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Continuing the ancient craftsmanship of ornamental plastering into the 21st century - by Sheldon Austin

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Newburyport bank - crack before repair

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Sheldon Austin,
Austin Ornamental

My career in the ornamental plaster profession has spanned over three decades. I learned the

business in my early twenties from my father who had a large-scale mold making and casting production business. Unfortunately, a massive fire engulfed the mill building where it was located, and it went out of business. I found myself unemployed the next day, but soon went to work for my older brother who also learned this trade from our father and had gone out on his own a few years earlier to start a complementary company that would install, not just produce, the products as my father's business had done. As time went on, I realized that opportunities to grow within my brother's company were limited and so I started my own company in 1999 and incorporated Austin Ornamental, Inc. in 2004.

In the beginning word of mouth was my main means of gaining work. But that only got me so far and so I decided to begin advertising. At first, I put a small ad in a Boston South End newspaper which brought me more jobs and led to the need to train more plasters who did not have ornamental plaster experience. Also, I brought in a former colleague who had 20 years of experience having come from Russia and who I trusted to make my operation run efficiently. So I would work on-site with the plasterers training them in the old world method of installing ornamental plastering, teaching them how to make templates of the moldings and showing them how to run plaster cornices in place on the ceilings and walls. At the shop I would have a craftsman mold making and casting the ornamentation. The pieces would then be delivered to the job and installed by the install team.

This process worked well for a few years but I realized I needed a larger labor force so I became a signatory contractor with Local 534. I now work with the Union to help train ornamental plasterers so I have a talented pool to tap into to. My relationship with the Union also provides opportunities for me to build good relationships with other union contractors like Angelini Plastering and JRJ Construction.

Mass. Statehouse Dome

Another great pleasure of my trade is working in historic and marquis buildings in all of New England. It is incredibly gratifying to know that my work will last for generations if not millennia. One of my favorite jobs was helping to restore the Boston Opera House. Austin Ornamental is still the on-call ornamental plaster company for the Opera House and has continued to do restoration work almost annually. Harvard University has also been a repeat client for the company including work on their dormitories, Memorial Church, Harvard Business School and my personal favorite the rare books library at Harvard Law School. Other great jobs over the years include The Somerset Club, Christian Science Center, the Boston Custom House, Faneuil Hall, MIT President's House, Park Plaza Hotel, and the original Massachusetts Statehouse.

I just finished work on the Massachusetts Senate Chamber renovation and was fortunate to partner with Angelini, and Colantonio (general contractor) on this historic project. Originally, I was brought to the job to do a small repair on a ceiling medallion on the Senate Chamber dome. After starting work

on the piece, I was told the significance of the medallion. It is one of the four emblems placed by builder Charles Bulfinch, and represents Peace. The other medallions in the dome represent Commerce, Agriculture and War. The repair of the medallion took only a few days but as Colantonio recognized the quality of our work, we were asked to stay on for the duration of the ornamental plaster repairs.

My current client is Newburyport Five Cent Savings Bank, and we are working on their original 1854 building. Much like the Statehouse, I was brought in to do a small repair. Once they realized my abilities, they were thrilled that I could help them bring back an original ornate ceiling that had been covered by a drop ceiling for many years. So we recreated some of the original plaster moldings and incorporated them into the new design. As this bank is still owned by the original owners, they are ecstatic to see the exquisite ceiling once again in its former grandeur.

Ornamental plastering is truly a passion for me and I feel fortunate to work in such a gratifying field. Whether restoring antiquities, or bringing custom old-world interiors and exteriors to new builds, Austin Ornamental has been and will continue to be a company that can meet the needs of any project that demands our expertise, high quality workmanship and exemplary customer service.

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