
Feature article

Romancing the Stone

Doyle and Linda Self's love affair with Safra's authentic Italian plasters began as a quest to satisfy their passion for the most beautiful wall finishes possible.

They started their career as regular paint contractors, and after more than 20 years in that business, were ready for something more satisfying. In 1999, Doyle inventoried every piece of equipment the company owned and contacted a broker to sell the business. Much to their surprise, their paint contracting business sold in two days. Suddenly unemployed, they began the search for their next career. One day while searching the Internet, Doyle ran across a faux finish school, and immediately knew this was to be their next venture.

Soon Linda was off to Kentucky for her first class at The Faux Finish School, taught by Martin Alan Hirsch. Soon after, they both went to New York for another class taught by Bob Marx at The Finishing School. One month later they took another 5 day class from Caroline Woldenberg in Atlanta. Every couple of months, their passion for the most beautiful wall finishes possible led them all over the country taking faux finishing classes.

Their first job was a 750 square foot condo, which brought in \$12,000, quickly followed by a restaurant job which brought in \$30,000. In the first year, they easily made up the money they had spent on classes.

Glazing was the bread and butter of this new business, but it wasn't long before Doyle and Linda gravitated toward the faux plasters. Doyle says "we reached the point if we could not trowel it, we did not want to do it."

One of the other investments they made was in books. Hundreds of dollars was spent for books on faux finishing and Italian decoration. No matter how hard they tried, they could not get the faux finishes to match the depth and richness of the true Italian plasters they saw in the books. So another search began.

Traveling first to Rhode Island, then to Texas, they were determined to find a plaster from Italy to satisfy their passion. One day, again searching the Internet, Doyle found Safra Colors, from Verona, Italy. When he found that this was the company that supplied the plasters for many of the historic buildings in and around the Venetian region of Italy, he contacted them. Two months later a package arrived from Italy with samples of the plaster.

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After using only one sample Linda and Doyle knew this was what they had been searching for. Never before had they seen a plaster that was so easy to apply, and burnished to such a high gloss without waxing or sanding.

Because of Doyle and Linda's passion and enthusiasm for Safra's products, they were asked by Luca Tassan of Safra to be the US distributor. After they accepted the offer, Gianfranco Foroni and Luciano Gianelli of Safra gave them extensive training in the authentic methods of applying Italian plasters – techniques passed down through the ages from generation to generation of skilled artisans.

"Safra told us we could set up the US market any way we wanted," says Doyle. Of primary importance to them was that everyone buying and using Safra plasters be trained in the same ancient techniques that are still used in Italy today. They also wanted to be sure that everyone using Safra plasters had the best support possible. With these goals of excellence and authenticity, the School of Italian Plasters opened its doors in 2001.

Each class is limited to only 10 students, guaranteeing everyone the personal attention necessary for success. Every student, upon completion of the class, also receives a set of 4 DVD's to take home. Knowing from their own experience how exhausting a week-long class can be, Doyle and Linda provide the DVD's for their graduates to keep so they will have a reference that shows exactly what was done in class – an invaluable asset for future success.

Additionally, all the applicators (graduates of The School of Italian Plasters) are networked together across the country, so that no matter what size job one gets, he or she knows that experienced help is available. Just recently Doyle and 3 other applicators worked together to finish a wall at the Tampa, Florida, airport with Stucco Veneziano.

Doyle also advertises nationally to promote the applicators. Today, almost daily, people get jobs from The School of Italian Plasters' web site, www.italianplasters.com. Doyle and Linda charge nothing for this service because "the more jobs they get, the more plaster they buy." This service has proven to be one of the major keys for their success.

The Plaster the Italians Ask for by Name – Artenova by Safra

So what is it that makes Safra plasters so unique?

Annibale Sergio Foroni, who in 1961 founded Safra S.p.A. of Verona, Italy, was a pioneer in the rediscovery of the plasters and techniques which are traditional to the Italian decorative heritage. Known in Italy as "decorative stucco" and in the US as "Venetian plaster", many of the ancient techniques and formulas were almost lost.

Safra's mission was to make known the decorative wall finishes which were used in the Italian art cities, especially Venice, during their years of greatest splendor. The goal was to reproduce the traditional classic formulas in a way that was compatible with present-day

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construction methods. In order to achieve that goal, the effort took two directions – first, to actually discover on ancient walls, both interior and exterior, a variety of authentic plaster finishes, and then to develop products which would outperform today's market standards, either technically or aesthetically.

That mission led Safra to the rediscovery of effects and techniques typical of Italy's decorative past. These rediscoveries include both famous (Stucco Veneziano) and less famous (such as Stucco Mantovano) products and application techniques.

In 1980, after years of research and development, Safra introduced to the Italian market the ArteNova line of rediscovered decorative wall finishes, which were enthusiastically embraced by the Italian market.

Still owned and operated by Foroni's son, Luigi, and brother, Gianfranco, both chemists, Safra products have become internationally acclaimed.

Today, Safra has a huge portfolio of Venetian plasters and other authentic Italian wall finishes, covering a wide range of looks, textures, and technical performances. No other company in the world is more committed to producing true authentic Italian plasters that will last a lifetime.

The Vibrant Glowing Color

In keeping with company philosophy, Safra complemented its line of traditional wall finishes with a line of authentic earth colorants. These restoration quality colorants come in the most advanced form of tinting pastes.

Safra's ArteNova colorants create walls that come alive with color. The authentic earth pigments, in their purest crystalline form, are unlike most pigments available on the market today. The crystalline form of authentic earth pigments catch the light and cause your walls to glow from within -- a look that is unattainable by any paint product. And the range of hues available is breathtaking -- imagine the colorful splendor of the Italian Renaissance!

Safra's colorants were the only ones considered by the Italian government for the restoration of the frescoes in Florence's Cathedral Dome of Brunelleschi. Built in the late 1300's, this beautiful building has the largest dome in the world made of bricks and erected without scaffolding; an architectural and engineering marvel, and vitally important piece of Italy's art history.

Venetian Plaster

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Many public and private buildings in Italy have walls of marble or other stone -- huge, heavy slabs and blocks erected to create a wall whose exceptional beauty and elegance would endure for thousands of years.

In Venice, however, it was impossible to use marble or stone for the walls of any structure. Architects and designers of the city built in water used stones only as necessary for load-bearing portions of the foundation. The remainder of the building had to be constructed to be as lightweight as possible.

For many years, Venetian architects and designers experimented with various methods and materials, looking for a way to finish walls to give their city the same enduring elegance as cities built on the mainland. And so "Venetian Plaster" was born.

The technique consisted of hand applying several layers of plaster to the wall, with the last few layers creating the decorative effect. These decorative layers were of a plaster made of powdered or ground marble or limestone, thinly applied to create a wall finish that had the visual depth, richness, cool touch, and natural elegance of stone or marble.

Over time, as the lime crystallized in reaction to the air (carbonation), the plaster returned to its original state of stone, creating a wall finish that was stronger than any painted finish.

Not a Faux Finish

Although some DIY companies offer a product they call Venetian Plaster, it is usually only a faux finish. These products are typically just a very thick acrylic paint, designed to be applied using simple techniques which require no special training. While they and other faux finishes attempt to mimic the appearance of marble and stone, they fall far short of the rich stonelike look and feel available.

Stucco Veneziano

The high gloss shine of Safra's most requested plaster, Stucco Veneziano, reflects the brilliance of master chemist Gianfranco Foroni. Ten years in development, Gianfranco's formula preserves the rich stonelike texture and translucency of the Italian decorative heritage, while adding the ability to take deep, intense colors. Durable, washable, and patchable, Stucco Veneziano is called in Italy "the woman's plaster" because it is so easy to apply. Applicators who use this plaster love its easy to burnish, mirror like reflection, achieved without waxing or sanding. It is love at first sight!

Marmorino

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Marmorino is one of the Venetian plasters which is currently gaining popularity. The word "marmorino" means, literally, "little marble". Safra's Marmorino is made of coarsely ground Carrara marble. The whitest of the marbles, it has been used since before the Renaissance to make the highest quality decorative plaster finishes. When skillfully applied, the subtle sparkle of marble is evident. Cool as stone to the touch, with a satiny look and feel, Marmorino gives your walls an understated elegance.

Mantovano – Safra's Signature Finish

Mantovano, a unique and intriguing wall finish dating back to the 11th century, was rediscovered by the researchers of Safra.

During the 11th century, the growing city of Mantua (now Mantova), needed more space and a better defense. To meet those needs, architect Alberto Pitentino modified the flow of the River Mincio to create a moat of four artificial lakes surrounding Mantova. Wandering outside the city in those times was quite dangerous, so people would look for raw materials as close to their city walls as possible.

While the limestones used by the people of Venice came from the delta of the Brenta River close to Venice, the limestones used by the people of Mantova were pulled from their moat and the River Mincio. The limestones from the two different areas, when ground, made plasters which were quite different in character. Because of its more fluid nature, the Mantovano plaster had to be applied using a brush and a trowel.

The resulting wall finish knew great popularity during the Italian Renaissance, when the Gonzaga family ruled the city for three centuries after seizing power from the Bonacolsi family in 1328.

During the Renaissance, Mantova was one of the most important European courts, hosting artists like Pisanello, Mantegna, Perugino, Correggio, LB Alberti, Giulio Romano, Rubens, and many more. In that period the architecture of the city was deeply changed and many of Mantova's famous palaces were built, their walls finished with the unique and intriguing Stucco Mantovano.

During the centuries after the Renaissance, the city of Mantova lost popularity and declined, and the Stucco Mantovano finish and technique were lost.

Safra, located less than 50km from Mantova, could not let such a unique traditional wall finish disappear. After years of research in the libraries of Mantova they found the original application technique and important clues to its formulation. After more lab work they were able to bring back to life the original Mantovano wall finish.

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Others may try to imitate it, but only with Safra Stucco Mantovano can you have a piece of the unique history of one of the wealthiest and most powerful cities of the Italian Renaissance.

The Unique Wall

The demand for decorative plasters in the high-end market is gaining momentum. Architects and designers are looking for a wall finish with a unique signature, and Safra authentic Italian plasters are the answer.

Luigi, the owner of Safra Colors said, “in Italy we try to make walls look new and in America they try to make walls look old.” At first the factory was not impressed with so many women in the US doing the plasters. In Italy this is a man’s job. But Linda soon won them over with some of her more artistic plaster applications. In fact, in 2002, Doyle and Linda were honored by being asked to teach the Italians some of their new artistic finishes. “In Italy they look at these plasters as a wall finish – tradition, but just a wall finish. In the US we look at them as art and are only limited by our imagination,” says Linda.

Now twice a year they travel to Italy for advanced classes, spring and fall. They take up to ten applicators to train also, along with their spouses. The advanced classes in Italy are taught not by Doyle and Linda, but by Luciano Gianelli, a true Italian master. Doyle says, “I do the advanced class in Italy for 3 reasons: First, it changes your perception to actually see the plasters – every time, you come back truly inspired. Second, the trip is worth it just to watch Luciano’s hand with the plasters. (Luciano has been with Safra for about 40 years). The third reason is, I never do an estimate where I don’t use the phrase, ‘and when I was in Italy’. I can work it into any conversation.”

The School of Italian Plasters, now in its fourth year, has trained nearly 400 people to be Safra authentic Italian plaster applicators. So, if you have a desire to offer to your clients the plaster the Italians ask for by name, using authentic ancient techniques, sign up for a class at The School of Italian Plasters and let Doyle and Linda’s love for their plasters inspire you, so that you too may be Romancing the Stone.