeowner—even though it is what they want—so you have to be patient with them but control the process."

Given his plaster background, Pedrin uses mainly plaster-based finishes. He prefers Diamond® Brand Interior Finish Plaster from USG Corporation for the way it spreads and holds color.

"Its timing is beautiful, and the colors we get out of it are gorgeous the more we knock it down for the mottling," he said. "Marmorino is great, too, but requires extra effort. It’s also very popular right now among applicators and homeowners. The competition for the jobs tends to drive the price down, so I avoid it."

Instead, Pedrin uses plaster to create walls and ceilings that are works of art. He mixes his colors from scratch in his own workshop using dried pigments and tends to discourage his clients
from choosing the latest, trendiest colors, believing they’ll look
dated long before the walls show any sign of wear. His cus-
tomers love the rich, earth tone and antiqued looks he achieves,
often by adding coffee to the mixture. (While many manufac-
turers recognize that the addition of coffee and other additives
can be successfully accomplished, they offer no recommenda-
tions or guidelines for these types of applications.)

“I add about 8 ounces of ground coffee to the water and then
mix in a half sack of Diamond finish,” he said. “The tannic acid
in the coffee bleeds through the finish a few days after it has
dried and gives the surface a wonderful antique look. This tech-
nique adds another dimension to just about any color you use
and looks especially good with a linen color that’s popular with
my clients.”

As far as pricing his work goes, Pedrin charges a premium
because he is a specialist. The Lee Saylor catalog—the guide
many architects and others in the industry use for various
rates—does not address the value of specialty finishes, accord-
ing to Pedrin.

“Once I convince people that upgrading their walls is as impor-
tant as the granite countertops and hardwood floors they’re
installing, and they see the quality of my work, they’re willing to pay a premium price,” he explained.

**A Great Entree**

Not everyone is an ornamental plasterer or has the imagination to use coffee successfully in his or her work, of course. (Pedrin also uses cotton string, abalone and pearls to interesting effects!) For drywall and exterior stucco installers and painters in particular, it is still possible to offer specialty finishes, feel confident about it and make a great profit by taking advantage of the many systems on the market that offer every component you’ll need to complete the job.

Kim DeLeeuw of Salt Lake City, Utah, got his start working for a drywall contractor in the 1970s. He soon went out on his own and specialized in high-end smooth walls finished to Level 4 or 5. About 10 years ago, his customers started asking for colored plaster, so he developed a finish made from scratch that combined drywall mud with pigment and aggregate.

To be successful with any specialty finish, DeLeeuw and his partner, Jeff Saxton, advise careful coordination of applicators for consistent work. Unlike installing exterior synthetic stucco, for example, the applicator must adjust to doing finer work and pay more attention to detail.

DeLeeuw and Saxton built their business, Decorative Plastering & Drywall, largely on word of mouth. As many contractors have found, once a homeowner, architect or designer sees the successful application of specialty finishes in one home or business, they want it for their own space.

DeLeeuw has differentiated his business
in several other ways as well. He often etches design into his work including petroglyphs, ivy, branches and wild animals. He has pressed branches and leaves into the wet plaster to create impressions and stains them with subtle colors once the plaster has dried. His signature, which he positions inconspicuously, is a gecko, the image of which he presses into the soft plaster.

For a special effect, once he has etched in a design such as petroglyphs, he sprays the surface with water until it is dripping wet, then slides a pool trowel over the surface to rework the texture. The rounded shape of the trowel creates an undulating effect, while the extra water soon dries and cracks the surface, giving it an aged look.

“Referrals keep us busy, but we have started calling architects and designers and showing them samples,” DeLeeuw said. “We’re also installing our specialty finishes throughout a 2,000 square foot ‘working house’ in Salt Lake City that will serve as a resource and design center to showcase various products and materials that are available in the area. There will be a plaque on each wall that describes the finish and features our company name.”

A Promising Source of Future Work

Keeping in touch with architects and designers is a good way to ensure continued work and supplement the personal referrals that the other contractors interviewed for this article reveal are a large source of their business.

“Don’t rely on the designer or the architect to specify the system to be used,” Pedrin added. “They’re too busy and focused on the many components of the job. They also don’t know specialty finishes in detail. Talk directly to home-
owners and make your own recommendations.”

In Edwards, Colo., Bob Kern, owner of Kern Plastering, has been making his own recommendations since he started working with colored plasters 14 years ago. They now comprise 90 percent of his business. The remaining 10 percent is exterior stucco work.

“Colored plaster is the most lucrative plaster business out here,” he said. “It’s priced better than regular plaster or drywall, and there’s no weather factor. We can install colored plaster year-round and avoid slow periods.”

Kern has learned a few tricks over the years, including using his own tint machines, which he relies upon for total control over the colors used in the finishes.

“They’re simple to use and very precise, which is important when you mix lots of batches for big jobs,” he explained. “Just make sure your finish mixer understands that he is just as important as the applicators. He has to be very precise and consistent about how he mixes each batch of finish.”

Kern, who uses USG’s finish system exclusively in his work, says it is imperative that the entire crew of four to five people be in tune. The applicators must pay attention to the curing process when they are both applying and knocking down the finish. It also helps to keep the building interior to an even temperature if possible, ideally 60 degrees Fahrenheit.

When asked what his outlook is for future specialty finish work, Kern laughed.

“I’m facing 600,000 square feet of work in the coming months, and the pace has been like this for several years,” he said. “And even if new construction slows down, which doesn’t appear to be the case in the Vail/Aspen area for 2001, it is only a matter of time before the remodeling market heats up.”

As is true in most regions of the country, many homes in Kern’s area are 15-, 18- or 20-plus years old and growing ripe for remodeling. As Kern explains it, once the owners of those homes see their friends’ new homes completed with specialty finishes, they’ll want to update and upgrade their older homes.

“The remodeling market is wide open,” he continued. “There’s so much work, it’s unbelievable.”

“Putting the Decorative Interior Finish System in an existing home is a piece of cake!” he said. “It’s designed to go over existing, sound drywall with all trims in place. Simply move the furniture out, cover the carpet and go to it.”

Kim De Leeuw used the USG Decorative Interior Finish System to give the walls of this home in Park City, Utah, a rich, almost suede-like appearance.

The finish is applied to the wall to a thickness of 1/8-inch, starting in the corners and moving outward.