



By Sheri Zeman

Estimating that Protects Your Profit

Like the work itself, pricing a decorative finishing project requires finesse.

You are performing the take-off for a large-scale straight painting job. All is well until the ominous words *faux painting* pop off the finishing schedule and stop you dead. Here's where the guessing game often begins. But we can take the mystery out of faux, to increase our profits and our workload.

Faux finishing, or the broader category of decorative painting, encompasses a wide variety of finishes, both literally and perceptually. As with conventional bidding, the application

method is the key factor in determining production rates and thus costs. The difference with decorative is the large scope of techniques, layers and products, resulting in a wide variation of pricing options.

Determining the finish of the job is just the first step to providing an accurate estimate. Breaking down the finishes into sub-categories helps determine the materials and labor that each method will require. While a simple single-layer glaze uses the least material and the fewest man hours, a more complex finish might involve more than five layers that demand extensive

Geometrics take painstaking care in design and execution. Make sure your bid includes that additional labor time.

labor and multiple trips.

Here are some considerations in creating a bid that will build your bottom line.

Samples and approval

What makes decorative painting so unusual is that the hue and style can be changed by the applicator, generally with very little difficulty. On the other hand, these subtle changes can also greatly increase the time spent getting approval from the client. Approvals can become a tedious, time-eating process, involving both designers and owners.

Be aware of this time, and don't give it away. Here are the two most common ways to capture this billable time in your estimate:

State in your contract that the job includes two samples per area and that additional samples will be billed at a set price (\$75 each, for example), payable up front, then deducted from the final invoice upon contract approval.

Bill a straight fee for samples, and the client can choose to have numerous samples made to his or her comfort level.

The training investment

Specialized training is a critical focus in decorative painting, and large jobs can be accomplished very well with a crew. More applicators means a faster process, and a trained applicator can cut your labor hours by 25-50%. Having a crew leader skilled in several techniques for larger projects will insure blending of the uniqueness of each applicator.

By orchestrating the placement of

several individuals, a large surface will look seamless when finished. Inconsistencies are evenly blended as each person moves to a new portion of the space. Most techniques can be converted to encompass several finishes; the tool and application stay the same, only the product changes.

Although, it's important to know the going rate for burnished plaster effects in your area, it is essential that you know your crew's proficiency in relation to your marketable samples.

For example, a painter trained in a Designer Wall Finishes class has completed up to one week of professional training by an expert instructor who not only teaches the finishes, but also shares critical on-the-job tips for profit making. Of course, with a few jobs under their belts, your crew's production rates—and your profits—will improve greatly.

Training is available through trade associations and decorative painting schools across the country.

Methods: Layers and speed

While decorative painting is a unique handcrafted art, there is a simple way to categorize the methods that are the key to the production rates. The easiest way to begin is by counting layers, along with speed of application for each technique. Some examples are listed in the table at right.

And then there's....

Here are some additional factors to weigh:

Dry time. Dry time is a key component of a decorative painting job. Additional time and crews may have to be allotted to make multiple trips to the job site with just the right timing to maximize production time. Overnight drying is often necessary with plasters

and glazes. For smaller spaces, consider planning three half-days of work instead of one or two full days.

Doors, windows and cabinets. Contrary to the belief of many clients, while doors and windows cut down on materials, they also extend application time and slow production.

Scaffolding, lifts and ladders. Aside from the set-up and tear-down needed on a typical job, the speed of application is affected by the necessary apparatus. For example, setting up custom-built scaffolding for curved staircase walls takes much longer than setting up a rolling tower for open area work. Adding 10-15% to the labor total for ladders and rolling stages would be appropriate to account for reduced production.

Geometric patterns. Repetitive patterns often are given the highest price, and for good reason. The preparation in measuring and calculating squares can be more time-consuming than applying the finish.

An example of this would be the office pictured in the photo above right.



Photos / Faux Design Studio

Here, our firm needed to establish a pattern that would fit proportionately from corner to corner and from ceiling to floor. After deciding on the square pattern, we calculated that the "squares" would be 2-1/2 inches wider than tall—unnoticeable to the eye.

We used levels and low-tack tape to tape off the squares that would receive the horizontal plaster treatment first. Because the plaster was heavy, it required an overnight dry time. The next

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Production Rate	Application	Technique	Examples
Lowest cost	Toweling, rolling/brushing	Skim coats Glaze over texture plaster Textured linens Plaster-buffed to a gloss Single-layer plasters	Acrylic plasters Grasscloth looks Polished Venetian Plaster
Medium cost	Double-colored applications, heavier manipulated toweling	Multi-layer troweled plasters Acrylic textures - 1 st coat Multi-colored glazing Hand-brushed effects	Metallic effects Stries Glazing
Highest cost	Measuring, stencil placement, finishes that involve reactive timing, hand painting	All-over pattern Stenciling/embossing Metallic leafing Crackle and Reactive Distressed woodwork Wood graining Marbleizing Geometric effects	Patterned finishes Gilding Hand-painted trim/cabinets Oxidized metallics Cracked/aged effects

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day, the tape was removed, and the unfinished squares were taped off to get the vertical treatment. Again, overnight drying was required and all tape was removed. The last day, a metallic top coat was rolled over the entire surface.

Repeat patterns require a similar work speed. Most stencils are cut in a 30- to 36-inch maximum Mylar size. This requires repeated placement, to complete the design throughout the entire space. In preparing your estimate, it's always a good idea to have between two and three stencils on hand so that they can be rotated to facilitate washing.

Pricing Your Work

The most common question I hear is: *Do I charge per hour or by square foot?* The simple answer is to know what you need to make and how quickly each layer can be applied. Obviously geo-

graphic and regional factors will also influence your rate. To simplify the process for illustration, I have used a billable rate of \$90 per hour, which includes overhead as a percent of labor.

Labor. Let's say I need to quote a 1,200-square-foot two-story foyer with a popular two-layer metallic suede effect. After meeting with the customer and agreeing on an existing sample board, with only a minor color change needed, I will factor in the following:

First client consultation	1	hour
Sample creation time	1	hour
Second meeting time for final approval	1.5	hours
Job set-up	4	hours
Application time	44	hours
Labor time subtotal	51.5	hours
Ladders/Scaffolding +12%	6.5	hours
Total labor time	58	hours

Note: The job set-up estimate assumes that tape is still up from the base painting. Decorative painting requires additional prep for taping ceiling line and vertical frames. Included in the base painting quote: floor covering, taping, patching, priming and clean up. This would be a separate charge from the decorative painting portion.

Material. Material quality varies substantially, and the use of inferior products can make the difference between profit and loss when it comes to a successful job.

Let's assume these estimated materials:

6 gallons of high-quality sueded product (\$77.70/gal.)	\$ 466.20
3 rolls of low-tack tape (\$ 8/roll)	24.00
Total estimated materials	\$ 490.20
Total job cost (5,220 + 490.20)	\$5,710

Variations can be broken down and easily addressed to give a proper estimate with a methodical approach. Taking these key steps will produce gorgeous results and keep your business expanding to take advantage of aspects of the painting job you may have overlooked in the past.

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General Tips

- Decorative painting often requires scaffolding in spaces where extension ladders would suffice for brush/roller applications.
- Always include in your contract a caveat about the hand-painted nature of the finish.
- Make sure to estimate taping carefully. Decorative painting requires more taping than traditional jobs. Geometric taping can be extensive.

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