



Walls are the main focus of any scheme, and floors' decorative potential has come to the fore in recent years. However, all too often, the ceiling is an afterthought. Of course, the reflex choice of smooth plaster, painted with matt white paint has value: it reflects light into the room, works with most colour palettes and is usually the least expensive treatment, but it is also the least imaginative. Unobscured by furniture, the ceiling is a blank canvas inviting creative consideration and it may well be the jigsaw piece that completes the interior design puzzle.

PERIOD DETAILS

Architects of the past saw the ceiling as an ideal showcase for the plasterer's art and their work began to appear in houses from the mid-sixteenth century. Over the generations, designs kept pace with fashions in interiors, and plasterwork that has survived the ravages of time and taste is an original feature worth preserving as an accurate indicator of the age and style of a building.

Plaster is vulnerable to damage and the causes may be gradual or the result of a single event. A build-up of paint can obscure the detail of intricate designs and water leakage, Second World War bomb damage and insensitive modernisation may have caused the destruction of large areas of plaster, but in most cases skilled artisans can rescue, restore or reinstate what is lost.

Accretions of old paint can be cleaned away, small repairs made by hand and moulds taken from remaining plasterwork to make matching replacements. Creating an authentic-looking ceiling for an old building with no surviving remnants requires research using the property's archive, photographs and reference books, though it takes creativity, too. "One of our craftsmen designed a strapwork ceiling in the Jacobean style for a seventeenth-century house where the original had been removed," says Nicola Mellor of Ryedale Plasterers. "He moulded and handmade 150 different components for the project, including a pineapple-shaped boss inspired by a contemporaneous finial on the property's gatepost."

As well as being a period feature, plasterwork can add sophisticated style to contemporary classic interiors, with streamlined cornices and ceiling roses taking the place of highly decorative designs for a sleek and elegant result. One treatment that is growing in popularity is the recessed ceiling. This is where the central part of the surface is set at a higher level than the perimeter frame. "This draws the eye upwards giving an extra dimension to the space and emphasising the height of the room," explains interior designer Emma Sims-Hilditch. "It also allows light fittings to be concealed, creating atmosphere with indirect lighting." ▶

OPPOSITE Hidden for years behind a false ceiling, this elaborate plasterwork was revealed and restored by Barlow & Barlow when converting part of an old theatre into apartments.

TOP LEFT Bespoke plasterwork like this Rococo-style ceiling – modelled, moulded and cast by Geoffrey Preston – is designed to reflect the building and room it occupies.

MIDDLE LEFT This plasterwork ceiling in an early Georgian house – restored and refurbished by Studio Indigo – was added in 1837 to enhance the original painted canvas ceiling.

LEFT The recessed ceiling in this bedroom design by Sims Hilditch allows for a layered lighting scheme combining downlights for clear general illumination and concealed lights for a soft, atmospheric glow.

Looking up

It may be overhead but it should never be overlooked – the ceiling is the last frontier for decorative exploration