

TRUTH IN DECORATING

Barrie Benson and Stefan Steil with a chair by Oly and an étagère by Todd Alexander Romano. See Resources.



THE TOP 10 PLASTER PIECES

Designers Stefan Steil and Barrie Benson cast an appraising eye on an array of chalk-white pieces that add a clean, crisp note to any room

From ancient Egypt to colonial America, artists have used plaster, one of the world's most versatile materials, to make intricate sculptures and architectural ornaments. In the 20th century, designers such as Frances Elkins and John Dickinson became renowned for producing whimsical white plaster furnishings and light fixtures.

The material isn't without drawbacks, most notably its fragility. Today, manufacturers use plaster as well as similar looking but more durable materials

to create objects and furniture with the signature chalk-white look. Such pieces are popular for good reason, says designer Barrie Benson: "They can make a stiff room feel a lot more casual."

Plaster-like pieces usually have a strong hand-made quality and a heavily textured finish—appealing elements for almost any interior, traditional or modern, says designer Stefan Steil. "They can bring a touch of nature into a room," he adds, "without hitting you over the head." ▶

TEXT BY TIM MCKEOUGH / PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAX KIM-BEE / PRODUCED BY ORLI BEN-DOR

THE EXPERTS

BARRIE BENSON

Known for mixing periods and styles while adding splashes of color and pattern, Benson designs residential and commercial spaces in her native North Carolina as well as in New York and Los Angeles. barriebenson.com

STEFAN STEIL

Since establishing his smartly named design firm, Steilish, last year, the German-born, New York-based designer has crafted modern interiors peppered with surprising natural elements. steilish.com

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6 / DEAN CHANDELIER BY MADE GOODS

For Steil, this faux-bois-and-iron light fixture is all about contrasts. "The gold metal versus the plaster, the reflective sheen versus the distressed matte finish," he says. "It's surprising." It would make an ideal addition to a house in the mountains, says Benson. "In a place that's very woody, with antlers and dark colors, this would freshen things up," she notes. 34" h. x 34" dia.; \$2,850; mecoxgardens.com



7 / TWIG ÉTAGÈRE BY TODD ALEXANDER ROMANO

This hand-carved wood piece with a plaster-like painted finish strikes Benson as versatile. "It's pretty but also fairly simple and not too heavy," she says. "I'd use a pair to flank a doorway or mantel, for balance and symmetry." Steil recommends stocking it with "sleek surfaces," like art books or photo albums, instead of decorative objects. "That would allow the piece itself to stand out," he says. 80" h. x 32" w. x 15" d.; \$6,800; toddalexanderromano.com



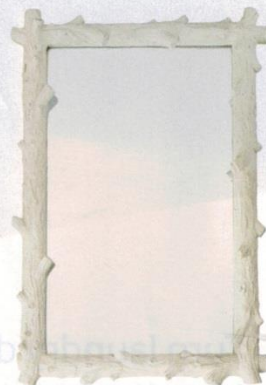
8 / FOSSIL CHAIR BY OLY

Steil admires the texture of this metal-and-resin chair. "When people hear 'plaster,'" he says, "they think of something cold. But this is soft and smooth, with a beautiful sheen." Benson considers it a lounge chair with a sense of levity, useful in many settings. "I could see it in a Florida beach house," she says. "If you had a big, upholstered sofa in the room, this piece would add lightness while still offering a lot of comfort." 31" h. x 29" w. x 32" d.; \$2,625; olystudio.com



9 / QUEEN ANNE SIDE TABLE BY MICHAEL S. SMITH FOR JASPER

This hand-sculpted plaster table is a fresh way to introduce a traditional element into a modern room, says Steil. "It's a classic form that takes on new life in such an unexpected material." Benson imagines it as a casual twist in an antiques-filled library or a traditional living room. "It would loosen up all that refinement," she says. "I love it." 23" h. x 29" w. x 19" d.; \$7,700; michaelsmithinc.com



10 / FAUX-BOIS MIRROR FROM WISTERIA

Benson considers this resin-framed mirror the perfect counterpoint for a space filled with gleaming wood furniture. "Dining rooms tend to have a lot of brown pieces, so it would be nice to have this thrown in," she says. "And it's an incredible price point." For Steil, the piece looks "very Adirondacks—but through a contemporary lens, because of the finish. It would be eye-catching in an entry with black-lacquered walls." 46" h. x 32" w.; \$349; wisteria.com

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