

The Official Publication  
of the  
Stencil Artisans League, Inc.

Volume 22, Number 2  
✻ Spring 2007 ✻

# THE ARTISTIC STENCILER

texture/concrete issue

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ahead of the <sup>Stay</sup> game

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# painting lesson



## Concrete Overlay Systems Demystified

Concrete architectural elements are gaining popularity in today's interior spaces. It is a natural, durable, and versatile finish that is as comfortable in old world decor as it is in modern/contemporary design.

Are you intrigued by the beauty of concrete samples that you see at the trade shows? Are you interested in adding handcrafted concrete overlay techniques to your portfolio of services? Do you want more information before you decide to invest in a class? You are not alone. It is a natural progression for decorative artisans as it blends architectural elements, artistic interpretation, and creativity.

## What is Concrete Overlay

Concrete overlays, introduced to architectural concrete and commercial flooring industry in the early 1980's, are a mixture of cement, various aggregates, and hybrid polymer or acrylic resins. Adding polymer resins to the cement and aggregate significantly increases the performance and versatility of conventional cement and concrete materials.

There are many products available today. Each system has a proprietary blend of ingredients and has different application requirements. Some include oxidizers and colorants for hundreds of effects.

Overlays are applied as thin veneer to existing substrates of cement, wood, vinyl, or any rigid surface. It can be mixed in small amounts and applied with a trowel. It can be colored or stained, stenciled or handpainted to achieve endless design possibilities.

Concrete work is a big commitment of time and energy, but it can be worth the effort if you learn the medium and develop an expertise that is marketable. You must be willing to put in the time it takes to educate yourself and gain experience in the medium. Advanced training is necessary before you attempt to sell an overlay job.

Richard C. (Rick) Fischer of Deco Illusions in Indiana says, "The learning curve is steep. You have to learn where it will work and make good, informed choices for your clients." You must have a thorough knowledge of how the product reacts in different situations, especially in adverse weather conditions. You have to be willing to experiment and test the product in a variety of environmental conditions.

Rich recommends that you make a connection with a reputable concrete contractor in your area. They can be a great source of information and advice. If you are not fully comfortable with the process, you can design the project and outsource the prep work to experienced concrete contractors. Then you can perform the artistry.

If you find the work too physical, there are other opportunities for a well-trained professional. Many flat-work concrete contractors want to expand into art concrete. You can become a technical consultant, resident expert, or pattern designer. Be creative with your skill set.

To better understand all that is involved, I asked Rick to share his insight and explain the process. Factors to consider when bidding a job:

Exterior: freeze and heat conditions, sunlight exposure, traffic and wear, use of snow shovels and salt in freeze zones, the condition of the substrate, prep, the best sealer is for the conditions, maintenance.

Interior: most of the above plus educate homeowner on maintenance and care

Sealers are improving all the time. Concrete is porous-it breathes and shrinks and expands. Sealers must allow these natural processes to occur. You have to factor in the hydrostatic pressure also. There are a variety of sealers available and you must understand the working of each and where best to use it.

Some colors are more susceptible to fading in sunlight. Red is the most sensitive. Some colors wear better. You must be able to make good recommendations for the jobs conditions. Rick advises to leave driveways to the flat work contractors. "They can pour colored concrete that takes wear better."

There are many products available today. Each works a little differently, so be sure to get trained in the product. Resurfacers give you a clean slate. "If you do textured surface, be aware that it will wear more," he warns. "Flat surfaces are best in high-traffic areas."

Rick concentrates on sun rooms or porches, wine cellars, columns, backsplashes, fireplace hearths and mantles, entryways, kitchen countertops, interior floors, etc. He says, "A wine cellar floor is the ideal place for concrete overlay. It gets little traffic and little or no sunlight."

Wood substrates are different from concrete surfaces. Be sure that you are trained in the specific skills necessary to perform the work over wood surfaces.

This is also a seasonal treatment in some areas of the country. In colder climates, jobs might have to be scheduled in spring and summer.

## Overlay 101

- 1) Rate the substrate. Make sure it is in good condition. Crumbling concrete cannot be fixed. New concrete must be more than 30 days old before you can work on it.
- 2) Condition. Clean grease and oil with a TSP, ammonia, water mix in a pressure washer with a scrubber attachment. Wash and rinse 3 or 4 times. There are other, more advanced techniques available with advanced study. Make sure you know how to use a pressure washer before you attempt to use it. You can damage the substrate with too much pressure.
- 3) Sand or grind surface to level 3 or 4 to create a tooth. Level 5 surfaces MUST be scratched. Dry overnight.
- 4) Prime. Bonding primer polymer will mix with concrete to bind. Dry overnight.
- 5) Prime again. Apply second coat of primer and immediately mix overlay. When primer is dry to touch overlay is ready to spread.
- 6) Overlay. Apply overlay, best with 2 people, one to pour the other to spread. Do only a workable area, usually between expansion joints. Do not let material stay in joints. If it get in, clear it out. Let dry.
- 7) Screen/Sand. Use a drywall screen to debur the surface, not scratch. Scratches will telescope through to the surface. Some products are more prone to scratching. Experiment.
- 8) Art Layers. Concrete can be colored with dye stain to achieve depth. Stencil or freehand a design. You can also use stain with water like a glaze. Several layers may be done at this point. Earth friendly stains and dyes are the rage. Let dry thoroughly.
- 9) Mask. Cover the walls 2-3 feet high to protect.
- 10) Seal. It is best to spray the sealer. A garden sprayer or pump sprayer made for concrete is fine. Spray 360 degree area. Three coats of sealer are best. Second and third coat can be rolled. Epoxy sealers are good for countertops.

Rick advises everyone interested to become a professional student first and learn all you can. "Knowledge is the key," Rick says. "Educate yourself. Study your field to the fullest. Never feel like you are knowledge proof. You can always benefit from more education."

**Rick, owner of Deco Illusions, specializes in custom and decorative finishes for both residential and commercial clients. You may e-mail him at: [decorick@earthlink.com](mailto:decorick@earthlink.com).**

BY REBECCA E. PARSONS

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