
Plasterers and Stucco Masons

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Significant Points

- Plastering is physically demanding work.
- Becoming a skilled plasterer or stucco mason generally requires 3 or 4 years of training, either informally on the job or through a formal apprenticeship.
- Good employment opportunities are expected.
- The best employment opportunities should continue to be in Florida, California, and the Southwest.

Nature of the Work

Plastering—one of the oldest crafts in the building trades—remains popular due to the durability and relatively low cost of the material. Plasterers apply plaster to interior walls and ceilings to form fire-resistant and relatively soundproof 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 to make interior walls and ceilings.

Plasterers can plaster either solid surfaces, such as concrete block, or supportive wire mesh called lath. When plasterers work with hard 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-mesh 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. They then apply the brown coat and the finish, white coat.

Applying different types of plaster coating requires different techniques. When applying the brown coat, plasterers spray or trowel the mixture onto the surface, then finish by smoothing it to an even, level surface. Helpers usually prepare this mixture.

For the finish, or white coat, plasterers themselves usually prepare a mixture of lime, plaster of Paris, and water. They quickly apply this using a “hawk,” that is a light, metal plate with a handle, along with a 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, spe-

cial gypsum baseboard, or drywall prepared with a bonding agent.

Plasterers create decorative interior surfaces as well. One way that they do this is by pressing a brush or trowel firmly against a wet plaster surface and using a circular hand motion to create decorative swirls. Plasterers sometimes do more complex decorative and ornamental work that requires special skill and creativity. For example, they may mold intricate wall and ceiling designs, such as cornice pieces and chair rails. 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.

Stucco masons usually apply stucco—a mixture of Portland cement, lime, and sand—over cement, concrete, masonry or wire 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.

When required, plasterers and stucco masons 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.

Work environment. Most plasters work indoors, except for the few who apply decorative exterior finishes. Stucco masons, however, work outside when applying stucco or exterior wall insulation. Plasterers and stucco masons may work on scaffolds high above the ground.

Plastering and stucco work is physically demanding, requiring considerable standing, bending, lifting, and reaching overhead, sometimes causing neck and upper back cramps. The work can also be dusty and dirty. It can irritate the skin, eyes, and lungs unless protective masks and gloves are used.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Becoming a skilled plasterer or stucco mason generally requires 3 or 4 years of training, either informally on the job or through a formal apprenticeship.

Education and training. Preparation for a career as a plasterer or stucco mason can begin in high school, with classes



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in mathematics, mechanical drawing, and shop. After high school, there are many different ways to train.

The most common way is to get a job with a contractor who will provide on-the-job training. Entry-level workers usually start as helpers, assisting more experienced workers. They may start by carrying materials, setting up scaffolds, and mixing plaster. Later, they learn to apply the scratch, brown, and finish coats and may also learn to replicate plaster decorations for restoration work. Some employers enroll helpers in an employer-provided training program or send the employee to a trade or vocational school, or community college to receive further classroom training.

Depending on the region, some employers say a formal apprenticeship is the best way to learn plastering. Apprenticeship programs, sponsored by local joint committees of contractors and unions, usually include 3 or 4 years of paid on-the-job training and 160 hours of classroom instruction each of those years. In class, apprentices learn drafting, blueprint reading, and basic mathematics for layout work. They also learn how to estimate materials and costs and how to cast ornamental plaster designs.

On the job, apprentices learn about lath bases, plaster mixes, methods of plastering and safety practices. They learn how to use various tools, such as hand and powered trowels, floats, brushes, straightedges, power tools, plaster-mixing machines, and piston-type pumps. Some apprenticeship programs also allow individuals to train in related occupations, such as cement masonry and bricklaying.

Applicants for apprentice or helper jobs who have a high school education are preferred. Courses in general mathematics, mechanical drawing, and shop provide a useful background.

Other qualifications. Workers need to be in good physical condition and have good manual dexterity. Artistic creativity is helpful for those who apply decorative finishes. Applicants for apprenticeships usually must be at least 18 years old.

Certification and advancement. Some organizations related to masonry trades offer training and certification intended to enhance the skills of their members. For example, the International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers, International Masonry Institute confers designations in several areas of specialization, including one for plastering. Candidates who complete a 12-week certification program can earn a designation as a “journey level plasterer” by passing a competency based exam. Experienced candidates can become trainers and earn a designation as “Certified Instructor of Journeyworkers and Apprentices in the Trowel Trades.”

With additional training and experience, plasterers and stucco masons may advance to jobs as supervisors, superintendents, or estimators for plastering contractors. Many become

self-employed contractors. Others become building inspectors.

Employment

Plasterers and stucco masons held about 61,000 jobs in 2006. Many plasterers and stucco masons are employed in Florida, Texas, California, and the Southwest, where exterior stucco with decorative finishes is very popular. Use of exterior stucco on homes in other parts of the country is gaining popularity as well.

Most plasterers and stucco masons work for independent contractors. About 16 percent of plasterers and stucco masons are self-employed.

Job Outlook

Employment of plasterers and stucco masons is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations as a result of increased appreciation for the durability and attractiveness of troweled finishes. Good job prospects are expected.

Employment change. Employment is expected to grow by 8 percent between 2006 and 2016, about as fast as the average for all occupations. In recent years, there has been an increased appreciation for the attractive finishes and durability that plaster provides. 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, 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.

Job prospects. Job opportunities for plasterers and stucco masons are expected to be good because many potential candidates prefer work that is less strenuous and more comfortable. Additionally, some prospects may be deterred by the lengthy apprenticeship. This creates more opportunity for people who want these jobs.

Job openings will come from employment growth and from the need to replace plasterers and stucco masons who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force. Skilled, experienced plasterers with artistic ability should have excellent opportunities, especially with restoration projects. The best employment opportunities should continue to be in Florida, California, and the Southwest, where the use of stucco is expected to remain popular. But decorative custom finishes, expensive homes, and large-scale restoration projects will

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

| Occupational Title | SOC Code | Employment, 2006 | Projected employment, 2016 | Change, 2006-16 | |
|------------------------------------|----------|------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|---------|
| | | | | Number | Percent |
| Plasterers and stucco masons | 47-2161 | 61,000 | 66,000 | 5,000 | 8 |

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

continue to drive demand for plastering in the Northeast, particularly in urban areas.

Employment of plasterers and stucco masons, like that of many other construction workers, is sensitive to the fluctuations of the economy. Workers in these trades may experience periods of unemployment when the overall level of construction activity falls. On the other hand, shortages of these workers may occur in some areas during peak periods of building activity.

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 May 2006, median hourly earnings of wage and salary plasterers and stucco masons were \$16.68. The middle 50 percent earned between \$13.53 and \$21.25. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$10.84, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$27.31.

The median hourly earnings in the largest industries employing plasterers and stucco masons were \$16.92 in drywall and insulation contractors and \$15.55 in masonry contractors.

Apprentices begin by earning about half the rate paid to experienced workers. Annual earnings for plasterers and stucco masons can be less than the hourly rate suggests 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 ter-

razzo workers; and drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers.

Sources of Additional Information

For information about apprenticeships or other work opportunities, you may contact local plastering contractors, locals of the unions mentioned below, local joint union-management apprenticeship committees, or the nearest office of your State apprenticeship agency or employment service. You can also find information on the registered apprenticeship system with links to State apprenticeship programs on the U.S. Department of Labor's Web site: http://www.doleta.gov/atels_bat Apprenticeship information is also available from the U.S. Department of Labor's toll free helpline: (877) 872-5627.

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

► 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, 11720 Beltsville Dr., Suite 700, Beltsville, MD 20705.

Internet: <http://www.opcmia.org>

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

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

For general information on apprenticeships and how to get them, see the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* article "Apprenticeships: Career training, credentials—and a paycheck in your pocket," in print at many libraries and career centers and online at: <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/summer/art01.pdf>.