A Fine Finish
Decorative Art

Green *and* Beautiful

by Katie Fitzgerald

Finishes created with low VOC plasters and glazes

You're thinking about a custom paint finish for your home or office. But do you enjoy that "new paint" smell? Not many people do, and there's a good reason. The sources of those smells are volatile organic compounds (VOCs) released from the material, which then permeates your environment. According to the EPA: "During and for several hours immediately after certain activities, such as [painting, VOC] . . . levels may be **1,000 times . . . outdoor levels**." Even years after the paint was applied and you can no longer smell it, it continues emitting VOCs.

As a professional decorative artist, I can tell you that I have suffered terrible headaches after a day of using standard paint products. But after a project is done, I get to leave. You have to live with the implications.

VOC health implications include:

- Eye, nose, and throat irritation
- Headaches
- Loss of coordination
- Nausea
- Damage to liver, kidney, and central nervous system
- Cancer, and so on

People who already have breathing problems, young children, and the elderly are particularly susceptible to problems that can arise from exposure to VOCs.

In the past, we had no choice but to use high VOC products because there were no alternatives. The worst of these products are oil-based; although they produce beautiful results, they are notoriously stinky (high VOCs) and must be cleaned up with more high VOC substances, like turpentine. Thinking about a lush finish in your bedroom? Now think about sleeping with that smell and unhealthy environment.

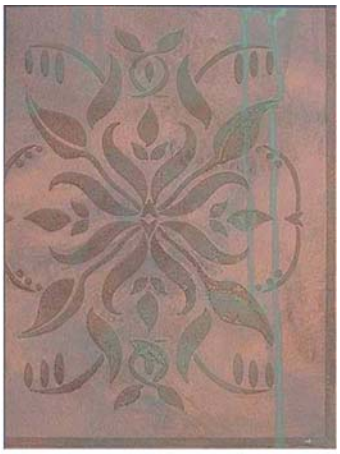
Next came water-based paints. While better than oil-based products, these paints are still high in VOCs and don't produce the depth and color of oils.

Within the last decade, we have seen the introduction of green, or low VOC, products. After my son was born, we did what all new parents want to do -- redecorate a room to create a sweet and nurturing environment for the baby. But babies and young children are

especially susceptible to health issues related to VOCs due to sensitive and developing systems. We chose to use one of the new, low VOC paints that had just been brought to market. I had friends over during painting, and they had no idea we were in the middle of a project until I showed them the finish. While this paint fulfilled the goal of low odor and low VOCs, it was chalky and had no luster or depth.

The newer products introduced within the last few years have finally achieved the promise of beautiful, oil-like finishes with little to no VOC content.

In these images, the first "Green Finish" sample was created using low VOC paints and plasters. The "Standard Finish" sample was produced using standard, non-green products.



Green Finish, Patina Tile

There are differences in these images that arise from being created by two different artists. However, in terms of the depth of the product and color, there are no quality differences. But I assure you, when these samples were being created, I could smell the difference!

Standard Finish, Patina Tile

So what *IS* a green product?

This is a good question. You would think there would be a good, governmental standard, right? No. It's confusing, and I've spent a great deal of time trying to uncover the answer.

According to industry expert, Bob Formisano of About.com, "There is no clear mandatory standard for what constitutes a Low-VOC paint or a Zero-VOC paint."

"The EPA's 'low VOC standards' of 250 grams per liter for latex paints and 380 grams for oil based paints are absurdly high," states physicist and green advocate, Dr. Michial Howell. So some products that are labeled as "green" might not be as good as you think.

And to make matters more confusing, what standards do exist are different for flat paints, gloss paints, glazes, plasters, and so on. Different states also have their own individual standards. I have even heard industry rumors that certain products that say they are green actually contain many times the VOC level they claim. In other words, there is no single standard and no single way to tell what's what.

What to do?

If you are hiring a decorative artist or other contract painter, ask:

- Are you familiar with green practice standards?
- Do you use green-certified products? Certified by whom?
- Do you belong to any green organizations?

If you are purchasing products yourself, look for those that have been verified as low or no VOC products by reputable, independent testing agencies. Two of the most reputable organizations are:

- The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System™, which encourages and accelerates global adoption of sustainable green building and development practices.
- Green Seal, which sets forth much more stringent, although voluntary, guidelines for low VOC products [Paints and Coatings (GS-11)]:

Product	VOC Content
Flat paint	No more than 50 grams per liter
Non-flat paint	No more than 100 grams per liter
Primer or undercoat	No more than 100 grams per liter

Remember, little or no smell means little or no VOCs. If the product stinks, find something else. Anyone involved in the decorative arts knows someone who has used high VOC products a little too long. There's a reason artists have a reputation for being a little scattered -- and most of them didn't start out that way!

The Economics of it.

Low VOC products must be more expensive, though, right? Not really. Manufactures have been working to keep low VOC products comparable and competitive in price. Like any other set of products, some will be a little more expensive; some will be a little less expensive.

In the following table, you can see that the Benjamin Moore paint is the least expensive -- but only slightly less expensive than a low VOC paint. The low VOC plaster is *less expensive* than a standard Venetian plaster.

If a project does call for a low VOC product that is more expensive than the non-green alternative, you will need to decide if the added expense is worth the benefits. Personally, I suffer from allergies and occasional asthma; the benefits to my health from lessening my exposure to VOCs is worth the slight increase in cost. And as a parent, I want to expose my children to as few VOCs as possible. Also keep in mind that the largest cost of a decorative art project is not materials -- it's paying for the time and skill of your artist. Product costs can add up, but they are secondary.

Low VOC Product	Approx. Price / gal	Non-green Product	Approx. Price / gal
Eco Organic Paint	$50	*Benjamin Moore* Paint	$40
Mythic Non-Toxic Paint	$60	*Blue Pearl* Metallic Paint	$80
Modern Masters Pataan Plaster	$63	*Pro Faux* Venetian Plaster	$70
Modern Masters Metallic Plasters	$80	*Faux Effects* Luster Stone Plaster	$77

Price comparison of green and non-green decorative art products

What's Next?

The paint and decorative art industries are moving towards green products. Our culture is increasingly aware of the green movement and the implications of pollutants in our environment. Eventually, standards will be enacted that require all paints and decorative art products to meet VOC standards.

These standards will be a huge boon to the artists who work with these products every day and their clients who live in the environment after the project is complete. Given the health implications and the astounding new products that produce finishes every bit as beautiful as non-green finishes, why would you choose anything else? Exactly! ***Green and beautiful!***

Katie Fitzgerald has been involved with decorative finishes for ten years, is a green-practices advocate, and a member of the **Build It Green** *organization.* ***A Fine Finish*** *is a decorative art company near Santa Cruz, CA that specializes in using green paints, plasters, and other media to create exclusive finishes that go beyond standard faux painting. To find out more about* ***A Fine Finish****, logon to: www.afinefinish.com*