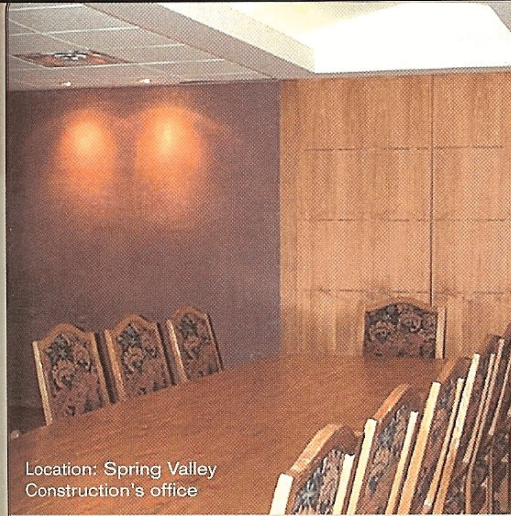


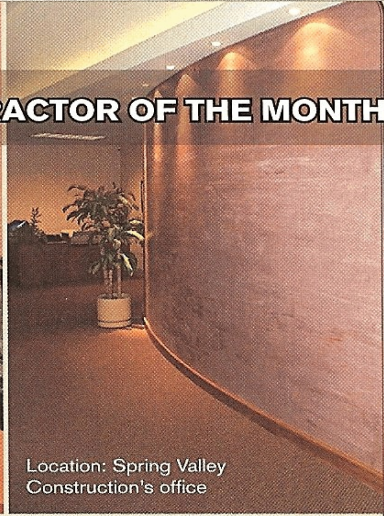
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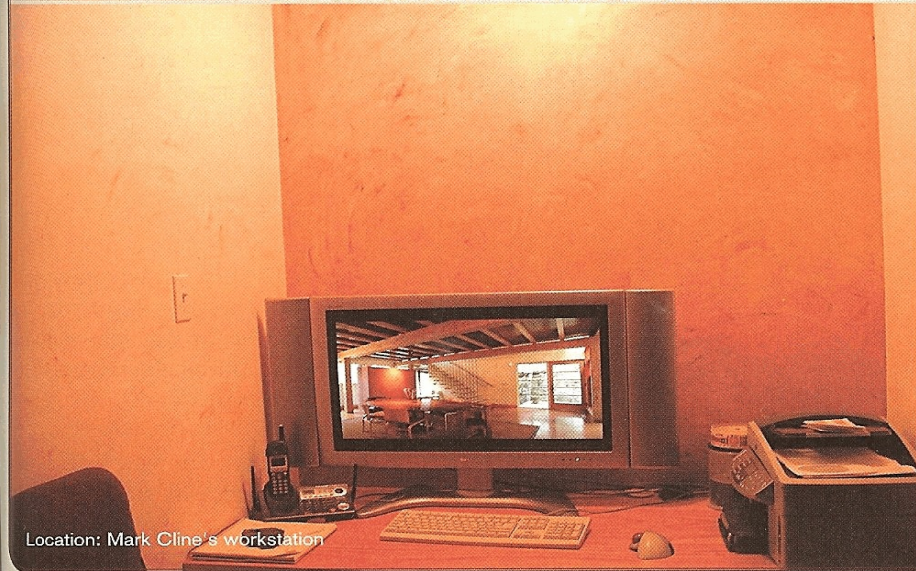
Location: Spring Valley Construction's office



Location: Mark Cline's den



Location: Spring Valley Construction's office



Location: Mark Cline's workstation



Location: Spring Valley Construction's office

Plaster in the Tradition of the  
**RENAISSANCE  
FRESCO**

Mark Cline Cites His Mentor as  
Leonardo da Vinci | By Thomas G. Dolan

**"I**'ve been around plaster all my life," says Mark Cline, president of Plaster, Inc., in Garland, Texas, a suburb of Dallas. One of my earliest memories was when I was five years old, I went out on a job with my father and older brother. They were slacking the lime to make the plaster for an interior job. When the lime hits the water, it starts to boil, the way dry ice does, with all of the

smoking and steaming. I was thrilled. That's what hooked me on plaster.

Cline was obviously influenced by his immediate family. But he was also influenced by their role models, the Renaissance fresco painters, especially Leonardo da Vinci. His father and older brother were unusual in this trade, since they both had art degrees. His brother now teaches art and German in high school.

"When I was a kid," he says, "we had these 2-by-2-foot and 3-inch thick books with the works of the Renaissance masters, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, as well as some modern masters such as Picasso. We would study their work and talk at length about these different masters, how they would get their different colors."

#### **POUNDING THE PAVEMENT**

Cline went to work for his father part time when he was about 13. He also started working for different plasterers in Salt Lake City, where he was born and raised. He took a couple of years off to do volunteer mission work for his church, and continued working for different plasterers while he worked his way through college, majoring in English literature. So in his mind there was never an artificial division between art and hands-on skills, as there was no such division among the classical artists.

In 1983, when he was 26, he took on a job for a plasterer in Dallas, and decided to remain there. He dropped out of college with only about a semester more to go before getting his degree, since he had gotten married and was

starting to raise a family. His wife was a driving force for his not returning to Utah at the end of the job, because as he says, "She loved Dallas and liked the idea of raising our children here. And though Salt Lake City is a beautiful city, it was hard to make a living there. This way it's worked out; I can visit whenever I want."

For a time, though, it wasn't at all certain that things would work out. "It was

**"I always had a problem of politics in working for other companies. I liked to do things my own way and enjoyed being independent, as I was when I was working my way through college."**

difficult to get a job in Dallas then," he recalls. "I went to one company and the owner said, 'How do I know you're any good?' Even though I offered to work free for a day, he just laughed at me and turned me away."

Cline worked off and on for a couple of different contractors. "One day I was working on a job, talking to an architect and telling him about some of the

things I had done, and he suggested I go out on my own.

The idea appealed to Cline because, as he says, "I always had a problem of politics in working for other companies. I liked to do things my own way and enjoyed being independent, as I was when I was working my way through college."

Cline started on his own as Mark Cline Plastering, a sole proprietorship. It was slow going at first, and there were intermittent periods between projects. But, says Cline, "There were some architects who really liked my work. They networked for me, so I really have never had to solicit work."

The company grew to about 50 employees. But there were two problems, Cline says. The first one was the paperwork, which kept him from working on the jobs. Second was the language problem he had with the primarily Hispanic work force.

"I knew a fellow who was looking for something to do, who spoke Spanish, so we formed a partnership," Cline says. This partnership, in 1995, became his current Plaster, Inc.

"After about a year, he phased out," Cline says. "I don't know why it didn't work out." Cline bought his partner out, then let the work force reduce to his current about 10 employees. This allows him to maintain more control on the quality he wants for his highly specialized work, and cut back considerably on the paperwork. Also, his former partner taught three Hispanics English. Though they initially spoke only broken English, now they are fluent in English and have become highly skilled in their work. "They are



Location: Spring Valley  
Construction's office

in a supervisory position over the non-English speaking laborers," Cline says. "It's reached the point where I can give them a job and they'll take care of it."

To turn to Cline's relationship with the Renaissance fresco, the latter is defined as the art of painting on fresh moist plaster with the pigments dissolved in water. "The Renaissance painters needed something to bind with the paint," Cline explains. "So when they did a fresco they would lay the mud on the white plaster and hurry up to put the pigments into the plaster before it set, and then bound the color."

## How Does He Do It?

Cline specializes in a similar process. "I mix the pigment into the mud, but fold the pigment in in such a way that you can get color variations in the walls. You can get different shades of green, or mix multiple colors, such as black and red and green, whatever you want to come out on the wall. The result can be quite pretty."

In doing stucco, Cline uses iron oxides to get a wide range of yellows to reds, cobalt for blues and chromium oxide for greens, out of which he evolves any

color he needs. "These chemicals don't react to the cement or plaster in a way that causes it to set before you want it to," Cline says.

"Another thing we do that is unique is that a lot of plasterers put waxes on the plaster to make it shiny," Cline says. "I've trained my men to trowel it out smooth enough so that you get a reflection without the need for waxes."

Cline learned his craft before the advent of off-the-shelf Venetian plasters. "Typically, what the new generation of plasterers can do now is go into a Home Depot and buy a Venetian plaster. You

can pick a color off a chart, squirt colors into the plaster and mix it up so it's all a consistent color. You can mottle it too if you want. It does an OK job, but it's more of a paint, not like the real thing. I think what I do is much richer."

Architects and clients who want a really quality look think so too. He did an art gallery last summer, does a lot of high-end homes and has been quite successful with renovation work. He has repaired plaster work on prominent Dallas structures like the Magnolia Building, Fairmont Hotel and Jefferson Tower, all done originally in traditional stucco, which Cline matched.

About the Blue Mesa Grill, Cline says, "They didn't know what to expect, so basically trusted us to go at it on our own. The walls have the look of a mesa, off-whites and reds, and walls with different streaks of lime colors. It conveys a very pleasant, relaxed feeling—gives you a good appetite."

Innovative architects turn to Cline. "What's neat about Gary Cunningham is that he'll pick up a rock or brick or leaf and say, 'Match this color.'" On one home Cline did for Cunningham, he took a digital photo of the owner's eyes and reproduced that color in one room, formulated the color of a green apple for another room, chocolate for another. He can create different effects, such as a golden rod that looks almost like suede, and he can fold blues into the white plaster so that the latter looks like clouds against a blue sky.

## **IN DEMAND**

Cline still does standard jobs to help pay the bills until an architect calls. "It's much better profit to do customized

work than just a regular stucco job," Cline says. "You don't have a whole bunch of people fighting over the same piece of meat. I have to bid against people sometimes, but in the better jobs people put so much money into the job and don't really know what it is, so I get this work anyway." Quite a few are negotiated. And the architects "get it right," says Cline, "because they tell the clients to send the drawings to me to ask how much it will cost."

Cline still enjoys doing some hands-on work. "Just yesterday I mixed mud and helped in the setup," he says. "I try to visit all the job sites every day. The guys are good enough to do it by themselves and they like to be left alone, but they also like to be recognized and given a

pat on the back. About 20 years ago we busted our butts doing a really gorgeous job. When the owner and project manager walked by, oohing and aahing and saying, 'damn, we're good,' while four of us plasterers were standing there as if we didn't exist. I try not to do that with our guys."

The company does about \$1 million in sales a year. Cline says his goal is to keep a healthy company so that when he reaches the point he wants to retire he can turn it over to the three Hispanic employees who now supervise the work in the field.

Cline and his wife of 23 years have four children, none of whom want to continue in the business. "I'm somewhat

disappointed the kids aren't interested, but they've seen a lot of heartache that goes with being a small business owner. I've always told them that it doesn't matter what you do, as long as you love it, make yourself good at it, and do it right."

In terms of hobbies, Cline says he still enjoys reading, especially literature, though he doesn't have as much time for that as he would like.

What he really likes to do with his spare time, Cline says, is "play with color, to put different pigments into the plaster to see how it mixes in. It's fascinating."

Too bad Leonardo isn't around so the two artists can share notes.