



# Working with Cultured Marble

by Sandy McAdams

In today's busy world, clients are constantly on the lookout for easy-care products. Whenever I'm doing bathroom designs, one of the most frequently asked questions is, "Isn't there something besides tile with grout that I can use in my shower?" People do not want to spend their all-too-short leisure time cleaning grout.

I often recommend cultured marble as an alternative to ceramic tile. Though it's not as impact-resistant as solid surfacing materials such as Corian, Fountainhead, or Avonite, cultured marble is considerably less expensive.

When cultured marble was first introduced it was widely regarded as an inexpensive product and not very attractive. It also came in a limited variety of styles and colors. That has changed, however. Not only has the overall quality of cultured marble products improved, but style and color choices have increased, with some manufacturers offering as many as 60 color choices in granites, marbles, and solids.

One reason for the improvement is that the International Cast Polymer Association (ICPA, 1735 N. Lynn St., Suite 950, Arlington, VA 22209; 703/276-2644) has been working since 1974 to develop a national standard for cultured marble products. ICPA is steadily upgrading the quality of raw material and improving the quality

of finished products by encouraging manufacturers to have their products tested and ICPA-certified. ICPA can provide you with a list of certified manufacturers in your area.

## What Is Cultured Marble?

Cultured marble is made of ground-up natural marble or stone mixed with a polyester resin. The resin is poured into a mold with the ground stone and any color additives. As the liquid combines with the pigment powder, it takes on a swirling pattern that resembles natural marble. Because each cultured marble product is individually poured, every piece has its own unique marbling pattern, much like real marble.

The resins set up in about an hour, but continue to shrink and cure for eight to ten hours. After the resins have cured, the back is sanded to remove any rough edges and the front face is buffed to remove any scratches or defects. The final step is to apply a gel coat — either clear or colored — to the face of the product. This gives a sheen and makes the surface water-proof, stain-resistant, and easier to care for. In some cases, the gel coat may be left off to give a matte finish. However, matte finishes are more susceptible to staining and not as easy to clean, so leaving off the gel coat can defeat the purpose of selecting cultured marble.

## What's Available

Products commonly manufactured in cultured marble include shower pans (any size, shape, or drain placement, and with or without thresholds); shower walls; tub decks and surrounds; and vanity tops (with or without integral bowls). Cultured marble can also be used on fireplace faces and hearths and as table-tops. There are a number of accessory pieces available as well, such as shower benches, soap and shampoo dishes, window sills and liners, toilet-paper holders, and Grecian columns and column bases. At the present time, I wouldn't use cultured marble for kitchen counters, although this may be possible in the future as formulations improve.

One of the biggest advantages of cultured marble is that it can easily be custom made. For example, many shops pour the resin on glass tabletops using molds made of aluminum or plastic. The molds can be moved and positioned in a variety of ways, making it possible to form virtually any size or shape of shower pan or wall surround.

## Installation

Most cultured marble manufacturers provide field measuring and installation services. However, skilled carpenters can install cultured marble fairly easily with the right tools and some simple instructions provided by the manufacturer. The basic tools required are a belt sander, a circular saw with a masonry blade, a jig saw with a grit-edge blade, and a carbide-tip hole saw. You'll also need a mildew-resistant silicone caulk for seams, an elastomeric construction adhesive for attachment, and denatured alcohol for cleaning.

Cultured marble panels are glued directly to drywall. You should leave at least 1/8 inch between panels to allow for expansion and contraction. Before gluing a panel in place, clean the back and the edges with denatured alcohol. You can use either sili-



*Cultured marble products are now widely available in a variety of colors and styles. In this bathroom, the shower walls, whirlpool surround, and vanity top are all cultured marble.*

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con caulk or construction adhesive for attaching the panel — the important thing is to use a waterproof adhesive that never hardens, but remains flexible to allow for the panel's movement.

Place areas of adhesive every 6 to 8 inches on the wall, then lift the panel into place. Use shims between the bottom of the panel and a tub or shower base to maintain a 1/8-inch gap until the adhesive sets. Then caulk the seam with silicone, remove the shims, and let the panel settle into the caulk. The caulk line can be cleaned with denatured alcohol. When all the panels have been installed, caulk all edges and seams with a paintable caulk. Do a thorough job to ensure that no water can get behind the panels and cause them to separate from the walls.

Cultured marble can be cut and drilled on site. Use a carbide masonry blade to avoid chipping. To avoid scratching the surface, we put masking tape on both the panel and the saw shoe. These precautions are important because cultured marble cannot be repaired if damaged during installation. After cutting, sand out irregularities with a belt sander. The belt sander can also be used to remove small amounts of material to match an irregular wall contour.

Holes are easily cut for drop-in or undermount sinks and for valve stems. When making cutouts, always leave rounded corners — square corners are more likely to cause stress cracks. For drilling holes, use ceramic hole saws, but never use self-feeding bits.

### **Maintenance**

Cleaning of cultured marble is very easy. But it's important to instruct your clients about the proper cleaning techniques. A product called Gel Gloss is recommended to maintain the beauty of the product. Glass cleaners are also acceptable, but abrasive cleaners should not be used — even products like Soft Scrub contain abrasives and may damage the surface. ■

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