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BY REBECCA SHERMAN. PHOTOGRAPHY PÄR BENGTTSSON.



The workshop at Casci Plaster

In the age of Internet startups, the acquisition of an 87-year-old artisanal plaster company seems an unlikely investment for a pair of Highland Park High School grads. But recently, Mark Marynick, 33, and Porter Fuqua, 30, inked a deal to buy historic Dallas-based Casci Plaster.

"It's not a startup, but a restart," Fuqua says. A newly minted associate architect with his father's firm, J. Wilson Fuqua & Associates, he remembers visiting Casci as a child, looking on as his father sorted through plaster samples with clients. Decades later, Casci was still profitable — but stagnant. "It was sort of on autopilot

AN 87-YEAR-OLD HERITAGE WORKROOM GETS A NEW LIFE.

when we bought it," Fuqua says. "We're new blood. And we can grow it."

On a recent afternoon, Marynick, dressed in jeans and neon-orange Nikes, and Fuqua, in khakis and button-down shirt, escort a visitor through Casci's massive warehouse.

It's a froth of white, with an inventory of more than 4,000 cast stone and plaster molds for cornices, brackets, corbels, mantels, and other decorative elements, some designs dating to the 1930s. Among them are columns from the Texas School Book Depository; delicate butterflies, bees, and woodland creatures commissioned by the Fort Worth Botanic Garden; an ornate domed ceiling with a design that originated from the Palais Garnier in Paris.

Casci's seven craftsmen, including foreman Jesus Garcia, who has worked at the firm for more than 22 years, have stayed on; Garcia is also giving Marynick painstaking, hands-on lessons in the ancient craft. Casci's specialized tools come from

Italy, many dating to the early 1900s, and workers still use the same techniques that craftsmen have used for centuries in Europe to make plaster — a mixture of gypsum, hemp, and water. In the late 1970s, Casci stopped using traditional animal-fat molds in favor of modern silicone molds that are more flexible and last longer. “[Plaster] is a highly skilled art, and when people buy from us, they get art,” says Marynick.

Marynick and Fuqua follow in the footsteps of Giovanni Primo Casci, an Italian immigrant who founded his company in 1930 and traveled from city to city, creating ornamental plaster for some of Texas’ most prestigious homes, banks, and municipal buildings. Royce Renfro bought it from Casci in 1972, and the founder stayed on for a year to teach him the business. Royce and his wife, Jan, built the company together, but in the last few years, the Renfros floated the idea of selling it, and even considered closing it. Casci’s doors might have shut for good if Marynick and Fuqua hadn’t stepped in.

Marynick, who has degrees in business and economics from Southern Methodist University and Harvard and has worked in private equity, says the acquisition wasn’t so much about making money as it was a perfect fit. With a certificate in design from Harvard Graduate School of Design, Marynick is also an amateur artist and seems armed with all the right tools. “I have the business background, but I also understand the art and what’s behind it,” he says. “I can talk to the artisans in the shop, and I can talk to the clients.” For Fuqua, raised alongside a highly regarded architect father, architecture school at UT Arlington and summers studying in France and Italy have prepared him to appreciate the centuries-old craft.

In the United States, Marynick and Fuqua know of fewer than a half-dozen companies that still specialize in ornamental plasterwork: Casci and Arlington-based American Masonry Supply, which was founded 15 years ago formed with former Casci employees, and others in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Buying Casci was a weighted investment, as they’ve taken on the task of caring for an esteemed part of Dallas’ architectural and design heritage. “Almost every large old home in Dallas has Casci plaster,” says Marynick. Much of their



Ceiling medallions, cornices, and corbels inside Casci Plaster’s warehouse

original plasterwork is found in the mansions along the city’s most storied streets — Swiss Avenue, Kessler Park, Armstrong Avenue, and Lakeside Drive, as well as in the many Georgian-style buildings at SMU, several churches in the Park Cities, and the historic Magnolia Hotel downtown.

Despite limited availability, ornamental plasterwork is still in demand. Society decorator John Astin Perkins and highly regarded architects Wilson McClure and Hal Thompson, who designed homes in

Dallas and the Park Cities in the 1920s and ’30s, kept the momentum going for decades, employing Casci for many of their jobs. Fuqua’s father, architect Wilson Fuqua, estimates he has collaborated with Casci in the past 25 years on the restoration of 14 Hal Thompson houses, including Peggy and Carl Sewell’s Highland Park home.

In 2001, renowned British architect Quilan Terry hired Casci to create a massive 20-foot carved plaster ceiling of his design for

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“PLASTER IS LIKE A BALLET COMPANY OR SYMPHONY ... FOR IT TO SURVIVE, YOU NEED PATRONS TO SUPPORT IT.” — Wilson Fuqua



A silicone mold for a plaster gargoyle



Saws from every decade, dating to the 1930s



Hemp has been used for centuries to give plaster strength. Casci buys its hemp from Panama.



Mark Marynick, left, and Porter Fuqua, in their office at Casci Plaster

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Lyn and John Muse's spectacular, neoclassical Preston Road estate. Casci also did the plasterwork for Nancy Dedman's French-inspired house, along with a vaulted ceiling for a private library inside Harlan Crow's historic residence, which was added in 2005. Kim and Justin Whitman's '80s-era Park Lane home, newly renovated by Wilson Fuqua, includes Casci plaster cornices in every room. "Plaster is like a ballet company or symphony," says Wilson. "For it to survive, you need patrons to support it."

The beauty of plasterwork, especially with intricate molding, is that it's often more cost efficient and accurate than carving wood, Marynick says. An artisan only has to carve the design

once for the plaster mold, then it can be replicated many times. Plaster is also more stable — hemp is added to give it strength — and won't shrink and split with temperature changes, as happens with wood. Plaster can be gilded, lacquered, or painted to look like wood, making it appropriate for historic restoration projects and ideal for fireproof mantles.

Marynick plans to build on the business Casci has already established. Its first website, casciplaster.com, launches this month, and there's a trip to London in the works to discuss a licensing partnership of historic plaster designs with the Sir John Soane Museum. "I think Porter and I will own Casci forever," he says. To that, Porter adds, "It's something to be proud of."