

## MASTER OF PLASTER: How Jeff Poree and company maintain the city's historic crown moldings, medallions, columns, walls

By Katy Reckdahl, Special to The New Orleans Advocate, January 13, 2017



Jeff Poree stands in front of 19-th century ornamental medallion replicas made in his shop. The historical replicas have been passed down in the family for five generations. Advocate Photo by J.T. Blatty

Sometimes, on a nice afternoon, Jeff Poree drives by the [Peristyle in City Park](#), where he and his workers spent three months in 2012, resurfacing every bit of the century-old ceiling and ionic columns.

A master plasterer, Poree, 66, is not known for relaxing. But on those afternoons, he can't help but stop at another former job, at the park's Casino Building. There, after ordering a beignet and coffee at Morning Call, he sits back, admiring the ceiling's curves, medallions and architectural elements. "I'm stuck looking at it," he said. "I can't believe we did it. I think it's so beautiful."

It's a habit he inherited from his father, Calvin Poree, also a plasterer, who wouldn't leave a job at night until he'd smoked a cigarette and admired the day's work.



An original 19th-century medallion, ready to be restored and replicated, sits on a table.

Advocate Photo by J.T. Blatty

Altogether, the Poree family has been doing this work for [five generations](#). So, almost anytime he drives through historic New Orleans, Jeff Poree sees evidence of his family's hands — his, his father's, his grandfather's.

“We're the maintenance men of local history,” Poree said simply, explaining how the city's signature architecture relies upon master craftsmen like him.



On a table in the shop is a photograph of Jeff Poree restoring and rebuilding the entrance columns of Audubon Park, damaged by Hurricane Katrina. 'We're the maintenance men of local history,' Poree says.

Advocate Photo by J.T. Blatty

Poree is crucial to the future of his craft, said Jonn Hankins, of the [New Orleans Master Crafts Guild](#). "I can't impress upon you how important he is to the next generation of New Orleans plasterers," Hankins said, adding that Poree has both the knowledge and skills – he came up underneath a legendary generation of master plasterers and learned his lessons well, ranking as one of the city's top 10 city's plasterers when he was on the scaffold.

And now, Poree runs the strongest plastering company of his generation, one of the only places in town capable of nurturing another generation.

"So he is in the strongest position to carry those traditions forward," Hankins said. "He has a lot on his shoulders."



Replica of a 19th-century medallion. It takes three years for apprentices to learn basic plaster work and another 10 to master intricate decorative work like crown moldings and medallions.

Advocate Photo by J.T. Blatty

Jeff Poree Plastering is a big operation, with a 15,000-square-foot casting shop in Mid-City that goes through 1,200 pounds of plaster on a busy day. Its 33 employees range from new apprentices learning to create smooth walls and ceilings to the precision-minded artisans whom Poree refers to as “cornice hens,” — plasterers with decades of experience creating and repairing ornamental plaster.

His crews do small repairs every day. Other jobs last a year or 15 months. Then there are the biggies. Poree has had a handful of biggies in his lifetime, the mansions and historic buildings whose dining rooms and grand halls have enough ornate plaster work to keep his crews busy for five years nonstop.



Master plasterer Jeff Poree stands in the entryway of his plaster shop.  
Advocate Photo by J.T. Blatty

While it takes three years for Poree’s apprentices to learn basic “flat” plastering, it takes an additional 10 years to learn decorative plaster: detailed crown molding, ceiling roses and medallions, beadwork, scrolls, lions, gargoyles, panels, domes and arches.

Poree counts on his younger brother, Jayce Poree, who is 16 years his junior, along with top craftsman Kevin Madison, to come behind the rest of his crew. With their level of expertise, they can fix any flaws and make sure all of the ornamental work is finished to the finest detail.

A third seasoned craftsman, Harold Bruneau, “the absolute best of my generation,” recently retired but will return to train new apprentices. Dedicated apprentices are in high demand because fewer young men are taking up the craft within the city’s longtime plastering families. Poree and wife Carole Delay Poree have four sons but none have picked up a trowel, though son John Poree is involved, managing the business for his dad.

At this point, Jayce Poree is the only Poree plasterer left. “He’ll be the last one,” Jeff Poree said.



An original 19th-century piece of decorative plaster sits under the replica created from its mold.

Advocate Photo by J.T. Blatty

In recent years, the New Orleans Master Crafts Guild has begun awarding subsidies for first-year apprenticeships, in an effort to create a new generation of plasterers. “It’s a godsend,” Poree said, noting that it is hard to get people to stick with the profession. “You have to have stamina, a strong heart and learn lots of mathematics,” he said.

In Poree’s shop, some long tables are piled with silicone plaster molds and damaged originals that need to be repaired and recast. At the end of one table, apprentices have been practicing pouring spans of crown molding.



Sculptor Christopher Caravella Jones shows an original 19th-century piece of decorative plaster, right, alongside the replica created from its mold.  
Advocate Photo by J.T. Blatty

Poree picked up a recent effort and held it up, pointing to some visible waves along its surface. “Close but not quite good enough to use,” he said. To make crown molding correctly, plasterers must constantly run a blade across the top of the plaster as it dries. “Turn away for even two puffs on a cig and you’d have to throw the whole thing out — it will swell and dry,” he said.

Poree was raised in the 7th Ward and graduated from St. Augustine High School. His family lived alongside many other Creole craftsmen, so Poree grew up hearing the braggadocio of the trade from the day he picked up a trowel. Little by little, his mentors taught him trade secrets and told him about the legends who had come before him.

Over the years, Poree and his workers recalled some monumental jobs completed under precarious circumstances. One time, Poree scaled metal scaffolds in driving rain, lightning flashing around him, to place a tarp over fresh

plasterwork on the façade of a synagogue on Esplanade Avenue. Right after his dad's death, he hired a crew of 30 to redo the Jackson Brewery building, a massive job. "In my memory, I was building a monument to my father," he said.



Replicas of 19th-century plaster medallions.  
Advocate Photo by J.T. Blatty.

More than a century ago, Poree's family helped to form the Operative Plasterers and Cement Masons International Union Local 93, one of the first racially integrated unions in the country. Grandfather Albert Poree Jr. was president of Local 93 for years and held many meetings on the first floor of the family house on Annette Street.

As a child, Poree learned his craft from his father, who took him along on jobs. His father later led crews that plastered the walls and ceilings of the Superdome. But he wanted his son to learn what he'd learned: the art of ornamental plaster.



With his father's help, Poree landed an apprenticeship at Lawrence Haydel Plastering Co., where he worked under some of the city's finest craftsmen.

In the mid-1980s, Poree landed his first big solo job, the entrance to Maison Blanche department store, now the Ritz-Carlton hotel. As soon as he got the call, he went to his dad's home and showed him the blueprints, which required complicated mathematics and full operation of his casting shop. "I want you to come over and look over my shoulder so that I don't miss a beat," he told his father.

Unnecessary, his father told him. "Everything that you've done in your life is a dress rehearsal for that job you're about to do. You're ready."

To finish the work, he hired a crew of plastering superstars: master plasterer Allen Sumas; Clement Torregano, who had earned acclaim for building the crest at the front of Le Pavillion Hotel; and Poree's top mentor, "the man I love," Emile Lumas. (On his deathbed, several years ago, Lumas pulled Poree down to him so that they could talk face to face. "You still have more to learn," Lumas told his protégé. "But you're going to continue your training without me — I'm getting a new assignment.")

Today, evidence of Poree's ongoing elaborate work can be found in the center of his shop, where one table displays a 12-foot-wide design for an intricate wreath of Louisiana vegetables and crops that will scroll across a broad ornamental plaster tablet, known as a cartouche.

Poree's go-to painter, Vlada Jones, painted the cartouche's design. It will now be sculpted in clay, molded in silicone and poured into plaster twice by her husband, in-house artist Christopher Caravella Jones, whom Poree has relied upon for 14 years.



Sculptor Christopher Caravella Jones restores a fragment from a 19th-century plaster medallion. After restoring the piece, Jones will create a mold to replicate the art deco design on future pieces of work inside the workshop of master plasterer Jeff Poree.

Advocate Photo by J.T. Blatty

Once the two weighty cartouches are finished, a forklift will place them over the two front entrances for the renovated 1909 Pythian Temple building, which will re-open next year across Loyola Avenue from the main New Orleans Public Library with a street-level food market, stores, offices and apartments.

“We’re restoring history, with a twist,” Poree said.



On a table in the shop is a photograph of Jeff Poree restoring and rebuilding the entrance columns of Audubon Park, damaged by Hurricane Katrina. "We're the maintenance men of local history," Poree says.

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