IT’S RESTORATION, NOT RENOVATION!

After 120 years and five generations, Toronto’s Balmer Studios are still creating and restoring ornamental plasterwork the old-fashioned way

By Norman S. Helm, BA, MS, APR.

There’s a world of difference between ‘restoration’ and ‘renovation,’ though the two words are too often interchanged indiscriminately—and by people who should know better.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, ‘restoration’ is an “attempt to bring (something) back to (its) original state”; ‘renovation,’ however, is merely “restoring to good condition.” The two meanings are clear and precise.

Among the people who never confuse the two definitions are Ron and Wilf Balmer, brothers and co-owners of North America’s foremost and most famous architectural plaster art company, The Balmer Architectural Art Studio.

The Balmer Architectural Art Studios are unique. Among most architects and designers throughout Canada and the United States, Balmer is a household name. When fire or other damage, or simply the ravages of time, erode a cherished building’s magnificence, almost always it’s Balmer who is called upon to study and sculpt, recreate, manufacture and install the architectural plaster embellishments needed, literally, to restore history: ceiling centres and cornices; pilasters and pediments; columns and capitals; niches; and the myriad of mouldings and enrichments that represent the elegance of yesteryear.

The Balmer Selection Guide itemizes more than 5,000 original designs copyrighted during the company’s 125-year history.

But Balmer is more than a mere restoration company. The search for ornament and embellishment is basic to human nature. Ever since men of fortune started to build their status homes in the classic style of European mansions, ornamental plasterwork has been the finishing flourish, the genteel touch of affluence. Featured in Georgian and Federal homes, it was madly proliferated by the Victorians. And style is cyclical. Today, people are tired of the austere plain boxes of glass, steel and drywall that have dominated the architecture of the past two or three decades. Our society is returning to the elegance of a bygone era. From condos to courthouses, architectural embellishments are again the order of the day. Both new construction designs and renovations now incorporate sculptured architectural art. And, as with the pure restoration work, it’s Balmer alone who can make the difference. The Balmer Selection Guide itemizes more than 5,000 original, copyrighted designs carefully warehoused by the company during its 125-year history. Others have tried (and continue to try) to emulate Balmer’s achievements; but, to date, no individual or company has ever even come close.

Although both restoration and renovation are intimately familiar to Balmer, actual restoration occupies only about 12 percent to 15 percent of the company’s total work load.

“Throughout our history,” says Ron, “the Balmer company has always been heavily involved in both restoration and renovation. But few people today need, want, or can afford, to have things exactly as they were. For
Usually we can salvage some small shard from which we can extrapolate the original as it must have been when new.

many, restoration to a particular historical period usually satisfies. The exceptions, of course, are historical ‘heritage’ buildings where the recapturing of yesterday exactly as it was is of paramount importance.”

Scanning a list of the historical buildings restored by Balmer skill and craftsmanship is like reading a “Who’s Who” of Canadian architecture: Rideau Hall, 24 Sussex Drive, the Parliament Buildings, St. Lawrence Hall, Osgoode Hall, the Ontario Legislative Buildings, Casa Loma, the Chateau Laurier, the Royal York, the Ritz Carlton, the King Edward, Niagara-on-the-Lake’s courthouse that’s now the Shaw Festival Theatre. Add to these the hundreds of private ‘carriage trade’ homes and corporate and professional offices whose owners, understandably, prefer to preserve their privacy, and one cannot help but wonder whether there is any other company, in any business, capable of claiming such a plethora of prominent and prestigious clients.

“Restoration work has always been important to us,” says Wilf Balmer. “And it’s often our most challenging.

“In order to restore a building’s interior authentically to its origins,” Wilf adds, “obviously we have to have some evidence of what those origins were really like. Usually we can salvage some small shard from which we can extrapolate the original as it must have been when new; a short section of cornice, for example, or a fragment of an embellishment. This is usually enough. We meticulously remove the veneers of paint or other finishings that have accumulated over the years then, armed with the ‘raw’ material, we recreate history in the shape of a new whole.

“Occasionally, however,” Wilf
Balmer continues, “there’s absolutely nothing left of the original and we’re forced to work from one of those sepia-toned photographs that so often are our only insight into the way things were. Surprisingly, however, often an old building’s original blueprints are still available.” Paintings too can and must be used once in a while though these, cautions Wilf, are seldom to scale and can be misleading.

The Balmer reputation for achievement in restoration work has been earned over the company’s long and successful history as a family business. Paintings too can and must be used once in a while though these, cautions Wilf, are seldom to scale and can be misleading.

The Balmers have been masters of plaster for at least five generations. Ron and Wilf’s great-great-grandfather apparently started it all in England sometime around the middle of the last century. His son, great-grandfather Philip, brought the business to Canada in the late 1800s. Grandfather Charles F. left his position as foreman of the old Toronto plastering firm of W. J. Hynes in 1909 to join colleague John F. Blakely in the creation of Balmer and Blakely and then, having subsequently bought out his partner, willed the firm to his sons Fred and John in 1944. Wilf joined the partnership in 1955 after 18 years with the firm. Ten years later, Wilf purchased the company from his retiring father and uncle. In 1987, younger brother Ron and Wilf have combined their talents and, with this corporate renaissance, have changed the name of the firm to The Balmer Architectural Art Studios.

For many years, the Balmer business was tucked away in a labyrinthine rabbit-warren of a building hidden behind a row of fading houses in east-central Toronto. There, once beyond the elegantly embellished reception and office area, one could step back into time. Down a bare wooden stairway lay an anachronism: the workshops of a Renaissance crafts guild caught in a time-warp. Worn wooden floors thick with plaster dust and debris. Massive wooden benches stained with 60 years of plaster and shellac spills. The distinctive pungent aromas of the plaster moulding shop. Craftsmen lovingly and flawlessly creating with their hearts and hands both art and elegance; over their heads, small pattern blocks hanging from an open ceiling, each with its catalogue number roughly scrawled above. And all around those craftsmen, peeking out from behind stark white columns and cornices, or standing in mute perpetuity among sculptured urns and fountains, chubby cherubs and seraphims, elegantly draped Greek and Roman Gods and Goddesses, and grotesquely grinning griffons and gargoyles begrudgingly approving every skillful move they make.

But that’s all gone now. Market demands and the need for more space have moved The Balmer Architectural Art Studios to bright, modern facilities. At 9 Codeco Court in Don Mills, Balmer now overlooks the magnificent splendor of Toronto’s Don Valley.
Here, visitors pass through an entrance to elegance into showrooms lavishly displaying many of the company’s 5,000 original art designs. This selection, by far the broadest in North America, is itemized piece by artistic piece in The Balmer Master Selection Guide. From the Guide’s pages leap ceiling centres that turn bland sterile ceilings into conservation-piece canopies—Adams, Georgian, Baroque, Elizabethan, even Contemporary and Art Deco; pilasters and pediments—Greek, Doric, Corinthian, Roman, Renaissance—that convert doorways into entrances; cornices with clean lines and cornices where pomegranates nestle with pineapples and berries flirt among brambles; shell niches; fireplaces; brackets; mouldings and friezes twisted, beaded, crosshatched, and scrolled. And beyond and behind Balmer’s new showrooms are the modern studios and workshops where tradition endures. Yesterday’s Middle Ages ambience may be gone, but the commitment to care, craftsmanship, and quality that has characterized Balmer through 12 decades continues.

The technique for creating ornamental plasterwork have changed very little over the years. Straight mouldings and ceiling cornices are still made by hand on six-metre long, dead level benches. Lines of sisal string are run the length of the bench and the plaster is dribbled, layer by layer, along them. With each run, the artisan craftsman swoops along the forming sculpture with a hand-held template; gypsum plaster hardens fast! An hour later, the pieces go into the drying room to be dried flint hard.

When a design is chosen for a moulded piece of art, the appropriate pattern is located and a flexible mould is made. This gelatine or silicone mould is then filled with gypsum plaster. During this process, pieces of wire, glass fibres, jute or jute fibre is layered in for added strength. Fine mouldings such as garlands are built-up around a core of coarse, brown sisal string. The usually drying process follows. Throughout all the years during which sculptured ornamental art has been a feature of our architecture, the same production techniques have prevailed. No hi-tech here, just sensitive craftsmanship dedicated and committed to the creation of quality. Wilf Balmer sums up that commitment in a story he tells of his grandfather: “My grandfather,” Wilf says, “once pointed-out to me a tiny pinhole in a cornice we were making back in the days of my apprenticeship. When told to repair the minute pore, I protested that no-one could ever possibly see it when the cornice was hoisted and in place several feet off the floor. He countered with the one comment that has directed my life ever since: ‘We know it’s there,’ he said. And that was enough!”