



TRADITIONAL FINISHES AND COLOUR SCHEMES: A GUIDE



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Traditional Finishes and Colour Schemes: A Guide
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Introduction

Much research into exterior and colour schemes and interior decoration has occurred in Australia since the emergence of heritage conservation as a movement in the 1970s. Efforts have generally focussed on practices from the 1820 through to the 1930s. Increasingly, there is greater appreciation and awareness of the decorations and details of the post-war era such that it is also possible to easily restore houses of the 1950s and 1960s.

Finishes

During the 19th century, exterior wall substrates of timber, brick, coursed stone, cement render or hair plaster were often finished with limewash, distemper or oil based paints. Generally, external joinery was painted to protect it from the weather, with the exception of front doors which were left stained or oiled as a clear finish. In the very early decades of the British arrival in Australia, these finishes were made at the site of application from natural materials including milk curds, and lime.

Trends in interior finishes are related to fashion, taste and technology. Until the 1840s, interior joinery was painted, and this was also the case for red cedar. Colours were usually monochromatic and pale with minimal sheen. Mouldings and panels were usually picked out and painted a subtler shade of the surrounding joinery.

At the advent of the Victorian period, from 1840 onwards, interior decoration became increasingly complex and detailed and followed trends emerging in England. Joinery was polished with shellac and bees wax because by this time the colour of the cedar resembled mahogany, which was considered a more pleasing timber than cedar. The more labour intensive French polishing was only used on stair handrails.

Limewash

Traditional limewash allows surfaces to breath because of its vapour permeability. As such, it is ideally suited to load bearing masonry walls where a cavity is absent. Traditionally limewash was made of slaked lime and tallow to which other materials were added including plaster of paris, oil, glue, milk, ash, and alum. Limewash was heavily used in the 19th century on external wall surfaces while the use of painted finishes was not universal. After about 1870 lead based paint was introduced to the local market, although limewash was still being used well into the early decades of the 20th century. There are commercial limewashes on the market today that can be readily applied to both interior and exterior. Westox supplies a limewash for sensitive or highly significant heritage buildings, based on slaked rock lime using a number of traditional formulations. Commercial paint suppliers Porter's Traditional Paints and Murobond also offer traditional and pintimento limewashes.

Distemper

Interior wall surfaces were often wallpapered, or painted with distemper. Distemper produced a flat finish which under the trade name *Kalsomine* was used up until the 1930s. Today, a commercially produced distemper can be purchased through Porter's Traditional Paints and applied to most substrates including plasterboard, plaster, masonry and previously painted surfaces. It is not recommended for bathrooms, wet areas or kitchens. Modern distemper is designed to dry to a velvet-like finish with subtle tonal variations. It is widely used in the restoration of heritage houses.

Painted finishes

As a general rule, timber houses were painted internally and externally, to preserve the timber and to display a range of pleasing decorative finishes. Many houses in Newcastle have been repainted several times since their construction.

Until the 20th century, paints were solvent borne linseed oil paint with lead-based pigments. Such paints were mixed and tinted on site by the painter, requiring a high degree of skill and care in the both preparation and application. Some paints contained a red oxide base while red lead was used as a primer for bare timbers and galvanised iron.

Interior timbers

In the first years of the British arrival in Australia, attempts were made to use local timbers for interior carpentry and joinery from the Sydney basin. These attempts generally met with failure, because the endemic species were too hard and unworkable. Sydney blue gum, a local hardwood, tended to blunt and chip the carpenter's tools, while the worked timber was prone to warp and shrink.

This changed when in the 1790s, red cedar, a soft deciduous hardwood was discovered along the Hawkesbury. This was a breakthrough for the young colony, creating an industry in timber milling along the east coast, and would lead to advances in vernacular carpentry and joinery. Red cedar possessed inherent advantages. It was lightweight and dimensionally stable – an absolute for timbers in joinery. It also had a tendency to accommodate French polish. And so it became the standard timber used for joinery during the 19th century in the Australian colonies. Much of the surviving early Australian furniture, of this period, is made of Australian red cedar.

By the end of the 1860s, supplies of red cedar were diminishing, leading to the importation of softwoods and other joinery timbers. Predominantly this saw Oregon and redwood imported from

North America, Baltic pine from Europe and Kauri from New Zealand. At the same time, Australian native hardwoods such as Mountain Ash and Tallowwood were preferred for external door and window frames, structural joinery and verandah columns.

Colour schemes

If you are considering applying or maintaining a traditional heritage colour scheme, you can often determine the original colours through investigation or you can replicate a colour scheme from the period. Commercial colour schemes by the leading paint suppliers offer a popular range of heritage colours, using the colour swatches at the end of this brochure.

Finding the original colours may involve some painstaking research. This work is sometimes made more difficult if earlier paintwork has been removed. There could be as many as 20 layers of paint on buildings older than 100 years. Paint scrapings can be taken by searching underneath verandahs, and in the sheltered parts of buildings including eaves and porches. With the help of a magnifying glass, the earlier colours can be matched with commercial paint colour cards. To discover the original external colours, it is best to do paint scrapes under window sills or behind meter boxes or anywhere where there may have been alterations or additions to the original house. Inside, there are often traces left underneath door hardware such as fingerplates or escutcheon plates.

Choosing the colour scheme can be an agonising process and influenced by many things, including personal taste, current fashion and price. There are no rules, but there are trends which can be identified by looking at old photographs or by taking paint scrapes and matching the colours against a paint manufacturer's colour system. Even old black and white photographs enable you to distinguish which elements on the house are painted with dark colours, and those which are painted in light or medium tones. It is just as important to get this balance right as it is to choose the correct colours. It is not necessary to paint your house using only so-called 'heritage colours'.

Clear finish

Some houses were not painted internally but contain unpainted or clear finish pine tongue and groove vee-jointed boards. It was also fashionable to clear finish, shellac or varnish internal cedar joinery. As a general principle, it is undesirable to paint surfaces which were originally clear finished as it is time consuming and costly to remove layers of paintwork successfully, later.

Special finishes

Many houses have stencilled borders, dados and friezes of painted decorative patterns. These can be carefully restored or reproduced. There are a variety of books available to assist with undertaking

this type of work. Please refer to the references. A standard range of pre-cut stencils is available from some paint and decorator outlets.

Other finishes include 'Black Japan' which was often applied to floor boards around the perimeter of rooms and entrance halls to produce a dark border. This border was then overlapped by a centre square of lino, rugs or mats, or carpet runners in hallways. Black Japan is still available and is relatively easy to apply with a paint brush. All of the major companies offer Black Japan, which can be applied with a lamb's wool applicator or brush.

Stains and varnishes were often applied to architraves, skirtings and interiors of doors and window sashes. Where found, these finishes can be repeated using similar materials which are readily available.

'Graining' of timber is sometimes found in historic buildings. This consists of paintwork which simulates the grain of another timber. For example, English oak grain was sometimes applied over a cheaper material such as pine. This is work for an expert conservator and specialist advice should be sought.

What paints to use

Today's paints are either oil-based solvent borne (enamels) or water-based latex (acrylics) with the colours obtained by adding tinters to a dark or light base and these are available in a variety of gloss levels.

There were traditional combinations of colours used for body, trim and accent elements. There were also traditional types of paint used on specific parts of buildings.

Modern paint manufacturers market a large range of gloss, semi-gloss, satin and matt finishes in both oil-based and acrylic paints. Their advice should be obtained to establish the most durable finish for each part of the building.

For best performance over the long terms it is highly advisable to use a breathable paint, that is, a paint that allow for the movement of moisture vapour from the substrate to the surface. Several Murobond paints allow moisture vapour to pass out through the paint of masonry buildings, preventing damp walls, flaking and bubbling surfaces.

Preparation

Preparation of the surfaces (washing down, stripping back, sanding and filling) is crucial to the final result of a paint scheme. On average, it is recommended that external elements are re-painted at 10-year intervals to best maintain the condition of the substrate. Paint companies produce data sheets on the repainting of existing surfaces including the number and types of priming (undercoats) and finishing coats.

Where a decision is made to remove paint layers from timber, a successful method is with a heat gun and a tungsten carbide scraper, such as the *Linbide scraper*. While chemical baths can be effective, care must be taken not to soften the grain of the timber, or a furry appearance will result which cannot be reversed. For this reason the heat gun method should be used.

A good quality paint scraper such as the *Linbide Scraper* is an invaluable tool when preparing surfaces. It can be particularly useful in removing Kalsomine where it has become bound to the substrate, or where a regular surface finish is required before applying a new finish.



Decorating with paint

Decorating the interior of rooms can be challenging. Interior decorating is not only about colour selection, but also requires decisions about floor coverings, joinery, cupboards and benches, plumbing and light fittings, window coverings and furniture.

In traditional houses, the hierarchy of rooms was based on classical principles. Rooms were individually coloured to reinforce their architectural features or their function. Hallways were usually painted in stone colours. Bedrooms and parlours were decorated in soft feminine shades. Dining rooms and living rooms had another identity, with architectural features such as black or dark marble chimneys in dining rooms and white marble in drawing rooms. Common to many houses in Newcastle are timber mantelpieces, usually mahogany or imported cedar.

In the reconstruction of traditional colour schemes, it is usually possible to accurately reproduce the colours and finishes of early paint schemes. However, it may be necessary to make some assumptions about these colours. In such cases, it is advisable to work from one of the 'heritage' colour ranges to choose colours which more accurately reflect those being replicated.

Australian Standard 2700 (AS 2700)

The Australian Standard AS2700-2011 "Colour Standards for General Purposes" presents reference colours for use when selecting colour schemes in the industrial, architectural and decorative applications with particular emphasis on paints and related materials. AS2700-2011 is an industry standard way of specifying colours and colour matching. Colours are identified by a unique code which makes colour matching achievable.

Suppliers

The following companies have a specialised heritage colour palette and can offer advice and information for getting the best out of your preferred colour choices. Some of these companies also offer distempers and limewashes, which can be very useful for a traditional flat interior finish.

- Haymes
- Porter's Original Paints
- Murobond
- Dulux
- Bristol

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TRADITIONAL COLOUR PALETTE



Deep Imperial Green



Eau-de-Nil



Ox Blood



Portland Stone



Regency White



Beige



Brunswick Green



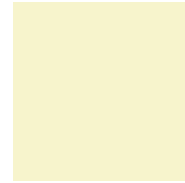
Stone



Sienna Stone



Cumberland Stone



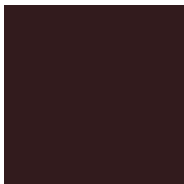
Lemon Chambers



Ivory



Teal



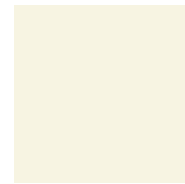
Chocolate



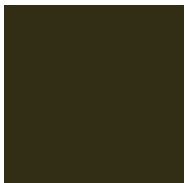
Pale Purple



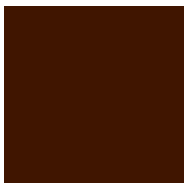
Pale Stone



Lime White



Drab



Mission Brown



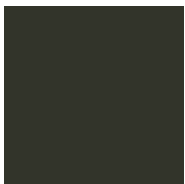
Victorian Brown



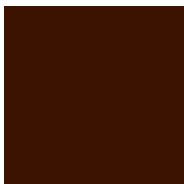
Cream



Deep Green



Deep Bronze Green



Purple Brown



Deep Buff



Tuscany Pink



Indian Red

Traditional Heritage Colour Chart

These colours are based on those presented in *Colour Schemes for old Australian Houses*, 1992, Flannel

Flower Press, ISBN 0 9594923 3 X, which accord with the AS 2700 table of colours.

Note – these swatches are a representation and should not be relied upon without checking against the actual paint.