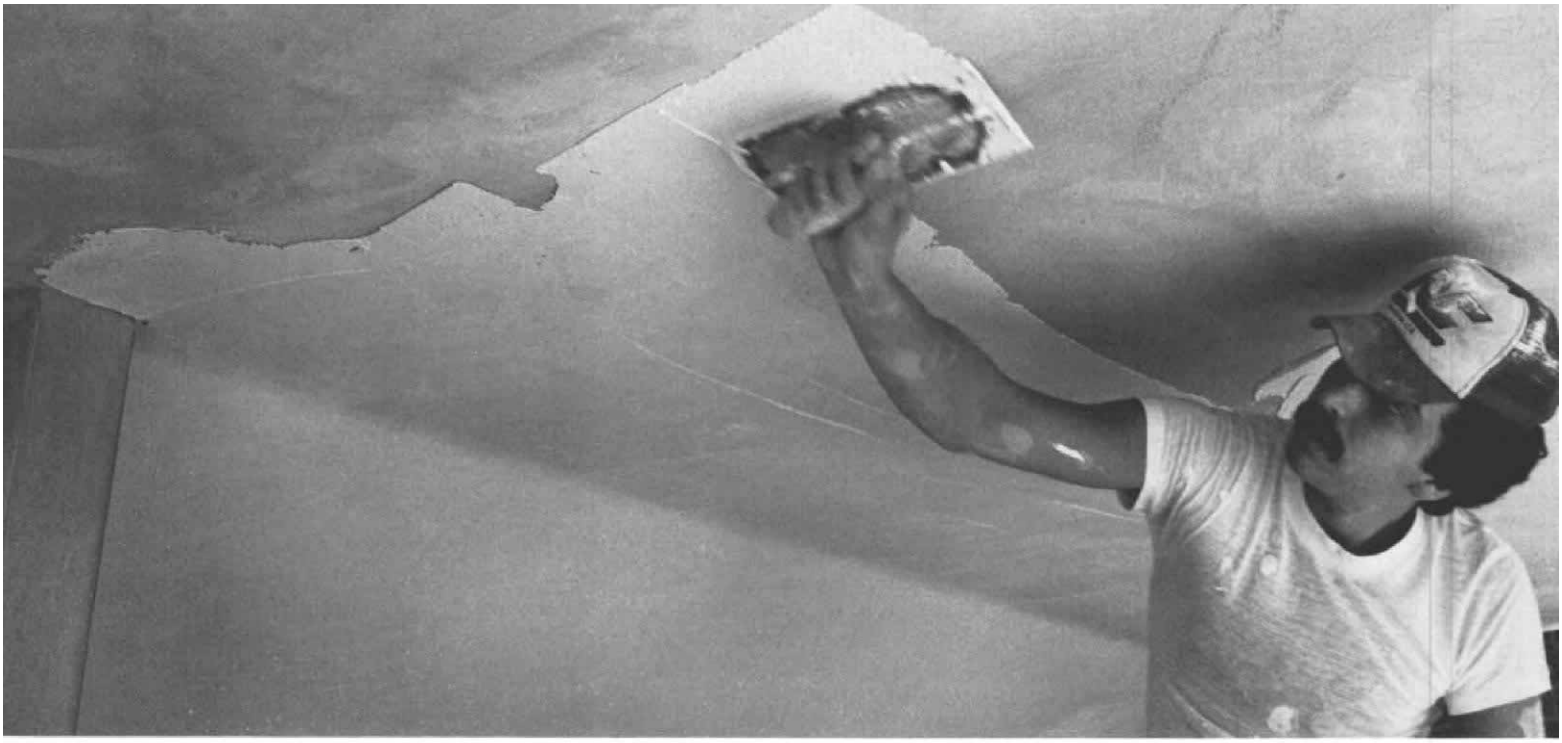


Veneer Plaster

Getting the look and texture of plaster on lath with gypboard and mud

by Tim Snyder

Finishing with plaster isn't the awesome job that it once was. Modern plastering systems have replaced the traditional wood or metal lath with gypboard sheets, textured on one side so they hold the plaster. After hanging and taping this substrate, you trowel on a thin (3/32-in.), seamless surface that's far stronger (up to 3,000 psi) and harder than the drywall itself. It can be painted or left as is, with no sanding or other treatment required.

Called Thincoat, Skimcoat, Kalcoat, Imperial Plaster, or simply veneer plaster, depending on what manufacturer or contractor you're talking to, the finish costs a few cents more per square foot than a conventional drywall finish. It takes time to learn how to handle the mud, though, and you'll need at least two people to do the job right. The plaster sets quickly, and it's meant to be worked fast.

Materials—Veneer plaster isn't a new material, but it's only in the last several years that manufacturers have put together complete systems based on its use. The systems consist of gypsum-core backing board (which is nothing more than regular gypboard with a bluish, textured paper surface), more commonly called blueboard; high-strength plasters for one or two-coat finishes; a retarder compound to extend the setting time if you're mixing big batches or working slowly; fiberglass-mesh joint tape; metal or plastic corner beads; and plastic edge terminals for transitions between plaster and other surfaces. You'll need all these items for most jobs. Manufacturers have their own product lines and encourage you to use their stuff only, but in practice, everything but the plaster pre-mix is interchangeable.

Veneer plaster can be either a one or a two-coat finish. The one-coat system is quicker, but if you want a slightly stronger, smoother wall surface, use the two-coat system. With the two-coat system, the base, or scratch coat is a grey, coarse plaster that bonds well with the substrate and with the white finish coat that covers it. This final coat can be floated to a satiny-smooth finish, or you can texture it by adding washed sand to the mix, or by going over the plaster roughly with your float. The finish coat can also be tinted with powdered pigment, though this is risky, since color may vary slightly from batch to batch.

Apart from sand, pigment and retarder, all you add to the plaster is clean water. The retarder gives about 15 minutes more working time—a blessing if you're troweling in corners or around contoured areas that demand more attention than flat work. A retarder works best when it's pre-mixed in water and then added to the batch as it's being mixed. Use the water-to-weight ratios recommended on the bag, both for plaster and retarder.

Veneer plaster can be applied as a one or two-coat finish over specially textured gyprock or concrete. The finish is far stronger than drywall and needs no sanding or painting once the finish coat has been floated smooth. Facing page, top, the white finish coat goes on over an equally thin base coat. Facing page, bottom, base-coat application. Stilts are a must for ceilings and high sidewalls.

Tools—Here you'll need a combination of drywall and plastering equipment. A straightedge and utility knife work fine for cutting the blueboard, just as they do with gypboard. Drywall screws aren't usually necessary, so all you'll need to hang the backer board is a hammer and ring-shank drywall nails.

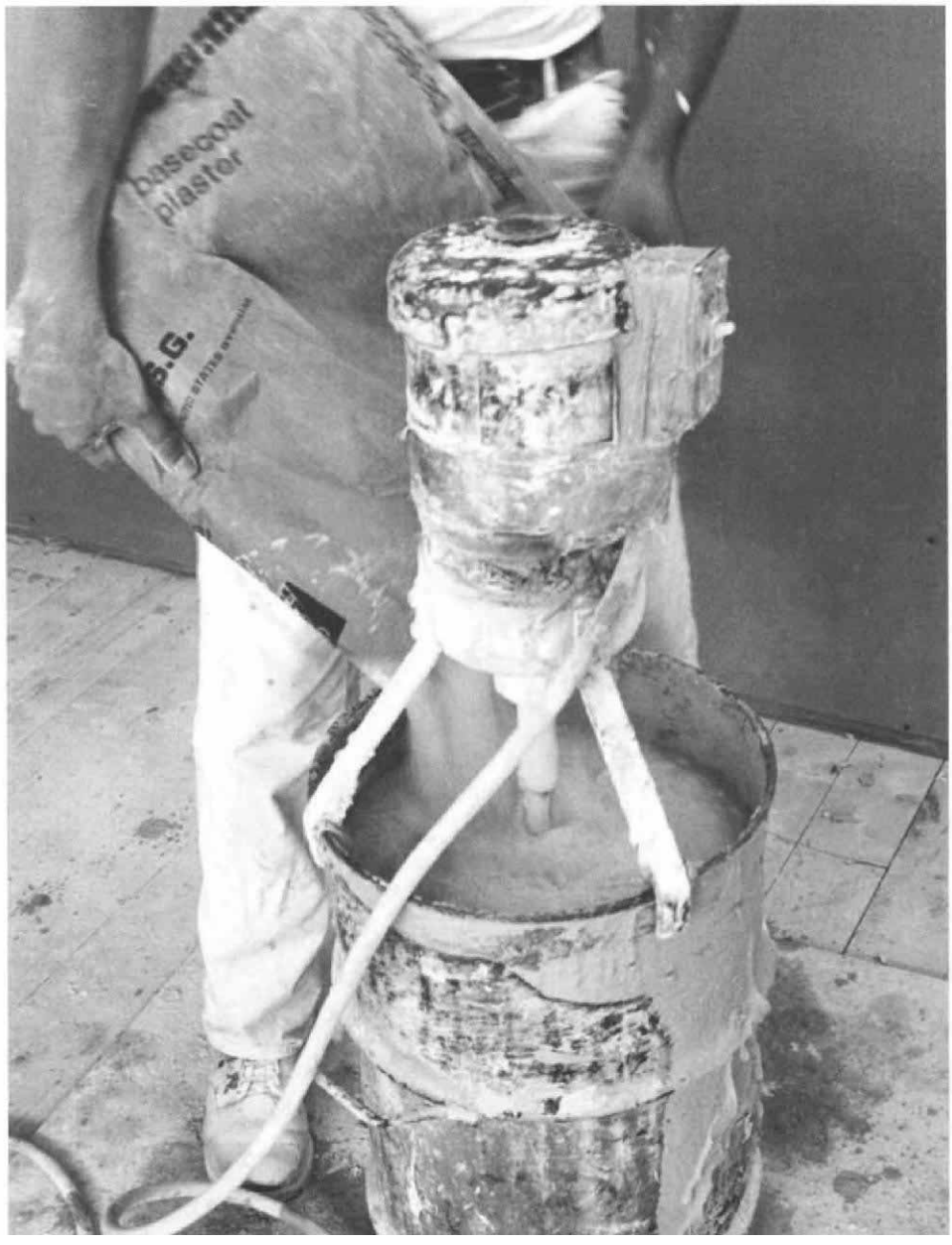
The plaster has to be mixed by machine. Most pros use a heavy-duty commercial mixer (photo below right), but a drill-driven blade will also work, if the drill can take the strain of heavy mixing. This isn't paint. With either rig, you'll need a couple of clean, strong containers to mix in. Plastic drywall-compound buckets work well, but they won't hold an entire bag's worth of mix. If you can get a couple of 30 or 40-gal. steel drums, use them instead. It's important to wash out the container completely with every other batch you mix. Otherwise, old plaster can contaminate a new batch and cause it to set too soon.

You'll need a hawk to hold the mud, and a plastering trowel to apply it. These can be either wood or metal. Once the mud is on the wall, the trowel becomes a smoothing tool. To produce an extra-smooth finish, you'll need a sponge-surfaced float and a handy source of water to keep the sponge clean and wet as you work the plaster. A garden hose with a misting nozzle does a good job. Some plasterers also use a blister brush for smoothing. It's similar to a paintbrush, but with thick felt strips rather than bristles. Like the sponge float, the felt has to be kept wet. Corners are best finished with a corner plow, which is simply a specialized float that's bent into a right angle so that both sides of a corner can be smoothed at once.

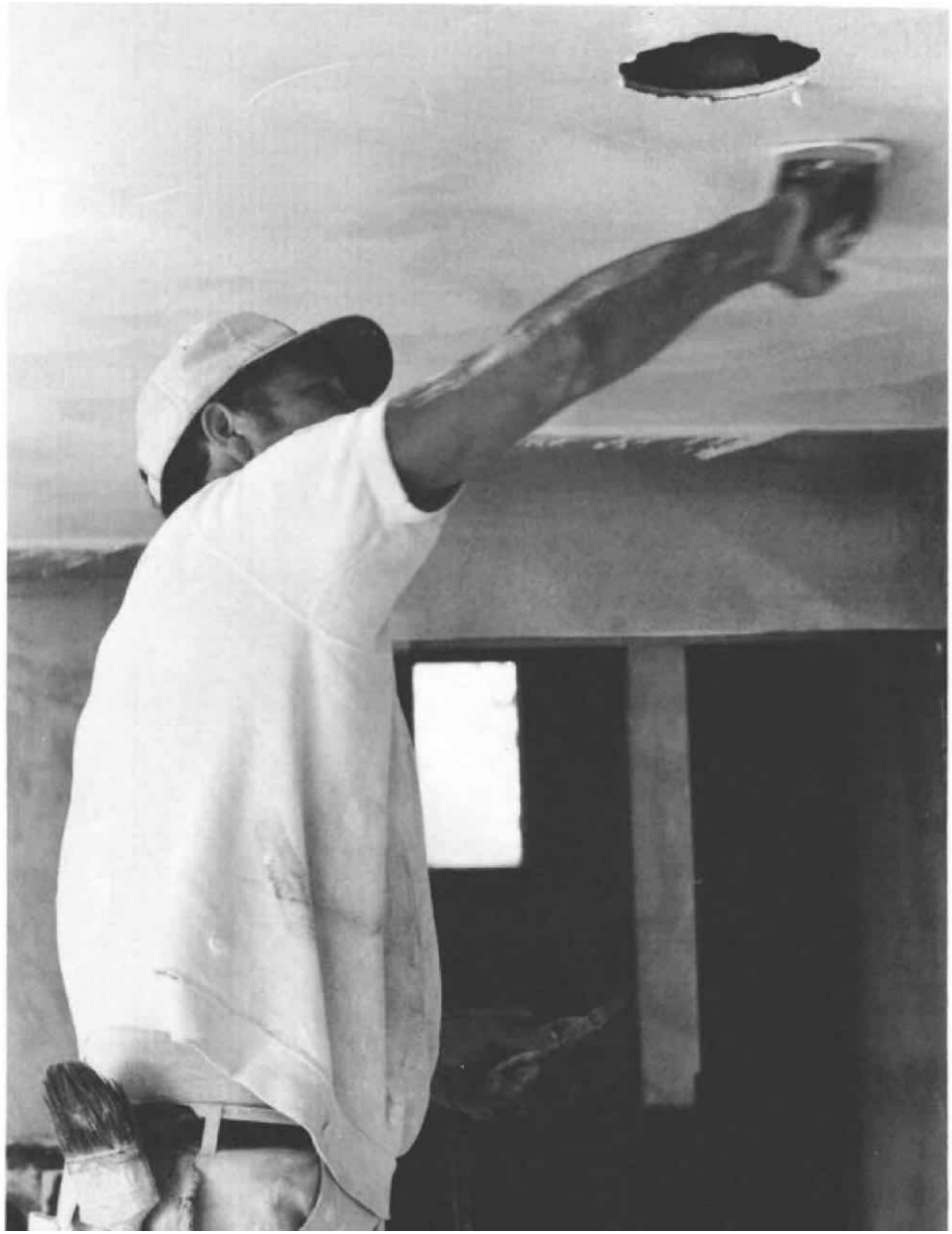
Get plasterer's stilts for working on ceilings. Speed and mobility are important parts of the job, so it's worth renting or borrowing a pair. With a two-man crew working on stilts, the mortarboard has to be set up at tabletop height, so that both mudslingers can get to the mix without dismounting.

Preparation—First, hang the blueboard, just as you'd hang drywall. Since the total thickness of the plaster finish should be only 3/32 in. or so, get the substrate plumb, with as few voids and dips as possible. Wherever the blueboard meets wood, brick or any surface that won't be plastered, install metal or plastic edging along the transition line (photo above right). These special edge terminals act as grounds so that you plaster up to the dissimilar material but not against it, allowing each surface to expand and contract at its own rate. Outside corners require metal or plastic beads, and inside corners should be taped. Reinforce all other joints with fiberglass-mesh

Preparing the surface. **Before the first coat of mud goes on, corners, above, are beaded with metal or plastic grounds. All joints are reinforced with fiberglass mesh-tape. The plaster compound can be mixed using either a commercial rig, below, or a powerful electric drill and spade. Water must be clean enough to drink, and solid should always be added to liquid.**



Applying the plaster. **Above, the last of a batch of finish coat is about to be hawked and applied to the scratch-coated wall in the background. Learning how to handle the fluid mix takes practice. Speed is essential, since the plaster sets in less than an hour. Once applied, each coat is either floated smooth or textured. Using an overlapping circular motion, below, and keeping the float clean and wet help speed the work. Lighting fixtures and trim are installed after the finish dries.**



tape. The self-stick kind and the staple-down kind work equally well.

Veneer plaster can be applied over materials other than blueboard. It will stick to a concrete-block wall as long as you've got a clean surface. Remove dirt and grease by scrubbing down the wall with a weak solution of muriatic acid and water. Poured-concrete walls have to be treated with a bonding agent before you start plastering. This is a brush-on preparation, available from masonry suppliers, that creates a surface the plaster will adhere to.

Using the mud—Mixing, applying and floating techniques are the same whether you're plastering against blueboard or concrete. To mix, always add solid to liquid, except if you need to add retarder to a batch that's in danger of setting too soon. Wet-to-dry proportions can depart slightly from the recommendations on the bag (usually 8 gal. per 80-lb. bag). In hot weather, for example, a quart more water will keep the mud workable longer. It's important to blend the ingredients thoroughly. But don't overmix them, because this accelerates the setting time.

If there are just two people working on the job, the best strategy is to spill your batch on a mortarboard so that both workers come and go with hawks, trowels and floats (photo above left). As the batch runs out, one remixes and the other starts to level the plaster just applied. A batch may set faster than one person can apply it. Working time is about an hour, less if the weather is warm. With three workers, two can apply the mud while the third supplies and mixes, so no mortarboard is necessary.

Do the ceilings first (photo below left). For a one-coat job, pre-hit all the joints with mud as you work section by section. This helps to keep the fiberglass-mesh tape in place as you coat the rest of the surface. Veneer-plaster mud is more fluid than drywall compound, so you have to load your trowel, then move it from hawk to ceiling or wall in a single, continuous motion. This particular stroke takes some time to master. Wear a hat.

Follow your application stroke with a reverse stroke that passes back over the plaster. This double-back technique is the fastest way to get mud on the wall in relatively smooth fashion. The object is to move a lot of material as quickly as you can; then go back over the plaster while it's still workable and float it smooth. A sponge-surface float will produce a smoother finish than a plain metal or wood one. With either tool, use a sweeping circular motion, and keep the float wet. You can use a blister brush or a sponged float to create a completely smooth surface, or just let the roughly leveled plaster set for a more rustic appearance. With either approach, plaster that will be covered by casing needs to be flat so that there won't be gaps between wood and plaster after the trim is applied.

Don't apply more plaster than you can float in 45 minutes. As the plaster begins to set, it darkens noticeably, and once this happens, it's folly to try to work it further. □