

An Easy Textured Ceiling

Not just a cover-up for lousy drywall work, this approach creates the appearance of hand-troweled plaster using ordinary joint compound

BY ROBERT A. SANDERS

Here in California, you don't see many smooth ceilings, and that's okay with me. In my experience, no matter how carefully the ceiling is finished, today's lighting can make even the slightest flaw painfully obvious. I guess that's why sprayed-on "popcorn" texture is so common. Although I have no problem with popcorn in new construction, the older houses I work on deserve a more traditional texture. I'm not a skilled plasterer, but a few years ago—after a bit of trial and error—I came up with a way to create this effect using ready-mix joint compound. Whereas sprayed-on textures require dedicated equipment and experience, all I need is a rolling scaffold and modest facility with ordinary drywall tools.

One section at a time

If I'm working with new drywall, all I need to do is tape and mud the seams with a first coat; then I'm ready to go. I prepare existing drywall or plaster the same as I would for a paint job. Texturing a ceiling is a messy process, so before I start slinging mud, I wrap the top of the wall where it meets the ceiling with masking tape. Then I cover the floors with heavy drop cloths.

Unless I'm doing a very small room, I always apply this texture in sections. To make sure the finished ceiling doesn't look like a checkerboard, I lay out each section as a radius rather than a square.



One circle at a time. Rather than take on the entire ceiling at one time, the author breaks the job into a series of overlapping circles. After quickly drawing an arc with a pencil, he begins by randomly slopping a thick layer of ready-mix joint compound within the confines of the circle.

Setting them up



Tap the blade in and out of the wet joint compound.

Texture, part 1. Holding his knife at a shallow angle, the author taps his blade into and out of the wet joint compound, making sharp ridges. To create a random appearance, he continually varies the direction of the strokes.

Starting from an inside corner, I draw a large arc freehand on the ceiling. Using an 8-in. drywall knife, I slap on joint compound, about 1/8 in. thick, throughout the area within the arc (photo left, facing page). An irregular pattern is the key to this texture's appeal, so I smear the mud with haphazard strokes of varying length, depth and direction.

Random strokes are the key

After I've spread enough joint compound through the first section, I form the texture by building a series of ridges, then knocking them down. While holding the finishing knife at a shallow angle—so that about 1 in. of the blade makes contact with the compound on every stroke—I lightly tap the blade of the finishing knife into the wet mud, then pull sharply down (photo right, facing page).

I create a pattern of ridges by flicking my wrist lightly as I "walk" the finishing knife through the wet mud. To keep the pattern random, I consciously change directions, crisscross and double up on my strokes as I work my way across the section. Occasionally, this motion causes a small patch of compound to pull away from the ceiling. When that happens, I trowel on more mud, then start walking again.

When the entire section is covered with ridges, I start knocking them down. To do this, I hold the finishing knife almost flat against the ceiling and gently float the knife across the surface of the mud at

a level where I can soften the ridges while barely touching the low spots (photo below left). To continue the random pattern, I vary the length and direction of each stroke, and I change the pressure applied to the blade, leaving some ridges more or less flat than others.

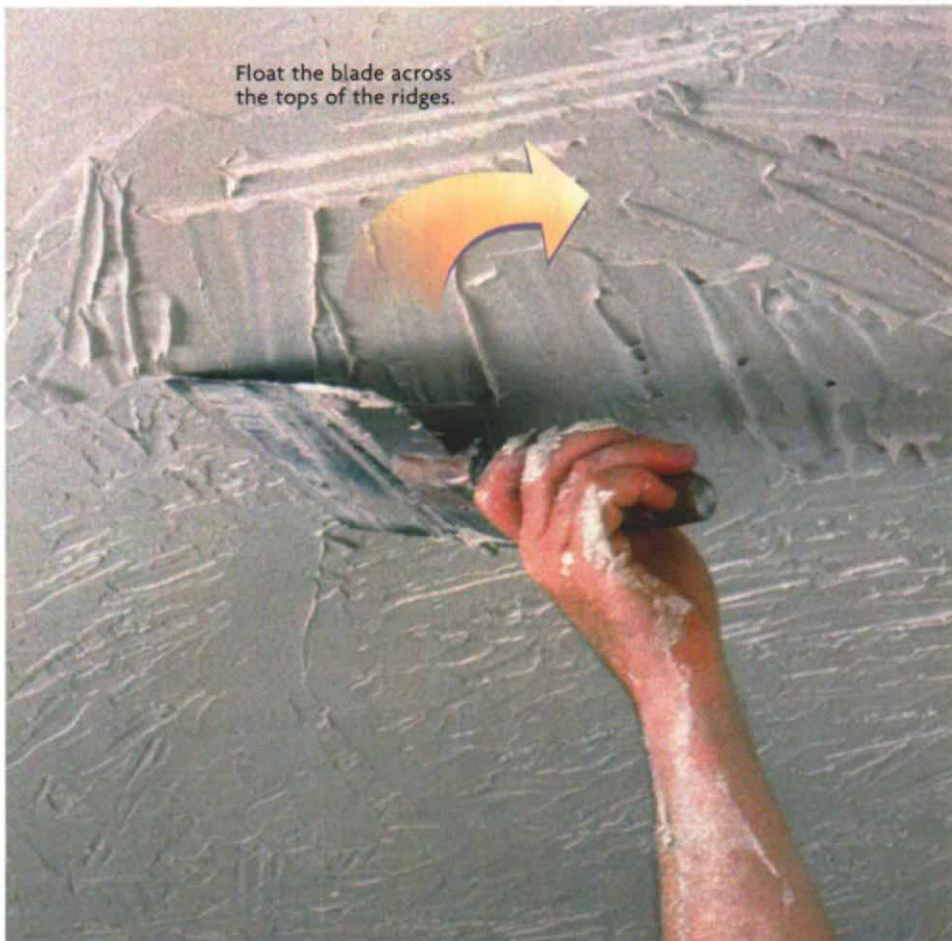
After I've knocked down the ridges, I give the section the once-over; I'm now checking to make sure that there aren't bare spots, smooth patches or patterns. When I'm satisfied, I clean up any mud that splattered onto the walls or the drop cloths; then, before the joint compound has time to dry, I move on to an adjoining section.

Strike while the mud is wet

Joint compound must be applied to adjoining sections before the edges begin to set up. To maximize working time, I close windows and turn off air-conditioning. To blur the borderlines where sections meet, I spread a few inches of new mud over previously completed sections (photo top right). Then I texture all the new compound, plus a few more inches of the adjoining sections. As I work, I scan the ceiling to make sure the pattern appears random. When I'm finished applying the texture, I let it cure at least a week before painting. □

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Knocking them down



Texture, part 2. To simulate the appearance of hand-troweled plaster, the author holds his knife almost parallel to the ceiling and gently floats it across the surface of the joint compound, flattening the ridges while barely touching the low spots.



Creating a seamless whole. To blur the borders where different sections meet, new joint compound is lapped a few inches over the old (but still wet) mud.



Wait a week before doing this. Scraping the wooden backside of a push broom over the dried texture knocks loose any fragile particles before they get caught in the paint roller.