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Moldings with Oomph

Switch out ho-hum trimwork to enhance any room

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Houses built in the early part of the last century featured large ornate crown and base moldings, as well as intricate millwork casing around doors and windows. These details added a layer of craftsmanship with elaborate ornamentation. But many contemporary builders cut project costs by skimping on a home's interior trim. The large, striking details shrunk in production houses during the second half of the century, leaving thousands of walls and architectural elements finished with cheaper narrow trim in mass produced profiles.

Fortunately, moldings can be changed. "We always suggest a little thought go into the size, scale and style of moldings—and not go with the basic profile a builder might supply," said Jason Tilton of Fanatic Finish, a molding millwork design and installation firm in Oyster Bay. "Take the example of a standard 5 1/2-inch base molding. For the same price or a few cents more, a homeowner can find a profile that is more unique and gives the home a custom feel." To locate those distinctive looks, visit a lumberyard or shop online—the major home centers only carry a few styles.

When it comes to picking the molding profile, match it to the size and scale of the room. Large spaces with high ceilings require taller and thicker trim than a small powder room. The style of the house plays a part in the decision, but according to Tilton, the trend is away from motif-type profiles like egg and dart or rope designs toward classic looks where the lines and curves take a front seat. "For a contemporary house, pick a profile that is on the smooth side with few lines," said Tilton. "For a traditional home, go with something with more lines and curves, something that grabs the shadows."

Most moldings are made of either poplar, pine or medium density fiberboard (MDF), a man-made material. All of them look good when painted and some come primed, helping to speed up the project. Profiles milled from mahogany, cherry, maple or other exotic woods should be stained rather than painted. They provide a distinctive, elegant look, but staining stock can cost four times the price of the paint-grade designs—a profile made of pine that costs \$1.50 a linear foot jumps to \$5 or \$6 when made from a premium species.

A newer option is molding made of polystyrene, a ridged foam. Purists may balk at using the material, but Tilton said it has its place. "I reserve it for cornices or applications on the ceiling where people can't touch it and where the material is out of the way of brooms and mops because it dents," he said. Polystyrene can be fabricated into any size or shape making it useful for anything too large to make out of a single piece of wood. The material is also used in decorative ceiling medallions, which were traditionally fabricated from plaster but are more affordable. For instance, a 24-inch diameter medallion starts at just \$25.

For painted moldings, glossy white is the default choice, but any color that complements the walls can make a statement. However, be careful when mixing a stained crown or base molding with a painted wall because the dark molding can often look like a racing stripe. "Reserve stained molding for rooms that already have stained millwork in them, such as stained built-in cabinetry, to balance out the stained trim," said Tilton.

Do-it-yourself installation is certainly possible, but it can be tricky, especially when dealing with walls that are not perfectly flat or floors that are not level. And corners require special joints that take some practice to master. When budgeting, expect to add about 60 to 70 percent of the cost of materials to have a pro handle the installation regardless of the grade.

Pro Tip: #47 When looking for authentic wood trim, one of the less expensive stain-grade materials is oak, which starts at \$2.75 per linear foot.

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