

Plasterers and Stucco Masons

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Significant Points

- Plastering is physically demanding.
- Plastering is learned on the job, either through a formal apprenticeship program or by working as a helper.
- Job opportunities are expected to be good, particularly in the South and Southwest.

Nature of the Work

Plastering—one of the oldest crafts in the building trades—is enjoying resurgence in popularity because of the introduction of newer, less costly materials and techniques. Plasterers apply plaster to interior walls and ceilings to form fire-resistant and relatively sound-proof surfaces. They also apply plaster veneer over drywall to create smooth or textured abrasion-resistant finishes. In addition, plasterers install prefabricated exterior insulation systems over existing walls—for good insulation and interesting architectural effects—and cast ornamental designs in plaster. Stucco masons apply durable plasters, such as polymer-based acrylic finishes and stucco, to exterior surfaces. Plasterers and stucco masons should not be confused with drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers—discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*—who use drywall instead of plaster when erecting interior walls and ceilings.

Plasterers can plaster either solid surfaces, such as concrete block, or supportive wire mesh called lath. When plasterers work with interior surfaces, such as concrete block and concrete, they first apply a brown coat of gypsum plaster that provides a base, which is followed by a second, or finish, coat—also called “white coat”—made of a lime-based plaster. When plastering metal lath foundations, they apply a preparatory, or “scratch,” coat with a trowel. They spread this rich plaster mixture into and over the metal lath. Before the plaster sets, plasterers scratch its surface with a rake-like tool to produce ridges, so that the subsequent brown coat will bond tightly.

Laborers prepare a thick, smooth plaster for the brown coat. Plasterers spray or trowel this mixture onto the surface, then finish by smoothing it to an even, level surface.

For the finish coat, plasterers prepare a mixture of lime, plaster of paris, and water. They quickly apply this to the brown coat using a “hawk”—a light, metal plate with a handle—trowel, brush, and water. This mixture, which sets very quickly, produces a very smooth, durable finish.

Plasterers also work with a plaster material that can be finished in a single coat. This “thin-coat” or gypsum veneer plaster is made of lime and plaster of paris and is mixed with water at the jobsite. This plaster provides a smooth, durable, abrasion-resistant finish on interior masonry surfaces, special gypsum baseboard, or dry-wall prepared with a bonding agent.

Plasterers create decorative interior surfaces as well. They do this by pressing a brush or trowel firmly against a wet plaster surface and using a circular hand motion to create decorative swirls.

For exterior work, stucco masons usually apply stucco—a mixture of Portland cement, lime, and sand—over cement, concrete, masonry, or lath. Stucco may also be applied directly to a wire lath with a scratch coat, followed by a brown coat and then a finish coat. Stucco masons may also embed marble or gravel chips into the finish coat to achieve a pebblelike, decorative finish.

Increasingly, plasterers apply insulation to the exteriors of new and old buildings. They cover the outer wall with rigid foam insulation board and reinforcing mesh, and then trowel on a polymer-based or polymer-modified base coat. They may apply an additional coat of this material with a decorative finish.

Plasterers sometimes do complex decorative and ornamental work that requires special skill and creativity. For example, they may mold intricate wall and ceiling designs. Following an architect’s blueprint, plasterers pour or spray a special plaster into a mold and allow it to set. Workers then remove the molded plaster and put it in place, according to the plan.

Working Conditions

Most plastering jobs are indoors; however, plasterers and stucco masons work outside when applying stucco or exterior wall insulation and decorative finish systems. Sometimes, plasterers work on scaffolds high above the ground.

Plastering is physically demanding, requiring considerable standing, bending, lifting, and reaching overhead. The work can be dusty and dirty, soiling shoes and clothing, and can irritate the skin and eyes.

Employment

Plasterers and stucco masons held about 59,000 jobs in 2002. Most plasterers and stucco masons work on new construction sites, particularly where special architectural and lighting effects are required. Some repair and renovate older buildings. Many plasterers and stucco masons are employed in Florida, California, and the Southwest, where exterior stucco with decorative finishes is very popular.

Most plasterers and stucco masons work for independent contractors. About 1 out of every 10 plasterers and stucco masons is self-employed.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Although most employers recommend apprenticeship as the best way to learn plastering, many people learn the trade by working as helpers for experienced plasterers and stucco masons. Those who learn the trade informally as helpers usually start by carrying materials, setting up scaffolds, and mixing plaster. Later, they learn to apply the scratch, brown, and finish coats.



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Apprenticeship programs, sponsored by local joint committees of contractors and unions, generally consist of 2 or 3 years of on-the-job training, in addition to at least 144 hours annually of classroom instruction in drafting, blueprint reading, and mathematics for layout work.

In the classroom, apprentices start with a history of the trade and the industry. They also learn about the uses of plaster, estimating materials and costs, and casting ornamental plaster designs. On the job, they learn about lath bases, plaster mixes, methods of plastering, blueprint reading, and safety. They also learn how to use various tools, such as hand and powered trowels, floats, brushes, straight-edges, power tools, plaster-mixing machines, and piston-type pumps. Some apprenticeship programs allow individuals to obtain training in related occupations, such as cement masonry and bricklaying.

Applicants for apprentice or helper jobs normally must be at least 18 years old, in good physical condition, and have good manual dexterity. Applicants who have a high school education are preferred. Courses in general mathematics, mechanical drawing, and shop provide a useful background.

With additional training and experience, plasterers and stucco masons may advance to positions as supervisors, superintendents, or estimators for plastering contractors. Many become self-employed contractors. Others become building inspectors.

Job Outlook

Job opportunities for plasterers and stucco masons are expected to be good through 2012. Many potential workers may choose not to enter this occupation because they prefer work that is less strenuous and has more comfortable working conditions. The best employment opportunities should continue to be in Florida, California, and the Southwest, where exterior plaster and decorative finishes are expected to remain popular.

Employment of plasterers and stucco masons is expected to increase about as fast as the average for all occupations through the year 2012. Jobs will become available as plasterers and stucco masons transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force.

In past years, employment of plasterers declined as more builders switched to drywall construction. This decline has halted, however, and employment of plasterers is expected to continue growing as a result of the appreciation for the durability and attractiveness that troweled finishes provide. Thin-coat plastering—or veneering—in particular is gaining wide acceptance as more builders recognize its ease of application, durability, quality of finish, and sound-proofing and fire-retarding qualities, although the increased use of fire sprinklers will reduce the demand for fire-resistant plaster work. Prefabricated wall systems and new polymer-based or polymer-modified acrylic exterior insulating finishes also are gaining popularity, particularly in the South and Southwest regions of the country. This is not only because of their durability, attractiveness, and insulating properties, but also because of their relatively low cost. In addition, plasterers will be needed to renovate plasterwork in old structures and to create special architectural effects, such as curved surfaces, which are not practical with drywall materials.

Most plasterers and stucco masons work in construction, where prospects fluctuate from year to year due to changing economic conditions. Bad weather affects plastering less than other construction trades because most work is indoors. On exterior surfacing jobs, however, plasterers and stucco masons may lose time because plastering materials cannot be applied under wet or freezing conditions.

Earnings

In 2002, median hourly earnings of plasterers and stucco masons were \$15.91. The middle 50 percent earned between \$12.33 and \$20.67. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$9.94, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$26.81.

The median hourly earnings in the largest industries employing plasterers and stucco masons in 2002 were \$15.99 in building finishing contractors, and \$14.94 in foundation, structure, and building exterior contractors.

Apprentice wage rates start at about half the rate paid to experienced plasterers and stucco masons. Annual earnings for plasterers and stucco masons and apprentices can be less than the hourly rate would indicate, because poor weather and periodic declines in construction activity can limit work hours.

Related Occupations

Other construction workers who use a trowel as their primary tool include brickmasons, blockmasons, and stonemasons; cement masons, concrete finishers, segmental pavers, and terrazzo workers; and drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers.

Sources of Additional Information

For information about apprenticeships or other work opportunities, contact local plastering contractors, locals of the unions mentioned below, a local joint union-management apprenticeship committee, or the nearest office of your State apprenticeship agency or employment service.

For general information about the work of plasterers and stucco masons, contact:

► International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers, 1776 I St. NW., Washington, DC 20006.

► Association of Wall and Ceiling Industries International, 803 West Broad St., Falls Church, VA 22046. Internet: <http://www.awci.org>

For information about plasterers, contact:

► Operative Plasterers' and Cement Masons' International Association of the United States and Canada, 14405 Laurel Place, Suite 300, Laurel, MD 20707.

For information on the training of plasterers and stucco masons, contact:

► International Masonry Institute, The James Brice House, 42 East St., Annapolis, MD 21401. Internet: <http://www.imiweb.org>

There are more than 500 occupations registered by the U.S. Department of Labor's National Apprenticeship system. For more information on the Labor Department's registered apprenticeship system and links to State apprenticeship programs, check their website: <http://www.doleta.gov>