MODERN APPROPRIATIONS OF AN HISTORIC MATERIAL: HOW DECORATIVE PLASTER DID AND DID NOT CHANGE, 1870-1930

Justine M. Posluszny

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Science in Historic Preservation

Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation
Columbia University
May 2007
ABSTRACT

Decorative plaster in the United States between the years 1870 and 1930 is a subject which has received scant attention in academic research and publications. It was in this period that this product was commoditized and consumerized, rendering it more of a product for the masses than one reserved for the moderately wealthy as it had previously been in the United States. However, secondary sources and conversations with professionals revealed that most people believed that this fairly traditional product witnessed little to no change in regards to its material substance of the technology used to produce it. However, an initial survey of this subject suggested that the phenomenon of decorative plaster in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was far more nuanced than the general contemporary understanding would suggest. A number of inconsistencies in period literature also indicated that myths and misconceptions had been perpetuated. This prompted an exploration of the question, how did ornamental plaster change in the United States between 1870 and 1930 in terms of its production, composition, and perception?