

PARODI ON PAPERHANGING

by Jim Parodi



Grow a Niche with Natural Fibers— *Grasscloth takes a sharp blade and a mellow mindset.*

First of two parts

Grasscloth was big in the 1960s, enjoyed a brief reprise in the late '70s, and has become hugely popular again.

Giving it a push is the "green" appeal of rice paper and natural grass. Just seeing a wall covered in this heavily slubbed fiber makes you want to pick up a book on Zen or get one of those pebbly meditation fountains.

Hanging grasscloth requires skill, but not the kind you might think. The material itself isn't that difficult for a professional. No, the main challenge is mental—specifically, the attitude adjustment required by both paperhangers and customers.

Natural means natural

Psychological difficulties may erupt as paperhanger perfectionism combines with unrealistic customer expectations to form a vile brew.

There is a very good reason that every roll of grasscloth includes a heads-up along these lines: "This is a handmade product with potentially unbelievable shading variations from roll to roll *and from moment to moment*, depending upon whether you finished that book on Zen"

OK, so there's no Zen, but the point remains. The first step in installing grasscloth is making sure that the customer understands two essential truths:

Grasscloth is a natural fiber *that can never match.*

Even dyed grasscloths hold *no* promise of uniform color.

Even if customers *say* they understand this, have them there during the installation, to OK the job when the multicolor reality hits home.

No perfectionists allowed

Sometimes, the client is satisfied, but a barrier still blocks the paperhanger's brain. After all, we

grees and ignore—or even celebrate—what would normally be gross variations in a machine-made product. Perfectionists who cannot surrender their nitpicky mindsets risk diving out the window, Cowardly Lion-style, before lunch.

No kidding. You must learn to embrace every variation as fabulous, so that when a customer asks about a section that could be more



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Soft grasses are knotted and woven onto a neutral background for a textural design.

spend all day every day examining rolls for shading and embossing variations and other troubling anomalies.

Hanging natural grasses requires that you bend your brain 180 de-

uniform, you can convincingly declare, "Isn't it great? It's supposed to be that way!"

As each strip of grasscloth is unique, so are the different types. Some grasses are very thin and

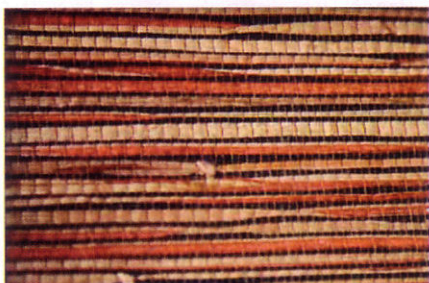
fine; others are rough and crude; and still others are as thickly woven as a basket.

Some grasscloth may approach the reed level, with the unbendable crunchiness of kindling. The gamut runs from thin grass to bamboo paneling, which is as bendable as a paint stirrer and must be cut with a saw. We'll address bamboo in the next issue.

Priming and prep

Hanging Day arrives. You and the customer are mellow. Now what?

When hanging the finer, thinner materials, the walls must be well sealed with primer and not just prep coated. This is especially important in older buildings, where things may lurk in the pores of the wall. Most grasscloths have a thin, absorbent rice paper backing that will suck up—and show—any old paint or brown paste in the pores of the wall.



Every panel will show when grasscloth has a natural horizontal pattern, such as that at left. A bidirectional motif, like the paper weave at right, is better for hiding seams.

For adhesives, light and thin grasses respond well to high-moisture powders of wheat or potato starch. I usually start with potato starch and add pre-mixed clear for a little extra grip.

Warning: The finer the weave, the more likely that the material

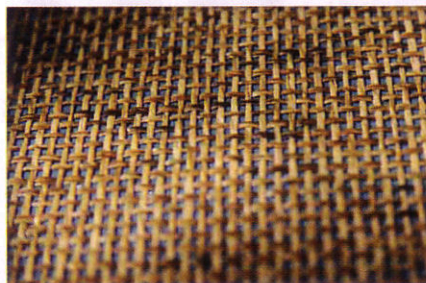
has a natural sheen that will dull if wiped with a sponge. Any stray paste on the material should be patted with a dry paper towel or, if absolutely necessary, a semi-damp rag. And don't overwork any area.

Measure for measure

Before cutting, assume that every panel in the room will appear different from every other one, even if the material is dyed to enhance color uniformity. Plan to center the material on the focal wall of the room.

Open the rolls to check for gross variations in grass type, brightness or color. (Embracing differences is fine, but avoiding ridiculous ones will help the job along.) Group rolls that have a similar look, and hang them close to each other. You can also reverse hang if necessary.

Since each strip will be distinct, avoid narrow pieces a few inches wide that can be left over after cut-



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ting in corners. Grasscloths generally come in a 36-inch width. Pray that the focal wall's width in inches is a multiple of 36 so that each panel is in Zen-like balance.

For instance, five 36-inch strips would equal 180 inches, or 15 feet, which would be perfect—but

who are we kidding? That sort of perfection is unlikely. More than likely, there will be dimensional disharmony that even *feng shui* can not conquer.

So, suppose more realistically that the wall is 14.5 feet, or 174 inches, wide. Perfect balance would require five sheets 34.8 inches wide, instead of the 36-inch factory width. Grasshopper, you may dry-cut each of those five panels to a 34.8-inch width on your table with a straight edge and thus achieve visual tranquility.

The kindest cut

Grasscloth cuts best with an *extremely* sharp razor or scissors. You don't want any razor blade "drag" when table-cutting a new edge. You also want a very sharp and stiff scissor blade tip for detail cutting at those crown molding end caps and fixed wooden banister areas.

I know from Internet chatting that many younger hangers don't use scissors anymore; if I used the Big Box offerings, I wouldn't, either. On the other hand, one experience with high-quality scissors will show how indispensable they are for these projects, where strands must be precision cut and not pulled or dragged.

So, spend about \$50 and treat yourself to a professional-grade model by Kai; these Japanese shears are impeccable. Note: These shears must be properly sharpened before shipment. Contact Wolff Industries (www.wolffind.com) for availability and ordering information.

Contrary to popular belief, grasscloth *can* be double-cut on the wall. You may want to double-cut in archways and recessed windows.

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Another tip: Depending on the maker, the panels may not fall perfectly straight, instead curving right or left as they approach the baseboard. This becomes a problem when reverse-hanging panels, which the material instructions often suggest. Panels sometimes need to be made true and straight. Overlapping, then double-cutting, to “retrue” them can be just the thing for those who prefer this seaming method to table trimming.

Steve Boggess Paperhanging (www.steveboggesspaperhanging.com) sells excellent polycarbonate double-cut padding kits, which can add finesse to any on-the-wall double-cutting project.

Curling and booking

One great thing about grasses is that they rarely suffer from edge curl, because the grass stiffens and straightens the paper edge. However, some will curl up at the baseboard and ceiling, so it's best to

Get to the wall as quickly as you can after testing for bubbling. This will come in handy when you reach that piece with the crown molding end cap, burglar alarm touch pad, wall scone, two switchplates, and loose baseboard heater cowlings.

Corners and switchplates

Grasses bend 90 degrees beautifully along the horizontal grain, but some coarser types don't bend well along the ceiling-to-floor axis. Grass that is too dry will snap like a dry stick, and some areas may fray.

Before trying to bend the grass around an outside corner, mist the wallcovering surface with water and let it sit very briefly to soak up moisture.

When wrapping switchplates, use a multipurpose-type spray adhesive. Spray the back of the material, then the front and back of the switchplate with adhesive. Press the plate down on the dry paper and cut out the outlet or switch holes. Before trying to bend the material around the plate edge, mist the grass side with water, let it soak in very briefly, and then wrap.

If the walls don't have a lot of fixtures to cut around, grasscloth goes up fast. If you haven't hung it before, you may be surprised how quickly the job goes. As usual, never let the customer know you are having an easy time of it.

Next issue: Hanging bamboo

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Thin strips of bamboo are woven into fine mesh netting with a natural horizontal pattern. Note the natural color and texture variations in these organic fibers.

Use painter's tape to prevent the paste from the top piece from touching the surface of the bottom piece, and you will do fine.

Always use a straight edge (no free-hand double-cuts!) and a really sharp blade. If you want to cushion the double-cut area to prevent the blade from damaging primer,

take a take a paint brush and cut in those horizontal areas with paste before doing the room.

Never let natural products like grasscloth book for an extended period. Many will simply fall apart, or the grass will separate from the rice backing if allowed to soak even for a few minutes.