

finishing touch

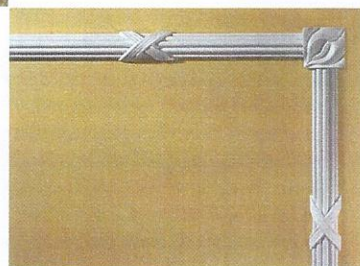
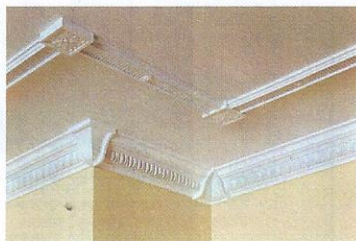
decorative molding adds elegance

by thomas m. ciesla

All photos except ceiling medallion (top) courtesy of Balmer Architectural Moldings, www.balmer6.com. Available at Eastwood & Company



Photo courtesy of Thomas M. Ciesla



The origins of decorative molding date back to the structural elements of ancient buildings in Europe and Asia, where molding was used to support and secure surfaces or prevent weather from entering between cracks in walls and ceilings. In Medieval Europe, the art of plaster and stone molding was raised to an unprecedented level of craftsmanship. As the 19th century drew to a close, handcrafted molding gave way to a new machine-assisted aesthetic, bringing decorative molding to the masses and prompting the design excesses of the Victorian era.

This explosive—some say brutish—use of interior and exterior decorative molding created a backlash calling for a return to the simplicity and honesty of early designs. During the 1980s and early 1990s, subdivisions across America were filled with houses almost completely void of decorative molding. Ceilings blended into walls penetrated with openings finished in gypsum board rather than cased, or framed openings, creating the “sheetrock box.” Some homeowners have grown tired of this spartan look and hunger for the decorative grace of past eras.

MOLDING

Homeowners today can use a variety of molding profiles to create magnificent interiors with relative ease. A single molding profile can be used as an interesting accent, such as crown molding at the ceiling-wall junction or base molding at the wall-floor junction. More ornate applications combine anywhere from two to six molding profiles to achieve a desired look. Doorways can also be dressed up by replacing flat casing with fluted casing, and adding rosette blocks to the upper corners and plinth blocks at the bottom for a classic look.

A chair rail in the middle of a large expanse of wall can create a visual horizontal break; for a vertical break, panel molding can be used to create framed panels. The interior of the framed area can also be painted in a contrasting color to provide a bold accent to the rest of the wall. For added drama, molding can be combined with raised natural-toned wood paneling to create a warm look that is perfect for a library or den.

MATERIALS

Plaster, the traditional molding material in Europe for generations, is still used today, but technology has added cost effective materials for molding profiles, such as wood, hardwoods, plastic, medium density fiberboard (MDF), and polyurethane.



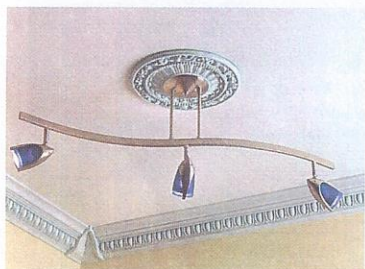
You should consider the price, durability, appearance and weight of molding to determine the best material for your project. Harsher environments need the tough resiliency of plastic molding, while projects requiring a simple paint finish would be perfect for MDF molding, since the lack of a grain pattern is not an issue. If you prefer a stained look, wood is your best choice. Soft and hardwood molding come in two varieties: smooth and patterned. Patterned molding is either

“embossed,” where wood is removed to create a pattern, or “overlaid,” where a wood-like putty is added to create intricate patterns. Softer woods such as pine can be stained to resemble other woods, but by nature, they will be more sensitive to damage. Hardwood moldings, such as oak, cherry, walnut, mahogany or maple, are more expensive than softer woods, but possess an undeniable, intrinsic beauty that is impossible to duplicate. As Chris Gibbs of Hardwood Products Inc., a hardwood distributor in Houston for 20 years, explained, “Even when you stain hardwood, the beauty of the grain comes through and you can see the quality of the wood.”

Polyurethane molding is made when light-weight liquid polymers are poured into molds and formed at high pressures; it's a popular choice because of its ease of installation, durability and ability to accept all latex and oil-based finishes. It combines low weight with high strength, and will not rot, crack or be attacked by insects. This product is often used for crown molding, ceiling medallions around light fixtures, or as a lightweight alternative to ceiling domes. Compared to plaster, it is a favorable alternative—a five foot diameter plaster dome weighs around 300 pounds! Almost any existing profile can be duplicated with polyurethane molding, often with two or three individual molding profiles combined into one light piece, making installation much easier.

FINISHES

The range of finish treatments for decorative molding is practically unlimited. Reohn Zeleznik of the Definitive School of Decorative Art in Houston, the largest decorative school in America, points visitors to his



showroom where dozens of molding samples are on display. The finished samples offer a multi-color spectrum, including metallic, stone, peeled paint, aged, distressed, pickled and even one that appeared to be eaten by insects. As an artisan, Zeleznik was once asked to match the existing molding in a French Chateau-style house which required him to develop a distressed, worm-eaten look. His recreation matched the existing molding so perfectly that the client couldn't tell his work from the original. "That," he says proudly, "is when you know you were successful."

BOTTOM LINE

Decorative molding is priced to match any budget, and starts at around thirty cents a foot for pine quarter-round, going up to more than three dollars a foot for embossed hardwood or dentil crown molding. If you choose to have a contractor install your molding, be sure to ask for references and get a written quote that specifies exactly what will be done. For the do-it-yourselfer, installation of most profiles requires a good miter box or miter saw for corners, but some folks avoid mitering by using corner blocks at the floor and ceiling, and rosette blocks for the top corners of doorway casing. Learn exactly what you will need to do before tackling crown molding; as one of the most popular

do-it-yourself molding projects, it can be tricky, requiring you to flip pieces around and backwards to get the proper cut. This will save you time and wasted materials.

When selecting molding, choose a profile that will fit the size of the room; higher ceilings offer the perfect opportunity to try a compound molding, which combines several profiles to create molding that is larger-than-life, but smaller rooms do well with single profiles. When finishing your molding, try to compliment the existing colors in a room, or strive for a modest contrast. For example, if you are repainting a room using off-white on the walls and a slightly darker color on the ceiling, perhaps the dentil crown molding you add should be finished in a low luster white to create a slight contrast. The more exotic finishes discussed earlier might require the experienced eye of an artisan to match your interior architecture.

Decorative molding is all about grace, elegance and subtle, classic lines. It is jewelry for the home that, when applied properly, will create the look you desire. Regardless of the architectural style of your home, there is a decorative molding profile that will complement your environment to create that rich, cozy feel of past eras—without breaking your budget. ■

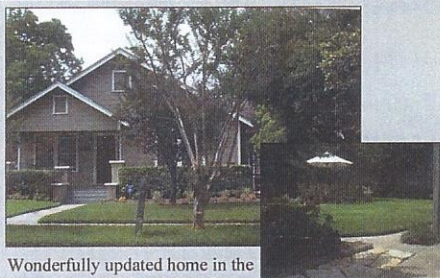
molding types and definitions:

1. Base Shoe - a molding used next to the floor on interior baseboard.
2. Base Board - a flat projection from an interior wall at the floor, covering the joint between the floor and the wall.
3. Corner Block - thin decorative square block for inside and outside corners, usually the same height as the baseboard.
4. Casing - molding around a door or window; may be smooth or molded.
5. Chair Rail - a horizontal molding which may be smooth or molded attached 32 inches above the floor, parallel to the baseboard.
6. Crown molding - any molding forming the crowning or finishing member of a structure.
7. Jamb - the inner top and two sides of a door or window opening.
8. Plinth Block - block of wood placed at the door moldings to separate the baseboard from the casing.
9. Panel Molding - a decorative, flat-backed molding used to frame-out a rectangle or square on a wall.
10. Rosette - decorative square block used at the upper two corners of door trim to eliminate the need for mitered casing corners.

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