Classical Proportions Revisited

by **CLAYTON DEKORNE**

While working with Marc Forget on his *Training the Trades* article "An Introduction to Wainscoting" (see page 9), I balked at the ⅓ rule he was taught. Having been steeped in the classical orders as a carpenter, I had been taught that wainscoting visually functions like the pedestal under a column. The wall above the wainscoting would be the column; the chair rail would be the cornice at the top of the pedestal; the baseboard would be the plinth on which the pedestal sits; and the wainscoting—the panels between the baseboard and chair rail—would be the "dado" section of the pedestal.

Carpenter and writer Gary Katz masterfully explains the classical orders to carpenters in "Rules for Proportion" at ThisIsCarpentry.com, which includes his YouTube video "Understanding Classical Proportions." This is a must-read/must-see for all carpenters.

The differences between the classical orders (for example, Ionic or Doric) are realized in variations of the column diameters. For each order, the diameter of the column serves as a unit of measurement for all the sizes and placements of all parts of the pedestal, column, and entablature. Several historical architect/builders codified the rules that define these orders into pattern books for carpenters and, depending on which one you read, the proportion of the wainscoting (pedestal) to the wall (column + entablature) varies, but all work out to roughly ⅕ or slightly less. By this measure, the wainscoting in a room with 8-foot ceilings would be around 20 inches tall, with 9-foot ceilings, about 22 inches, and with 10-foot ceilings, 24 inches. While we certainly see wainscoting this low in colonial and neoclassical homes, it's rarely this low in modern homes, begging the questions: Should we be comparing it with a column pedestal? Do classical proportions always apply? Do they really look best?

There is another school of thought on wainscoting. Speaking to a humbler aspect of wainscoting, the late author and illustrator Eric Sloane wrote in *A Reverence for Wood*, one of his many illustrated works on early American life: "Wainscoting means any wooden wall-lining, whether it be sheathing or paneling, horizontal or vertical, floor-to-ceiling or chair-rail height." In the illustration accompanying this definition (see image, above right), he asserts "Wainscoting was cottage wall Sheathing." The word wainscot, Sloane notes, stems from the Middle German "waghenscot." While it's plausible this relates to "wagon" + "cottage," as Sloane's illustration suggests, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) provides alternative interpretations: Variants of the word include the Flemish "waeghe," wave, referring to "the undulation in the grain of wood." This helps explain some of the earliest citations, beginning in the early 1300s, for "waghenschot" in the OED as a type of oak, specifically a "superior quality of foreign oak ... used for fine panel work." "Waeghe" is also an alteration of Middle Dutch "weeg" or Old English "wah" (wall). The second part, "schot," derives from the Middle Dutch for "partition," "barrier," or "bulwark" (the side of a ship above the deck), suggesting a screen to dress up and shield residents from rough-hewn wood or damp stone walls.

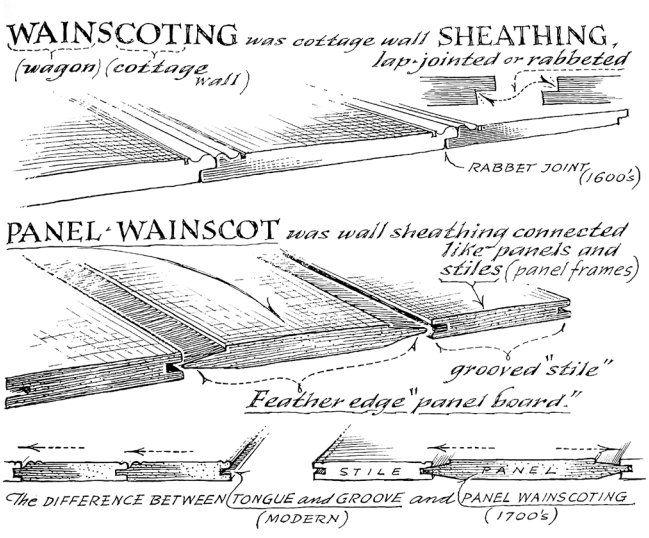

Illustration from Eric Sloane's *A Reverence for Wood* (original edition copyright 1965; republished 1974).

There are no fixed rules for beauty. In a home with tall ceilings and a full range of trim from base to crown, designing wainscoting to serve as a "pedestal"—a visual base for a composition of trim elements—seems "correct." While in a simpler home, wainscoting that covers the bottom third of the wall or aligns with the dividing rail of double-hung windows (or some other element in the room) may look coherent and pleasing. It will still, as Forget says, transform the space, and perhaps serve a practical purpose as well.