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Pool & Patio



ALL NATURAL

The artisan Nina Zubkova stands in front of her favorite pattern, flower of life, stenciled onto a cobalt wall in her office.

WALL-TO-WALL ART

An artisan breathes new life into an ancient form of decorative plastering BY N.C. MAISAK

It is the soft scraping sound of 15 trowels applying lime plaster that Nina Zubkova remembers most vividly about the 2004 restoration of L'Eglisette, an 11th-century treasure dedicated to St. John the Baptist in Moules et Baucels, France on four levels of scaffolding, she said, "no one was talking."

"It was as though we all knew not to say anything," she said, "and it was as if we had traveled back nine centuries and were plastering the walls for the first time." It was after this trip, on which she learned the old techniques of decorative plastering, that she hatched the idea of starting a company in Riviera Beach to import and distribute all-natural Italian lime plasters. Zubkova, 56, named her company Dimensions International and also founded a studio of the same name that teaches decorative plasterwork and decorative painting.

In the French chapel, she learned to repair the walls with a white lime plaster over a yellow-ochre plaster. The technique aged the walls instantly. Chaux, which is pronounced "show," is French for lime plaster. "My motto is, 'Why faux it? Chaux it!'" Zubkova said. "I love the creativity that plastering brings out in me and in others. Once I started doing it, I found my calling."

Zubkova, a single mother, moved from Miami, where she had been an art consultant and gallery owner, to a kind of semi-retirement

in Palm Beach Gardens in 2003. But the new home she bought, in a gated community, had boring, plain white drywalls. "So I decided to take a faux-finishing course to perk them up," she said. "I did every wall in my house to practice, and got hooked."

But that was just faux finishing, using paints to create the look of decorative plaster. In 2004, Zubkova took a course with the master artisan Pierre Ricard and discovered natural lime plasters, which have been used in Europe for 4,000 years. Because the plaster is all-natural, made of ground, slaked limestone with natural additives like marble, sand and titanium—it is a green product, unlike plasters with additives, or plasterboard, which is made with gypsum. Natural lime plasters are mold- and mildew-resistant (unlike plasterboard) and free of volatile organic compounds.

The lime, which comes from a collection of small, family-owned quarries in Italy, is dug out of the ground, sometimes by hand, then fired in special kilns and granulated. Water is added to it over 18 to 24 months until a paste is created. Mineral pigments (Dimensions offers 160 of them) can be made integral to the plaster, which means that, as the wall ages, it looks better and better.

The pure limestone plaster can be used either inside or for exteriors. In addition, artisanal plaster is much easier to apply than other

types of plaster generally available in America. Fine craftsmen in Europe, and Unesco, which is in charge of restoring historic buildings like the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, buy similar plaster abroad.

Georgia Morrow, who runs a company called Studio Faux Walls in Laguna Beach, California, now buys Dimensions products for effects like the glossy Venetian plaster. "When you trowel with this product, I can achieve in one pass what I would achieve with six passes with something else," Morrow said. "And the glazes and waxes catch on it immediately."

"If they market it properly," she added, "that will be the number one source for upscale wall finishes." ("I'm trying to keep it quiet here in California," she said, "so no one else finds out about it.")

One of Zubkova's first limestone plaster projects was a 2,400-square-foot condo in Sarasota. Dimensions' plaster also has been used on the exterior of a 50,000-square-foot mansion in Hutchinson Island.

Zubkova and her team of artisans created a sensation at this year's Palm Beach American Red Cross Designer Show House, in January and February, with their Venetian plaster and stenciled sienna-brown Moorish patterns done for the designer Jennifer Garrigues in the loggia. "Nina added silver wax over the pale ivory plaster, so the walls were all twinkly," said Garrigues, who is based in Palm Beach. "I was thrilled to pieces. There's nothing she can't do."

In another Palm Beach show house, the Designer Show House 2006 to benefit the American Lung Association, in April, her artisans applied decorative plaster to living room walls for the Palm Beach designer JoAnn Munro and to the bathroom walls for the West Palm Beach designer Joseph Pubillones.

Zubkova, whose parents are from Ukraine and who has business contacts in Russia, is going to open a Moscow branch of Dimensions International this year.



CHAUX STOPPER

Above, pots of colorful Venetian plaster are used by students in an advanced workshop at Dimensions International. Left, a group of artisans used the Chaux technique, which instantly ages walls, to restore L'Eglise in Moules et Baulcels, France.



MEET THE ARTISAN

Kim Griffin, an Orlando interior designer, has worked with one of Zubkova's artisans on several projects that called for instant aging and old-world textures. She even used Dimensions' plaster (in cobalt blue) in a midcentury modern house in Winter Park, Florida.

Zubkova, along with Linda Marsteller and Katherin Peric, artisans who work with her, offer certification in lime plasterwork, Venetian plaster, frescoes and a variety of decorative finishes. "I love anything that is real and natural and has history," Zubkova said.

"The Romans had their own brilliant process," Zubkova said. "They pulverized the limestone, put it in large clay urns and buried them near underground streams and let the water seep into the powdered limestone to slowly slake it, creating a paste."

Judie Budnick, a decorator in Port St. Lucie, said the plaster that Dimensions custom tinted to match the golden marble on the floor has made a real difference in her new house. "People who walk in our house are wall huggers," she said. "People can't help but touch it."

Zubkova is particularly excited to be introducing the Moroccan tadelakt plaster to her students. (The special plaster is polished with stone tools.) "In five years, it will be as popular as Venetian plaster," she said. "You can put it in bathroom sinks, walls, ceilings and showers. It is totally waterproof, and there are no grout lines."

Zubkova is looking forward to going to France with some of her teachers and students for a master class in the autumn. "It'll be 10-hour days of troweling, touring and wine tasting," she said. "There are hundreds of places to be restored in France. They have a whole list of things for us to do." ▣

Dimensions International

Dimensions International's studio at 1967 West Ninth Street in Riviera Beach, Florida, teaches two dozen decorative plastering techniques—from smooth lime painting to rough-textured, aged finishes. The classes are intended for experienced artisans. Every month there is a first level three-day session for \$895, and every three months there is an advanced three-day session for \$1,200. The class in Moroccan tadelakt will be \$2,000.

The plasters are sold to the trade. Decorative plastering by Nina Zubkova and her artisans runs \$8 to \$20 a square foot for basic projects and higher for more intricate custom work.

For more information, call 561 863-4009 or see www.dimensionsplaster.com.



IN THE DETAILS

Right, a sample of the French technique, Grissaille, that Zubkova learned in a workshop in France. Below, the designer Jennifer Garigues hired Zubkova to decorate the walls with Venetian plaster and silver wax stenciling for her room at the 2006 Palm Beach Red Cross Show House.

